



## On Channeling and Receiving Blessing

Rabbi Shai Held

The threefold priestly blessing (*birkat kohanim*) is among the best-known and most deeply treasured passages in the Torah. It is recited in Jewish prayer every day and for the past several hundred years it has been recited by parents at the beginning of Shabbat as a way of invoking God's blessing upon their children. Part of the blessing's power lies in the simplicity of its structure, which Bible scholar Jacob Milgrom describes as "a rising crescendo": There are three words in the first line, five in the second, and seven in the third; fifteen consonants in the first line, twenty in the second, and twenty-five in the third.<sup>1</sup> The sense conveyed is of increasing, overflowing divine blessing.



A broad array of interpretations has been put forward for the three lines and the six verbs included, but a definitive line-by-line interpretation is probably impossible. As R. Shlomo

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Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619) comments, "There are many opinions as to the meaning of the individual blessings, and everyone interprets them according to his own lights" (K'li Yakar to Numbers 6:24). And yet a close look at the blessings, and at the ways they have been understood, yields crucial insight into the role of the priests in Judaism—and just as importantly, into the nature of blessing in Jewish theology.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (1990), p. 51.



Let's look briefly at the text in its entirety:

The Lord spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons: "Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

"May the Lord bless and protect you!

"May the Lord shine His face upon you and be gracious to you!

"May the Lord lift up His face toward you and grant you peace!

"Thus they shall link My name with [or: place My name on] the people of Israel, and I Myself will bless them."

(Numbers 6:22-27)

### Channels, Not Sources

The verses that surround the priestly blessing (vv. 22, 27) raise important questions: Why does God dictate to the priests the exact formula they are to use in blessing the people? And why does God emphasize after dictating the words that "I myself will bless them"?<sup>2</sup> The answer to both questions is the same: The Torah wants to underscore the fact that the priests are not the source of blessing. They are, rather, its conduits. "The blessing issues solely from [God]; the priests' function is to channel it."<sup>3</sup> The same point is driven home by the (syntactically unnecessary) repetition of God's name (YHWH, "the Lord") as the beginning of each line of the formula—these are actions which God and God alone will perform. To imagine that the priests are themselves the source of blessing, or to assume that they have some mysterious capacity to guarantee it, is to expose them to the ever-present danger of

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<sup>2</sup> We could just as easily render these words as "and it is I who will bless them"—the emphatic nature of the Hebrew *va-ani* is lost in many translations.

<sup>3</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 50.



grandiosity—and worse, it is to open the door to exploitation of the weak and vulnerable by those believed to have magic powers at their disposal.<sup>4</sup>

To be sure, the Torah here teaches us something important about priests. But by extension, it instructs us in the nature of blessing more generally: We are not sources but channels of blessing. We do not create the goodness we bestow but rather pass it on. A good teacher, for example, knows well that the Torah she teaches is not hers but God's; she is a vehicle for Torah but not its source. A good parent knows that the love he showers upon his child is not ultimately something he himself made; that love itself is a manifestation of divine grace. The parent's task is not to manufacture love but to pass it on. To understand and internalize this is what allows us to remain genuine givers, to prevent our giving from yielding to a form of narcissism in which everything is ultimately about us. God—and not we—is the source of blessing, and in giving we pass along a bounty ultimately not ours.

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#### **Blessings That Remain Just That**

There is a fascinating debate over how to understand the first of the three blessings, “May the Lord bless and protect you”. R. Obadiah Seforno (1475-1550) pithily presents the

conventional interpretation. “May the Lord bless you’—with wealth and possessions, since without flour (i.e. material well-being) there is no Torah. ‘And protect you’—from thieves”

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<sup>4</sup> Some traditional interpreters evidently worry that imaging the priests as channels of blessing still confers too much power upon them. Thus, for example, Rashbam (1085-1158) explains that the priests are given a set formula to recite because all they are doing is praying to God on the people's behalf. As the very first words of the formula make clear: “May the Lord bless...”—the Lord is doing the blessing, and not the priests (Rashbam, commentary to Numbers 6:23). R. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) argues similarly, insisting that that the Torah wants the priests to understand that their task is “to speak and pray on behalf of the people—and nothing else” (Abravanel, commentary to Numbers 6:23).



(Seforno, commentary to Numbers 6:24; cf. also Rashi). According to Seforno, the divine blessing invoked here refers to material well-being and the protection invoked is about not losing what we have been given. But R. Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin (Netziv, 1816-1893) offers a subtler, more powerful interpretation of the verse. Picking up on the fact that the blessing, recited over the whole people, is nevertheless stated in the second-person singular,<sup>5</sup> the Netziv insists that the prayer here is that each person be granted blessings appropriate to her. “For the one engaged in Torah—blessings for his study; for the one engaged in trade—success in business,” and so on. We can take the Netziv’s point one significant step further: Divine blessing is not generic but specific to each individual and her needs, dreams, and yearnings. As I have argued elsewhere, God sees and cherishes us as individuals,<sup>6</sup> and we pray for blessings accordingly.

