

February 17, 2019 - Num 6:22 – 7:47 - Priestly Blessing and Gifts for the Altar
Torah Reading: Numbers 6:22 – 7:47 - Priestly Blessing and Gifts for the Altar
Psalm 95
Haftarah: 1 Kings 8:54-63

The Priestly Blessing

Numbers 6:22-27 - "And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The LORD bless thee, and keep thee: The LORD make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The LORD lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace. And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them."

This blessing is the virtual capstone on the completion of the Tabernacle - a spiritual description of its meaning and purpose.

The oldest surviving fragment of biblical literature is a scrap of parchment from 700 B.C. with the priestly blessing written on it. It is so old that it is not written in the Hebrew alphabet as we recognize it today, which dates from the Babylonian exile, but rather in the ancient Semitic script, the first alphabet known to mankind.

Traditionally, the priests blessed the people every morning after the sacrifice at the Temple. Today, Ashkenaz Jews only recite it on Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot (because, since it must be done joyfully, Jews in the diaspora would not be joyful away from the Promised Land except on feast days when they are commanded to rejoice). Sephardic synagogues end all their services with this blessing as a benediction

According to the Talmud (Sotah 39a), before administering this blessing, the priests recite a separate blessing thanking God for the privilege:

"Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe, Who makes us holy with the holiness of Aaron, and has commanded us to bless His people Israel with love."

"With love" -

Numbers 6:23 - "Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them..."

The word "saying" (*amar*) here is written with an "extra Vav," i.e., *rAma*.. This "full" spelling of the verb is said to indicate that the act of blessing others should not be done in a halfhearted or impatient manner, but rather with "fullness of heart" and sincerity.

Procedures

When recited, the kohen (priest) raises his hands with the palms facing outward and the thumbs of his outspread hands touching. The four fingers on each hand are split into

two sets of two fingers each (thus forming the letter Shin, an emblem for Shaddai. (El Shaddai = God who is the Sufficient One)

(Star Trek's Vulcan salute was drawn from this)

Orthodox Jews do not look at the priest as he says the blessing. In fact you're not supposed to look at anything, but concentrate on the blessing without distraction.

When the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the Shekinah, the Divine Presence, would shine on the fingers of the Kohanim as they would bless the Jews, and no one was allowed to look out of respect for God.

Therefore the priests spread their hands, as though to say that the Holy One stands behind them, as it is said, There He stands behind our wall, gazing through the window (**Song of Songs 2:9**) — from between the fingers of the priests.

Jews use this blessing to bless members of their household on Sabbath and at other times.

Blessings

According to midrash (and Jewish tradition), in the beginning only God could bless other people. His first blessing was to Adam and Eve ("Be fruitful..."). Later He blessed Noah and his sons when they left the teivah (ark). God especially blessed Abraham the tzaddik, who was given the power of blessing others (Genesis 12:3 - "Who you bless, I will bless"). Abraham did not directly bless Isaac, however, since he did not want to also bless Ishmael, so God stepped in and blessed Isaac directly (Genesis 25:11). The power of blessing others was then transferred to Isaac, who then transferred it to Jacob (Genesis 27:30), who then blessed his twelve sons before he died (Genesis 48-49). In the Torah, God later taught Moses that the power to bless others would now come from His appointed priests.

The blessing must be performed joyfully. If a priest was not happy or in mourning, he could not bless.

God really blesses, not the priests:

A midrash - The house of Israel said to the Holy One, blessed be He, "Lord of the universe, you order the priests to bless us? We need only your blessing. Look down from Your holy habitation and bless Your people." The Holy One, blessed be He, replied to them, "Though I ordered the priests to bless you, I will stand together with them and bless you." It is not the priests who bless the people. Rather, it is through them that G-d blesses the people.

The blessing is not to "you" plural, but it's in the singular - to each individual member of Israel. Or perhaps to a singular Person (Christ).

Three Divisions of the Blessing

In the original Hebrew, the first line has three words, the second, five, and the third, seven. These prime numbers have special significance throughout the Mosaic books: three-, five- and seven-fold repetitions always signify a key-word. Equally precisely, the first has 15 (3×5) letters, the second 20 (4×5) and the third, 25 (5×5).

"Bless" = *Barak* - to kneel, the idea being to kneel and worship. But here the picture is of a smiling father kneeling down to bless and enjoy his child.

