



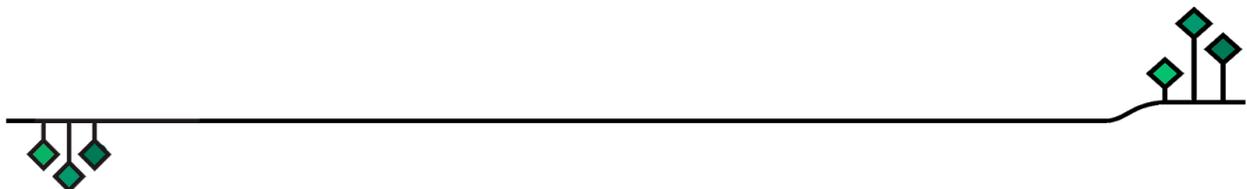
From God, With Love

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Parashat Naso 5781

Parashat Naso contains the instructions and text of the priestly blessing, recited daily in the Temple by the priests, and then carried over into the synagogue liturgy. In the modern practice (often called *dukhenin*), the priests recite the blessing, antiphonally, word by word with the *hazzan*. In Israel, this is done daily in the morning prayers; in Diaspora, on holidays only. The Conservative movement largely stopped this practice—whether it be out of distancing to rituals associated with the Temple or because some more traditional Conservative rabbis felt their lay people were often non-observant so they should not exercise this special “sacramental” role. In some Orthodox synagogues, non-observant priests are encouraged not to go up for *dukhenin*.

This approach is regrettable because the Torah makes clear that the priest is **not** personally blessing the people. Rather, the priest is channeling God’s blessing: “They [the priests] shall put My name on the children of Israel and I [God] will bless them” (Numbers 6:27). I have always felt there was an important positive message that God uses both righteous people and sinners to bless the people. This checks any self-righteous tendencies which can develop among observant Jews. It also reassures sinners—we are all sinners at some point in our



lives¹—that God has not rejected or dismissed them. God loves them and invites them to serve God’s good purposes. Maimonides rules that, aside from idolatry, there is only one sin that can disqualify a *kohen* from participating in this divine service: killing another person (intentionally or unintentionally). Life is the highest Jewish value and only a violation of the ultimate reverence for life can make one unfit to serve as God’s messenger of the blessing.²

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik calls our attention to another unique and special requirement for blessing the people. To be valid—to fulfill the *mitzvah*—the priests must give the blessing **with love**. As stated in the preamble blessing the priests recite before uttering the actual words of the priestly blessing, “Blessed are you Loving God, our Lord Ruler of the Universe, who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron³ and commanded to bless His people, Israel, **with love**.” Rabbi Soloveitchik points out that there is no other blessing on a commandment that specifies that one must do it with love in order for it to be a valid performance.⁴

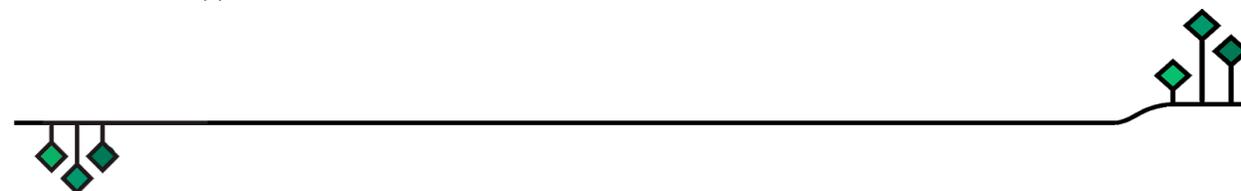
To understand this requirement of love, we must analyze again the nature of the blessing and who is giving it. The priestly blessing was not created by the Rabbis to precede the performance of a good deed or a ritual action. For example, *ha-motzi*: “Blessed are You, Loving God, our Lord Ruler of the Universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.” The priests are also not uttering words or giving a blessing to the people in the congregation. This

¹ “There is no righteous person on earth that does [only] good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20).

² Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Tefillah u-Birkat Koahnim* 15:3. On of reverence for life as a defining feature of the priesthood, see my essay on Parashat Tetzaveh, “On the Priesthood, Or: Holiness is Living in the Fullness of Life,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/priesthood>.

