

**Naso — The Power of Blessings**  
Silent Center of Things  
5775 Text Study by Yael Shy

**The Instructions**

- 22 The One spoke to Moses saying: כבּוֹדֵדְבַר יְיָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:
- 23 Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them: כגדּבּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל בְּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם:
- 24 "May the Force of Compassion bless you and watch over you. כדִּבְרָכָה יְיָ וְיִשְׁמְרָהּ:
- 25 May the Eternal cause its countenance to shine to you and favor you. כהִיָּאֵר יְיָ | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנֶךָ:
- 26 May the One raise its countenance toward you and grant you peace." כוּיֵשָׂא יְיָ | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לָךְ שְׁלוֹם:
- 27 They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them. כזוֹשְׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֵם:

In these verses, God teaches the priests a special blessing for the children of Israel. It serves as an interruption from the priests' seemingly endless list of sacrifices given and received on behalf of the people as well as rituals in their direct communication with the Divine.

Compared to all the “dashing out” of the blood and guts of animals as well as the burning of fat and incense, this blessing is rather quiet and intimate. It does not depend on the behavior of the Israelites. It isn't a response to guilt, or conflict, or jealousy or even gratitude. God simply wants humans to take a moment and bless each other.

Rashi heightens the preciousness of the moment even further by picking up on the repetitive line, “saying to them,” in verse 23.

**saying:** The word אָמֹר is written in its full form [i.e., with a “vav”], indicating that they should not bless them hastily or in a hurried manner, but with concentration and with wholeheartedness. אמור: מלא, לא תברכם בחפזון ובהלות, אלא בכוונה ובלב שלם:

[Midrash Tanchuma Naso 10]

It's not enough that the priests bless the people with the proper words. According to Rashi, they have to focus, giving the blessing slowly and with intention and heart.

## **The Act**

What is a blessing? What is actually happening when we (or the priests) turn towards someone and bless them? Rabbi Jeff Roth, in his book, *Jewish Meditation Practices for Everyday Life* (2009), writes about the difference between wishing someone well, which we are all accustomed to, and blessing them:

“Imagine saying to a friend, ‘I hope you get that job you are interviewing for tomorrow.’ Then compare that to saying, ‘I wasn’t to bless you that you get that job tomorrow.’ The difference is immense. Using the word *bless*, for most people, seems to establish a feeling of connection to the divine nature of the universe.” (167)

A blessing is not a wish or a hope. Once uttered, wishes and hopes seem to float out in the universe, untethered and direction-less. Blessings - especially the priestly blessings - call upon forces of love and peace in the universe to wrap themselves around the bless-ee. Giving a blessing is a very active practice, and a slightly presumptuous one – bringing holiness into the space between human beings.

## **The Blessing**

The *particular* blessing God teaches the priests is intimate and powerful.

*“May the Force of Compassion bless you and watch over you.”*

This is a blessing for safety and care. As someone with a childhood history of neglect, this particular blessing always moves me. The world can sometimes be a scary, out-of-control place and it is easy to feel alone. Even Rashi references thieves and attackers in this line. Knowing that there is a force beyond our control watching over us helps to bring us a sense of comfort and ease.

*“May the Eternal cause its countenance to shine to you and favor you.”*

What does the Eternal’s countenance feel like as it shines on us? What would it mean for that countenance to show us favor? To me, it is the feeling of being loved and of belonging. It is the warmth of the sun as it gently heats us our face. It is the feeling, deep within, that we matter.

*“May the One raise its countenance toward you and grant you peace.”*

Deep peace – real peace – is the feeling of connecting with the oneness of the world. It is the feeling of being in *flow*. In Numbers Rabbah 11:7, Shimon ben Halafta says, “great is peace, for no vessel other than peace can receive blessing.” Peace is the container for all other blessings. As Thich Nacht Hanh would say, there is no way to peace – peace is the way. Being blessed with peace is therefore the ultimate blessing of realizing our true nature, and feeling that divine wholeness in all we do.

## **The Bless-er**

Receiving a blessing is meaningful and powerful, but so is giving a blessing. Blessing others opens the heart and gives the bless-er a buoyancy of spirit that is transformative. When my mood and

energy starts sinking in meditation, or when I begin feeling alone and lonely, I begin what Rabbi Jeff Roth calls the “Blessing Practice.” This is a practice of sending blessings to distinct people over and over again. It’s highly unlikely the people I’m blessing at these times actually feel any difference. It is possible, of course, but that is not the primary goal. Orienting the heart towards blessing others shifts *my* energy and opens up feelings of love and connection within me, which changes the way I relate to others in the long term. Perhaps God gave the blessings to the priests as a way to open the *priests’* hearts, and to help connect them with the wider Children of Israel.

### **Practice Guidance**

Set aside some time this week to practice sending blessings. You can do this in silence in your home, bringing specific people to mind and blessing them over and over again. You can also do this on the train, plane, or in traffic, focusing on people you see in front of you and blessing them one-by-one. Once you have chosen your person, slow down, as Rashi suggests, and bring your whole heart to act. Say to yourself, “May this person be blessed with safety. May this person be blessed with love. May this person be blessed with peace.” You can also use the exact priestly blessing (in Hebrew or English) if you prefer. Repeat over and over again. Concentrate on the person and on the power in your heart and mind to partner with God in this precious and powerful act.