But the Netziv’s explanation of “and protect you” is the real key to his interpretation. “May God protect you, lest the very blessing you receive turn into a stumbling block.” The blessing of wealth, for example, can lead to greed, or stinginess, or lack of empathy. Or it can lead to a perpetual state of anxiety that one does not have enough (“A lover of money never has his fill of money”—Ecclesiastes 5:9) or that one may lose what one has earned (“The rich man’s abundance never lets him sleep”—5:11).<sup>7</sup> Crucially, the Netziv points out, even the blessing of Torah learning can yield rotten fruit: The Torah scholar can easily become arrogant or cause a desecration of God’s name.

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<sup>5</sup> It is impossible to capture this in English translation, but *yevarakhekha*—may the Lord bless you—and all the rest of the verbs that follow are stated in the singular rather than the plural.

<sup>6</sup> Shai Held, “Divine Love and Human Uniqueness,” CJLI Parashat Bemidbar 5774, available [here](#).

<sup>7</sup> The examples I give here are my own, not R. Berlin’s.



Although the Netziv's comments are a bit terse, we can attempt to draw out their implications. We know only too well that religion—and here, sadly, Judaism is no exception—can constrict our hearts and minds rather than expand them, can legitimate cruelty instead of kindness, and can turn God into an idol who hates precisely the same people we do.<sup>8</sup> The Talmudic Sage R. Joshua b. Levi poignantly tells us that “if one is meritorious, the Torah becomes for him an elixir of life, but if not, it can become a deadly poison for him” (BT, Yoma 72b). A life of commitment to Torah can make us kinder and gentler, more loving and more present, but it can also render us cold and merciless, less loving and attentive to others instead of more. As R. Abraham Joshua Heschel pungently notes, “There has, indeed, been so much pious abuse that the Bible is often in need of being saved from the hands of its admirers.”<sup>9</sup>

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#### **Love and Blessing**

The blessing traditionally recited by the priests before blessing the people is highly unusual. They say, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless His people

Israel with love.” Two important questions emerge from this formula: First, why do the priests talk about being sanctified with the sanctity of Aaron instead of employing the usual

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird* (1995), p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> Abraham Joshua Heschel, *God in Search of Man* (1955), p. 275.



formula, “who has sanctified us with God’s commandments”? And second, why the mention of love at the end of the blessing? To the best of my knowledge, this is the only blessing before the performance of a *mitzvah* in which love is explicitly mentioned (and required).

The answer to our two questions is identical: Blessing depends on love. The Torah does not assign the priests the task of rote recitation. On the contrary, it calls upon them to love the people. Indeed, the Zohar declares that “a priest who does not love the people or is not loved by the people should not raise his hands to bless them” (Naso, 147b). Perhaps not surprisingly, Aaron, the first priest, is remembered as “a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace, one who love[d] people and brought them closer to Torah” (Mishnah, Avot 1:12). “The holiness of Aaron,” says R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky (1911-2000), “flowed from his love.”<sup>10</sup> A priest devoid of love is a priest in name only.

What is true of priests ought to be true of the rest of us as well: To bless someone by rote is to fail to bless them at all. When parents recite the priestly benediction over their children on Shabbat, for example, it is a moment that demands total presence, as we attempt to give our love, and to channel God’s, to those for whom we care most.

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### **No Blessing Without Receptivity**

Why, asks R. Moshe Alsheikh (1507-1600), do the priests turn to the people and say “may the Lord bless you” rather than turn to God and ask “bless them, Lord, and protect them”? In turning to the people, R. Alsheikh suggests, the priests “prepare them to receive [God’s] blessing.” This, he argues, is what the text means when it says that the priests should “place

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<sup>10</sup> R. Shalom Noah Berezovsky, *Netivot Shalom, Bemidbar*, p. 33. My interpretation in these past two paragraphs is similar in many ways to his.



God's name on the people." Alsheikh's comments suggest that sometimes it is more difficult to receive blessing than to give it. The Israelites, still only recently liberated from slavery, are about to resume their journey to the Promised Land. They are devastated on many levels—slavery is so utterly ingrained in them that freedom is intolerable; the suffering they have endured is so profound that accepting God's bounty is impossible. It is no easy matter for this heavily traumatized people to receive the blessings God seeks to grant them. Think of people you know who have endured deep and sustained trauma, shaping almost of every corner of their inner lives. Often the most difficult challenge they face is to allow the past with all its pain to be the past, and to receive in the present what was unavailable to them in the past. Similarly, the question facing the Israelites is whether, now that they have left Egypt in body, they can leave it in spirit as well. At the deepest level, you cannot receive blessing

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against your will; without at least a modicum of openness and receptivity, blessing becomes impossible. According to Alsheikh, the task of the priests is to help the Israelites allow present blessings to penetrate the fog left by the past.

The priests are summoned to bless the people—recalling, all the while, that the blessings do not ultimately derive from them. They ask for blessing for the people—and for each individual person amongst the people—and they pray that blessings received do not tragically become curses. More, they help prepare the people for what can sometimes be the most daunting challenge human beings face: How to receive blessing after having been long deprived of it. Since, for all their divinely mandated responsibilities, the priests are still human beings like us, there is a great deal we can learn from what they have been charged with about what it means to be a teacher, a parent, or a friend—and about what it means, most fundamentally, to sincerely wish for the well-being of others.

Shabbat shalom.

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