³ Aaron was a member of the Levite tribe, as was his brother, Moses. He (and all his descendants after him) was consecrated to the status of priesthood and the priestly roles in Temple worship, sacrifices, and blessings. See Leviticus 8 for the consecration ceremonies which preceded the consecrating of the Tabernacle.

⁴ Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance (Al Ha-Teshuvah)*, edited by Pinchas Peli (Koren Maggid Series: Jerusalem, 2017) pp. 72-75.



blessing is being bestowed by God onto people; the priests are merely conduits for God's outreach to the people.

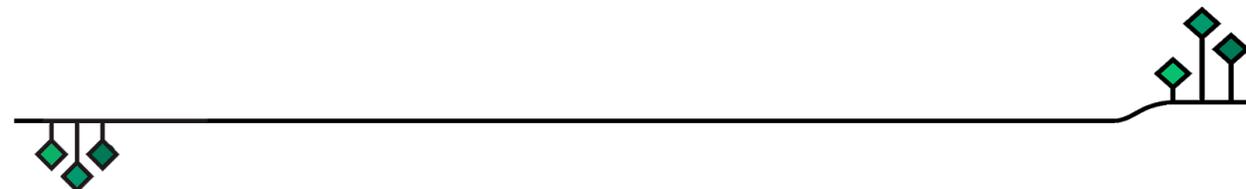
The priestly blessing is grounded in the blessings which God showered on living things when they made their appearance during the evolution of Creation. After each stage/day, God pronounces "it is good."⁵ God loves Creation and all God's creatures.⁶ When God sees the emergence of life, God is overjoyed and responds lovingly with a call for "give me more," i.e. "be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters and the birds shall multiply on earth" (Genesis 1:22). The blessing that God bestows on life is not words, but **vitality**. Out of love, God radiates good energy and power of replication and increase to all living creatures. The Kabbalah insists that these channels of connection between the Divine and human are universally present. The divine energy sustains all living things; all are rooted or embedded in the ground of God.

The High Holidays liturgy notes that God is "*Melekh hafez ba-hayyim* / the Ruler who lusts for life." When life advances and land animals make their appearance, followed by the most developed form of life, human beings, God's delight overflows. Again God lovingly blesses life.⁷ The Divine radiates the energy of reproduction and replication because God wants more life—more quantity, and more quality of life. God's love embraces life and stimulates its growth.

⁵ Genesis 1:3,10,12,18,21,25,31.

⁶ "God is good to all, [because] God's mother love (*rah_{am}av*, related to *re_hem* = womb) is on [i.e. extended to] all God's creatures" (Psalm 145:9).

⁷ "God blessed them and God said to them, 'Be fertile and increase, fill the earth....'" (Genesis 1:28).



This, then, is the blessing transmitted by the priests. The priests have no independent power of bestowing blessings to serve as a kind of amulet for people. And yet, the sense of direct connection to God, the channels which link the visible and invisible realms and which transfer energy and vitality between them are “lost” or obscured by all the sensations and experiences of daily life. The tabernacle/Temple is a place created to cut out the static and concentrate the mind of the pilgrim to “tune in” to the Divine Presence. Evil, death, and injustice also block the connection. As it were, they dam up the flow of love, and distract individuals from penetrating the surface to meet the Divine Ground in which everything exists.⁸

What the priest must do, says Rabbi Soloveitchik, is empty him- or herself of the anger, judgment, jealousy, and enmity that he or she may feel toward members of the congregation or toward the people in his or her life. If the priest will exclude the emotional blocks and barriers and respond with generalized love, the divine effusion of compassion, care, and love will flow through the priest and reach the congregants, or anyone who is focused to receive the blessing or energy, as well as the grace, forgiveness, and esteem which is embedded in the divine love.

It takes a tremendous effort for the priest to overcome the self-centeredness, envy, or begrudging of the other that operates in day to day life. But if the effort is made and the love “plugged in” then, a finite, flawed human receptacle can pass on and channel the unlimited love of the Infinite God and the delight which the Lord feels in every display of life’s capacities and human goodness. Thus, the liturgical apparatus strengthens the forces of life and the vitality of life in the world.

⁸ For death as an interruption in the covenant and flow of God’s blessings, see my essay on Parashat Vayikra, “The Pollution of Non-Acts,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/pollution-non-acts>.