Jew see the first part asa pointing to material blessings.

Targum Pseudo-Jonathan: "May the Eternal bless you in all your [business?] matters...."

Jonathan Sacks, the former chief Rabbi of England, interprets the first part of the blessing in an interesting way.

The phrase "keep you" follows the "bless you" phrase, he says, because of the tendency to become complacent when we are materially blessed and forget God.

- **Deuteronomy 8:13-14** - "And when thy herds and thy flocks multiply, and thy silver and thy gold is multiplied, and all that thou hast is multiplied; Then thine heart be lifted up, and thou forget the LORD thy God, which brought thee forth out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage"

"May the Lord protect you," means: May He protect you from the blessing turning into a curse.

Make His Face Shine Upon You

The second priestly blessing is: May God "make His face shine on you," meaning, may His presence be evident in you. May He leave a visible trace of His being on the face you show to others.

2 Corinthians 3:18 - "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord."

- **Psalms 80:3,19** - "Restore us, O God; Cause Your face to shine, And we shall be saved!"

"I will turn [My face] toward you" (**Leviticus 26:9**).

i.e. because we have been forgiven, we can forgive others. Because we have been shown love, we can love others.

Lift Up His Countenance

God "lifting up His countenance" suggests that God's justice has been fully satisfied and His compassion now flows outward to the child in loving grace - "be gracious unto you"

Also, it can be translated He "turns his face toward you" indicates that God really "sees" you, He "regards" and validates you, gives your life meaning. You are not lost in a crowd or disappearing in the mass of humanity. But like the one sheep that the shepherd goes to find - leaving the ninety and nine. He will never leave you or forsake you.

Be gracious unto you

Rashi states that the blessing will be that God will bestow (the quality of or the capacity for) "grace" on the Israelites.

Bemidbar Rabbah (11:6): "May God grant you the capacity/understanding to show grace to each other, and show compassion to one another..."

In the Psalms, blessing is linked to salvation and deliverance:

"May God be gracious to us and bless us; may He show us favor...that Your way be known on earth, Your deliverance among all nations." (**Psalm 67:2-3**)

"And give you peace" -

For Rashi, *shalom* (peace), here is construed as a pardon for past sins. So he hopes God will NOT function as an impartial judge when ruling on Israel's sins - that his mercy will prevail over his justice.

Jesus is called the Prince of Peace (**Isaiah 9:5**)

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (**John 14:27**).

- **Philippians 4:6-7** - "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

- **Isaiah 26:3** - "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee."

- **Isaiah 40:2** - "Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD'S hand double for all her sins."

- **John 16:33** - "These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world."

- **Colossians 3:15** - "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts, to the which also ye are called in one body; and be ye thankful."

Put My Name Upon Them

Numbers 6:27 - "And they shall put my name upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them."

The name of *YHWH* is meant. Rashi says "I will bless them" can refer to the priests, who in turn pass the blessing down to the people.

This is mysterious. There was an ancient practice of physically wearing a pagan deity's name and blessing for protection against evil. Here God is conferring His name on Israel spiritually.

This is ultimately fulfilled in believers taking on a new identity in Christ, putting on Christ, and being given a "new name":

- **Revelation 2:7** - "To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."

- **Revelation 3:12-13** - "I will write on him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name."

- **Galatians 2:20** - "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

The Blessing Was Later Never Read or Translated Publicly!

There was one problem with the Priestly Blessing according to the rabbis.

The Jerusalem Talmud in Mishnah Megillah, says, "The Priestly Benediction (**Numbers 6:24-26**) is neither read nor translated (targumed)." The Babylonian Talmud, in the same passage, says instead, "We read the Priestly Benediction, but do not translate it."

Apparently it was not read even though listed as part of the Torah Readings. But the blessing was given in Hebrew by the priests and their later generations in the synagogue.

The reason is because the uneducated might think God has "respect of persons."

Numbers 6:26 - "The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace."

The phrase "lift up his countenance" or "*nasa paniym*" can mean to "bestow favor," which in the Hebrew can also mean to "show (unlawful) judicial favoritism or preference" on a par with taking a bribe.

Favoritism or "respect of persons" goes against the Torah's sense of impartiality in justice.

- **Deuteronomy 10:17** - "For the Lord your God is God of gods, and Lord of lords, a great God, a mighty and a terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward."

