

The Priestly Blessing

What for you is the most moving part of services? For me, it's those moments where we actively live out ritual, where we're able to close our eyes and envision ourselves back in our ancestors' time. The key moment of this occurs for Ashkenazi Jews in the Diaspora only 13 times in the year: on Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret, Simhat Torah, Passover and Shavuot. As a child, I loved attending services, but I especially loved going on those times to receive the blessing from the *Kohanim*. We attended both Conservative and Orthodox synagogues in which this prayer was done. My head was covered by my father's tallit, and I could hardly wait to hear the words of the *shaliah tzibbur*, the prayer leader, followed by those of the *Kohanim*. יאר ה פניו -May G-d bless you and guard you. א-אליך ויהנך -May G-d shine G-d's face upon you and be compassionate onto you. ישא ה פניו אליך וישם לך שלום -May G-d turn G-d's presence to

you and may G-d grant you peace.¹ These fifteen words would touch my soul on every holiday and enable me to feel G-d's presence.

I am not the only one who is enamored with these words of the Priestly Blessing. Jews used to wear these words on their necks as amulets for God to protect them. Two amulets containing the Priestly Blessing were found in 1979 at a site called Ketef Hinnom southwest of Jerusalem, a site which we visited during the 2015 congregational Israel trip. These amulets were dated by archeologists to 600 BCE, during the First Temple Period. They continue to be the oldest copies of a text from the Hebrew Bible that has been found.

What is it about these fifteen words that make them so prominent? There are so many interpretations of these blessings, but my favorite is that of Rabbi Yitzchak Karo, a 15th century commentator. In his commentary *Toldot Yitzchak*, he provides ten explanations for the threefold priestly blessing. I like best Karo's third interpretation: that the threefold blessing corresponds to the three types of blessings that we

¹ Numbers 6:24-26

recite. The first blessing, “May God bless you and guard you,” corresponds to ברכות המצות, blessings that we recite upon performing commandments, such as putting on a tallit. The second blessing, “May God’s face shine upon you and be gracious unto you,” corresponds to ברכות השבח, blessings that we recite to praise God in gratitude. The third blessing, “May God’s presence be with you and may God grant you peace,” corresponds to ברכות הנהנים, blessings that we recite upon seeing something that we enjoy, like a rainbow or a loved one’s face.² Rabbi Yitzchak Karo’s understanding is just as we bless God through these three types of daily blessings: those regarding performing commandments, praise, and witnessing wonders, so too does God bless us through the threefold priestly blessing.

What I find compelling about Rabbi Yitzchak Karo’s interpretation is that it illustrates a reciprocal relationship between us and G-d, one that is full of blessing. Our blessing G-d through performing rituals and witnessing the daily miracles of life is reciprocated by G-d blessing us,

² ד"ה יברכך ה' וישמרך Numbers 6:24 Toldot Yitzhak

guarding us, bestowing grace upon us and giving us peace. This demonstrates what I believe is an essential teaching: the reciprocity inherent in relationships, both in terms of our relationship with God and our relationship with people. Through blessing others, we are blessed; through viewing each moment of life with wonder and excitement, we bring wonder and excitement into the world.

I see this reciprocity also in my personal connection with the priestly blessing. Receiving the priestly blessing while under my father's tallit was a spiritual and emotional experience through which I could feel G-d's presence. Now that I bless others as a rabbi, I pray that I can continue to be part of the formation of such experiences. This is what I think Heschel meant in his work *God in Search of Man*: that just as we are looking to create spiritual experiences through which to connect with G-d, G-d is looking for opportunities to connect with us and bless us.

On this Holiday of First Fruits when we hear the Priestly Blessing, let us think about our own, personal connection with the Almighty.

Whatever challenges or struggles we are going through in life, let us feel that there is a beneficent G-d who loves us and cares for us and may this help us not only persevere but thrive and succeed through what faces us. Sometimes a blessing can give us a moment of inspiration to help us get past a place at which we are stuck. It can lift us up when we feel down in the dumps or quiet us at a moment of turbulence inside. May we pay special attention to each word of the *Birkat Kohanim*, focusing intently and coming to a moment of stillness and inner peace to receive this blessing.