

A Shabbat Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

The Power to Bless

The oldest Hebrew artifact is also our most current. In 1979, Professor Gabriel Barkai found, in an area located behind the Menachem Begin Center, a scrunched up bit of silver scroll just outside the Old City Walls of Jerusalem. When it was examined more closely it turned out that the scroll could be dated to the First Temple era (7th century BCE). It is the oldest Hebrew text we have. It precedes the Dead Sea Scrolls by some 400 years. What was written on this scroll? *Birkat Kohamin*, the 3-fold Priestly blessing. This week's Torah portion, *Naso*, includes the *Birkat Kohanim* which is recited daily by Sephardic tradition and on the holy days by Ashkenazi tradition. It is also the highlight of every wedding, naming and *B'nei Mitzvah*:

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶכָּךְ:

יְאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיַחַנְדֶּכָּךְ:

יִשְׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשֶּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

May the Eternal bless you and protect you!

May the Eternal deal kindly and graciously with you!

May the Eternal bestow God's favor upon you and grant you peace!

(Numbers 6:24-26)

The three lines of the blessing are mathematically arranged: 3-(Hebrew) words in the first line, 5-words in the second and 7-words in the third. The 14th century commentator *Bachya* taught that the arrangement reminds us of the 3 patriarchs, the 5 Books of Torah, and the 7 levels of Heaven. Others point out that the progression reflects the aspirational achievement of blessing: growing ever higher, exponentially lifting those who are blessed.

That this blessing is the oldest we have so far found is not entirely surprising. The idea that we can help uplift another person is universally inspiring. We long for the power to positively affect others. We long for the ability to help transform and improve. And yet, the Torah reminds us that our individual power to bless is quite limited. Indeed, it is not we who bless. Rather, all blessings are woven into the fabric of life:

וְשִׁמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֵם:

*Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and **I will bless them**.*
(Numbers 6:27)

The Torah asserts that God has already blessed us. Therefore, our power to bless is that we can remind others that they are already blessed. One human cannot bless another. But we can remind others of their inherent blessings, talents, significance, and their ability to love, be loved and make a positive difference. God has created each of us with the potential to be a blessing. Our blessing to one another is to help activate another's power in order to fulfill their inherent goodness.

This ancient Jewish concept of blessing stands in stark contradistinction from those who pose as conduits of holiness in order to dispense "blessings" in exchange for obedience (or more often, money). Judaism emphasizes that we are already blessed. All that others can do (parents, friends, Rabbis and teachers) is to help another realize his/her blessings and be motivated to share them.

Let each of us think how we can inspire others to share their blessings. Perhaps it is by giving another the space to shine. Perhaps it is by giving another the last word. Perhaps it is by a simple expression of encouragement that affirms another person's value and says: "Yes, we care what you think and what you do." Indeed, the greatest power we have is to communicate that another person has power!

By the way, there are two ancient amulets with *Birkat Kohanim* and both are on display in the Archaeology Wing of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem. Let's go see them together next March!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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