"You are not to commit corruption in justice; you are not to lift-up-in-favor the face of the poor, you are not to overly-honor the face of the great; with equity you are to judge your fellow!" (**Leviticus 19:15**).

There "regardeth not persons" is also "*nasa paniym*."

In this reading, to save the reputation of God, the rabbis believe the proper understanding is that God bestows favor on Israel because He is properly rewarding them for meritorious behavior. Israel is the "chosen people" because they somehow merited the right to be chosen. And now, they maintain, there is no Moses to intercede for the people when they failed.

The angels said to Holy One blessed be He, "Master of the Universe, it says in your Torah, [You are a God who] does not favor anyone nor takes a bribe (**Deuteronomy 10:17**). But you favor Israel as it says May God turn His face toward you and grant you peace." He answered them, "I shouldn't favor Israel? I wrote in my Torah You shall eat and become satiated, then bless your Lord God (**Deuteronomy 8**). Yet they are careful [to bless] even on [the smallest morsel of food]." (Talmud Brachot 20b)

They dealt with this question in different ways. One was to interpret "bestow favor" as having God's mercy prevail over his justice:

It was taught; Rabbi Yishmael the son of Elisha said: "I once entered into the inner most [part of the sanctuary], to offer incense, and I saw Akatrie-I K-ah (a name referring to the crown of God), the Lord of Hosts, seated upon a high and exalted throne, He said to me, 'Yishmael my son, bless Me!' I said, 'May it be Your will that that Your mercy suppresses Your anger, and that Your mercy prevail over Your other attributes, and that You deal with Your children with the attribute of mercy, and that You deal with them beyond the letter of the law.' And He nodded to me with His head. (Talmud Brachot 7a)

Yishmael was High Priest and entered with the blood of the sacrifice on Yom Kippur.

Rashi interprets this that while "court is still in session," as it were, God will take every opportunity to "lift His face" and forgive/show mercy to the defendant. Once God issues

His decree, and it is “sealed,” however, then there is no deviation from the judgment.

From a New Testament viewpoint, the answer is clear. The blessing from God is actually to Christ (it is in the singular after all, not the plural), and we partake of the blessing because we are in Him, not because we earned a place there, but from the unmerited grace of God.

Fulfilled by Jesus

After His resurrection, Jesus blessed His disciples:

- **Luke 24:50** - "And he led them out as far as to Bethany, and he lifted up his hands, and blessed them. And it came to pass, while he blessed them, he was parted from them, and carried up into heaven."

In His position as a priest after the order of Mechizadek, Jesus may have said something like this, in the first person - “I bless you and keep you; I shine upon you and am gracious to you; I lift up my countenance upon you, and give you my peace”

Ephesians 1:3-4 - “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, 4 just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love”

Response to the Blessing

The Sages of the Talmud ordained that at the time of the priestly benediction, the congregation should think of their dreams - individual and corporate, crying out “Master of the Universe, I am yours and my dreams are yours...”

The Hebrew word dream, *halom*, has the same letters as *hamal*, love, compassion, as well as *laham*, fight, struggle, wage war.

Receiving the blessing means giving over our dreams, the things we love and our struggles in life to God.

The Offerings of the Princes of Israel (Numbers 7)

"Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being" (**Leviticus 9:22**)

The Priestly Blessing turns out to have been commanded shortly before the chieftains began bringing their offerings. Their offerings began "On the day that Moses finished

setting up the Tabernacle" (**Numbers 7:1**). Since the chieftains commenced their offerings on the eighth day of dedication of the Tabernacle, Aaron was commanded regarding the Priestly Blessing before he began the sacrificial service of the eighth day, described in the passage in Leviticus above, according to Rashi.

The first half of **Numbers 7** is included as part of this week's Torah reading perhaps because of this.

We'll study that chapter in depth next week.

See also:

<http://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5768-naso-the-priestly-blessings/>

https://www.hebrew4christians.com/Blessings/Synagogue_Blessings/Priestly_Blessing/priestly_blessing.html

<https://www.aish.com/tp/i/moha/48924577.html>

https://www.academia.edu/25637603/What_s_In_a_Blessing_Rashi_and_the_Priestly_Benediction_of_Numbers_6_22_27_in_Birkat_Kohanim_The_Priestly_Benediction_in_Jewish_Tradition_Ed_Martin_S_Cohen_and_David_Birnbaum._New_York_New_Paradigm_Matrix_2016_231_258