

“Desert Blessings and Just Desserts”

A Sermonette for Shabbat Naso

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June 10, 2006

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New Orleans, Louisiana

## I.

By the time we arrive at the Book of Numbers, it ought to be clear to everyone that we're not going back to the Garden of Eden! No matter what eventuates from our wanderings post-Egyptian slavery and post-Red Sea miracle, this sojourn in the wilderness will not be a cakewalk. And yet, there is a message of hope to be ascertained, even here in the desert. And, it is this: somewhere out there, there is our Promised Land!

What are these Israelite wanderers like, these folks whom we meet in the Book of Numbers? Well, I'm relieved to report that they're certainly not evil people – not most of them anyway. But, they are scared – frightened and understandably traumatized by slavery, by that narrowest of escapes at the Red Sea, by the unfamiliar wilderness that surrounds them, and by their uncertainty from dealing with this ever-so-hard-to-figure-out God of theirs.

I'll tell you what else they are: dissatisfied. Their wants are nearly endless. Their stomachs, especially, are always hungry! Like teenage boys, they are always ready to eat. But, their palates are particular!

“If we only had meat to eat!” they complain at one point. To make matters worse, the bad old days become the “good old days” in their imperfect reminiscences. They say, “We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our stomachs are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look at.”

False memories spur the people to bitter discontentment. Moses is sorely tempted so many times, as we shall see in the next several weeks, to just chuck it all and give up on this headstrong, hopeless people. And, who could blame him?

But, perhaps nowhere is the directive to hang in there with humankind more poignantly articulated than with our reading of the Birkat Cohanim: the Priestly Blessing. Scholars caution that we not reduce these beloved words to nebulous, wishful fantasies.

May the Lord bless you and keep you  
 May the Lord cause His face to shine upon you and be  
 gracious unto you.  
 May the Lord lift up His face upon you and grant you peace.

Say the experts, these familiar words of benediction are no casual words to be recited on the order of “gesundheit” or “God bless you” after a sneeze!

There are not that many words of prayer in our Torah. So, when we find some delineated and specified as the words to use to bless the people, how shall we view them?

Scholars point to this text and maintain that its words are too highly charged for casual use – too formulaic and rhythmic. It's structure –

three words, five words, and seven words – is distinctive. And, each portion contains the four-letter name of God as the second word.

Y'varechecha Adonai  
T'air Adonai  
Ye'sah Adonai.

Scholars further claim that there is, as well, a clearly intended and well-thought-out number of patterns and syllables in each verse. So, there is no note of casual usage here in the Priestly Blessing. It is no *gesundheit!*

## II.

But, here is where we must be cautious, lest we jump to conclusions. Some would then be tempted to alternately conclude that, far from being a casual “God bless you,” the likes of which one would say following someone’s sneeze, this priestly blessing was intended to be a powerful and magical incantation: an utterance capable of automatically calling down God’s blessing via multiple pronunciations of the sacred Name. Sounds like something from an Indiana Jones movie script, doesn’t it? – *Indiana Jones and the Priestly Words*.

Yet, doesn’t our text make it abundantly clear that God is the source of blessing and protection? The choice and source of blessing derives from God’s decision and not the invocation of human magic or witchcraft.

Saying these blessings the way we would say “God bless you” will only serve to point out that you and I have no power to affect significant blessing. Alternatively, considering these verses as a magic incantation totally dependent on God’s desire seemingly robs us human beings of responsibility in the world.

Ruling out both of these interpretations or approaches to the text leaves us with a God who is neither manipulable nor irrelevant.

Enter, then, Dr. Arnold Eisen’s interpretation, which I really like. Says this scholar of the role of the Levitical priests who have, after all, just been charged with the responsibility and the honor of reciting this blessing:

The priests are in the text’s view analogous to the Sabbath Day...they are a divinely appointed vehicle for blessing.

God’s gift streams through the priests (and today, through their descendants) more efficaciously than through others.

Note however, what eventuates following the blessing

of the priests depends on what its recipients do with it.

“Human action and divine initiative,” writes Dr. Eisen, working in uneasy partnership, are both required if blessing is to be pronounced and accomplished.

Let’s take a closer look. In the first of the priestly Benedictions, “May the Lord bless you and keep you,” God guarantees the essential conditions for human fulfillment: life and the goods necessary to maintain life.

In the second part of the Benediction, we are reminded that it is up to us to take the reflected light of God’s glory that shines from our faces – the inner light that animates and ensouls us – and bestow it upon others. “May the Lord cause His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you.”

Faces (of our fellow mortals) are to receive Divine light just as bodies receive food. The source of that Divine Light is God, of course, and the agent of its delivery, human. It is our human charge to pass along God’s Light to others in this life and in this world.

Finally, “May the Lord lift up His face unto you and give you peace.” Here is portrayed a much-longed-for condition on Earth when there exists, at last, a symmetry between divine and human standing opposite one another.

Such a state of human grace in communion with the Creator presupposes a state of peace, satisfaction, fulfillment, and want of nothing – an unattainable ideal that is the very opposite of the moods of increased desire and discontent that so abound in the Book of Numbers.

Say the Sages of old, this state of human bliss and blessing – just like the Promised Land – can be known to us, if we live righteously, but can never actually be possessed once and for all. Though we are destined never to return to the paradise of Eden on Earth, possible access to the Promised Land summons us to transcend the discontent and gloom that so often characterizes the mood of those still wandering in the wilderness.

God be with us, dear friends, as She has been with our predecessors, searching and in our every finding and arrival.

Amen