

Parashat Naso, 5773, 2013:

Understanding the Blessing of the Kohanim

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

One of the best-known passages in the entire Torah is that of *Birkat Kohanim* (the Blessing of the Kohanim):

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying:

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them:

“May the L-rd bless you and watch over you.

May the L-rd cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you.

May the L-rd raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace.”

They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.

(*Sefer Bamidbar 6:22-27*, this and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Herein, Hashem summons the Kohanim to serve as the viaduct through which His divine beneficence flows and comes to rest upon our people. Thus, the *bracha* (blessing) is pronounced by the Kohanim, but not actually given by them. The source of the blessing, like all *brachot*, is Hashem Himself: “They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.”

The Blessing of the Kohanim is composed of three parts:

- 1) A request that Hashem should bless and watch us
- 2) An appeal that G-d should cause His countenance to shine upon and favor us

- 3) An entreaty that our Creator should raise His countenance toward us, and grant us peace

The familiar words “bless,” “watch,” and “peace” appear to be quite accessible. Yet, we may honestly be left a bit confused when the Kohanim beseech Hashem to have His countenance shine upon and favor us, and be raised toward us. When we witness this stirring event, we may feel that the content of the *bracha* remains elusive, just beyond our reach. As in all instances of authentic Torah interpretation, we must turn to the giants of our exegetical tradition to enlighten us as to “the story behind the story.” It is to this task that we now turn.

The great Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzhak (Rashi, 1040-1105) provides us with a midrashically-based interpretation of the Kohanim’s tripartite *bracha*. He explains that the two words “bless” and “watch” refer to physical possessions that have been mercifully bestowed upon us by Hashem:

May [the L-rd] bless you: that your possessions shall be blessed. - [*Midrash Tanchuma* Naso 10, *Sifrei* Naso 1:144]

and watch over you: that no thieves shall attack you and steal your money. For when one gives his servant a gift, he cannot protect it from all other people, so if robbers come and take it from him, what benefit has he [the servant] from this gift? As for the Holy One, blessed be He, however, He is the One who [both] gives and protects (*Midrash Tanchuma* Naso 10). There are many expository interpretations in the *Sifrei* .

In contrast, the two verses that focus upon G-d’s “countenance,” refer to overarching aspects of how we ideally would like Him relate to us. In the first instance, the Kohanim ask:

May the L-rd cause His countenance to shine to you: May He show you a pleasant, radiant countenance. - [*Midrash Tanchuma* Naso 10, *Sifrei* Naso 1:144]

and favor you: May He grant you favor - [*Sifrei Naso* 1:144]

According to Rashi, as based upon his selected Midrashic sources, the notion of having Hashem's "face" shine upon us depicts the manner in which we long to be treated by our Creator. This idea is strikingly illustrated by the beautiful Shabbat *zemirah* (liturgical poem) entitled "*Yedid Nefesh*" ("the Beloved of my Soul"). Given its power and scope, it is little wonder that it is one of the most universal and oft-sung *zemirot*. It describes our Creator as our Beloved, and depicts our most intimate relationship in the world. Our very souls, in some mysterious and ineffable manner, merge with G-d as we ascend to higher and higher levels of spirituality. This is possible if, and only if, the essence of our being is connected to Him in our transcendent quest for spiritual union. Thus, we ask Hashem to shine His countenance upon us, and be our guide on our journey toward Him. This is the greatest and deepest favor (*chane*) that we could ever be shown and receive in this world.

The second occurrence of "*panav*" ("May the L-rd raise His countenance toward you") is different in kind and degree than the first. Whereas the first time we encounter the term the focus is ultimately positive, in this instance, the *bracha* entreats G-d to refrain from expressing His wrath toward us when we fail to properly fulfill the *mitzvot*. Thus, Rashi states: "**May the Lord raise His countenance toward you:** by suppressing His wrath. [*Sifrei Naso* 1:144]." Given the trials and tribulations of Jewish history, this is certainly a *bracha* that we long to see realized, soon and in our days.

Birkat Kohanim concludes with the eternal Jewish hope "**and grant you peace.**" Maimonides (the Rambam, 1135-1240) helps us to understand the overarching import of

shalom within Judaism via a seminal philosophical statement that appears as the final words of *Hilchot Megillah and Chanukah*. Therein, the Rambam discusses a situation of financial triage in which an individual has extremely limited funds. He presents two scenarios: One has money to purchase either Shabbat candles or Chanukah candles, and one has money to buy Shabbat candles or wine for Kiddush. Which takes precedence? Maimonides is unequivocal in his response: “*Ner beito kodem meshum shalom beito*” (“Shabbat lights must be purchased prior to either Chanukah candles or wine because of the peace of his home”). We must remember that the Shabbat lights in this context may very well have been the only lights in the home. Therefore, without this small amount of illumination, people would trip into one another, arguments would become rife, and the Shabbat evening would become a dark and dreary time. In short, there would be a manifest diminution of peace in the home. Therefore, and without mitigation, the Rambam codifies the law that Shabbat candles take precedence over fulfilling either the mitzvah of Kiddush or Chanukah candles, even though Kiddush is a positive Torah commandment, and Chanukah candles are a Rabbinic obligation. Beyond a doubt, the value of *shalom beito* trumps these other *mitzvot*, based upon its overriding and singular import.

On measure, *shalom* emerges as the ultimate goal of *Birkat Kohanim*. Little wonder, then, that *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) concluded the *Shemoneh Esrai* (Silent Prayer) with these truly stirring words that, in part, parallel the *Birkat Kohanim*:

Bestow peace, goodness and blessing, life, graciousness, kindness and mercy, upon us and upon all Your people Israel. Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance. For by the light of Your countenance You gave us, L-rd our G-d, the Torah of life and loving-kindness, righteousness, blessing, mercy, life and peace. May it be favorable in Your eyes to bless Your people Israel, at all times and at every moment, with Your peace. Blessed are You L-rd, who blesses His people Israel with peace.
(http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/867674/jewish/Translation.htm)

May the words of this *bracha* be realized for us soon and in our day – both individually, and as a nation. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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