

Naso 2017

Delivered by Rabbi Aaron Krupnick 6/3/17

Just a few moments ago we heard a quote from this week's Torah portion, Naso. We blessed the Dias family with Priestly Blessing, "The Yivarechecha," although since it is the blessing of the Kohanim, perhaps it would have been more appropriate, Alan, for you to bless us since you yourself are a Kohen. It is in this week's Torah portion that we read, "The Lord said to Moses, "Tell Aaron and his sons, "Thus shall you bless the Israelites. Say to them: "May Lord bless you and protect you; May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; May the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.' (Num. 6:23-27)

This is among the most ancient of all prayer texts we have in our sacred tradition, and one of the most familiar. It is very, very old: It was used by the Priests/Kohanim in the Temple; both Temples in fact. And it is used to this very day, not just for b'nai mitzvah, but as a blessing for many sacred Jewish occasions. We recite it over our children each and every Friday night. It is especially beautiful and poignant when it is said to the bride and groom under the chuppah. It is such a simple and beautiful blessing.

The Birkhat Kohanim is the oldest biblical text extant, way older in fact than the Dead Sea Scrolls. In 1979, the archeologist Gabriel Barkay was examining ancient burial caves at Ketef Hinnom, outside the walls of Jerusalem when a thirteen-year-old boy who was assisting Barkay discovered a hidden chamber. There the group discovered almost one thousand ancient artifacts including two tiny silver scrolls no more than an inch long. Can you imagine?! They were so fragile that it took three years to work out a way of unrolling them without causing them to disintegrate. Eventually the scrolls turned out to be amulets, containing, among other texts, the priestly blessings with the same exact text we just used this morning! Scientifically dated to the sixth century BCE, the age of Jeremiah and the last days of the First Temple, they are four centuries older than the Dead Sea Scrolls. Today those very amulets can be seen in the Israel Museum, testimony to the ancient connection of Jews to the land (which unfortunately is called into question by anti-Zionists) and indeed the continuity of our Jewish faith itself. This is but another direct link in the unbroken chain connection us to our ancient past.

What gives these particular words their power is their simplicity and beauty. There is a rhythm and a grace to the phrasing of this three-fold blessing. The first line is three words, the second is five, and the third line is seven words, which, of course is the symbol of completion in the Torah. But, behind the simplicity of the phrasing lies a much deeper and far more complex message; one that grows more complicated and complex with each line.

Tradition tells us that the first blessing: "May Gd bless and protect you" means with material wealth. You should have enough to live well. How much is that? Well, I read research recently that said it's about \$60,000 in family income. In measures of happiness, people whose family income was below this line reported a great deal of hardship and an overall dissatisfaction with the quality of their lives. But interestingly, above that \$60,000 threshold the reported overall quality of life and personal happiness did not increase all that proportionally or dramatically as income levels rose. So basically, if you have enough to live comfortably, you can feel this first blessing coming through in your life.

The second blessing ends with the special word, "Vi-Choo-neckah" we hope that Gd will bless us with "grace." What is grace? Grace is not simply kindness. "Chen" or "grace" is also more than forgiveness. Grace is forgiveness of another even if that person might not truly deserve to be forgiven. In other words, we ask Gd to not hold us completely accountable for the sins we have committed even though, by rights,

He could. We pray that Gd will move past the hurts even if He really could still dwell on them. We pray that Gd will let it go... At the same time, this stitch of the blessing reminds us that sometimes we need to be able to do the same - to let it go even if we have a right to dwell on it. That's what grace is, and Gd wants us to have more of it, so that's why it is in this blessing. Obviously, this 5 word blessing is more complicated than the first blessing because it is more personal, less objective, and therefore, for many, harder to achieve.

But the last blessing, the seven word blessing is the most complicated and the most personal of all. We pray that Gd will lift up His face, as it were, show you kindness and grant you peace. The knowledge that Gd turns His face toward us - that you are not just a face in a crowd, can be a profound source of peace. Still, this blessing of peace is the most subjective of all, and sometimes the hardest to achieve. The reality is that most of us do not live in a war zone. Most of us live comfortably and in safety. We indeed have physical peace (unlike so much of the world.) But, creature comforts cannot buy us peace in our hearts. That is something we must embrace for ourselves. And so, we carve out time from our busy lives to celebrate the gifts that are ours so that we might better feel at peace, at ease with ourselves and our world. And we know that when we feel that sense of inner-peace, it radiates out into the lives of our loved ones and all how share our world.

The Hebrew word for prayer is "L'hitpalel" - which means self-reflection. And so, we pause to celebrate the goodness in our lives, to give thanks for the blessings, and to focus our hearts on truly knowing the inner-peace that only we can grant ourselves. We pray for Gd to give us the insight, and the will, to look for and find peace in the quiet moments we afford ourselves here in this spiritual shelter; our sanctuary, our protected place of peace.