

Parashat Naso נשא

Torah: Numbers 4:21–7:89

Haftarah: Judges 13:2–25

The Aaronic Blessing

General Overview

“May the Lord make His face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee.” This is the light of the Torah that He should enlighten your eyes and your heart in Torah and grant you children learned in Torah, as it is said: “for the commandment is a lamp and the Torah a light.” (Bamidbar Rabbah 11.6)

One of the interesting features of the Torah is that the writer does not use any literary device to differentiate what we might label a sublime passage from what seems like a more mundane section. This week’s parasha is a great example of that. We are led into some of the greatest of spiritual heights when Moshe teaches Aaron the so-called “Aaronic Benediction” in chapter 6, when only a few verses before we learned how to handle a jealous husband.

Quite often a new teaching may be introduced with a phrase such as, “And the Lord spoke unto Moshe saying...” This literary device only marks off new revelation, it does not tell us if it has a specific connection with the previous one or not. Because of this, it is sometimes difficult to find a common thread upon which to hang all of the content of a given parasha. This is especially so with our present one. Several commentators have tried to find common threads, but we find most of their efforts wanting. Perhaps the only way we can see a common denominator is to examine the content in the larger context of the whole book.

Exposition

According to the general outline of Numbers that we are following, this parasha comes in the section entitled, “Preparations to Enter the Promised Land.” If this analysis is accurate, then we can explore all of the content in this parasha to see what relationship it has to preparing Israel for life in the Promised Land. Accordingly, we will see that the Lord had to provide more judicial principles, more provision to govern their spiritual lives and finally, He had to finish the instruction for the transportation and dedication of the Mishkan.

Let us therefore outline our parasha accordingly. Unfortunately, we will only have space to comment on the first two sections. The Matters of Housekeeping are concerned with a continuation of the details about which family of the Levites will carry which part of the Mishkan (4:21–49), maintaining camp purity (5:1–4) and the initial offerings of the tribal leaders (Chapter 7).

I. Matters of Justice

II. Matters of Spirituality

In this excerpt from Parashat Naso, we will focus on “Matters of Spirituality,” specifically, the Aaronic Blessing.

The Aaronic Blessing

In our commentary on this parasha, we said that this section of Bamidbar was concerned with matters of spirituality. The first matter was that of people wanting to serve God in the spiritual way of taking upon themselves the Nazarite vow. There is a second important spiritual matter this parasha discusses. The last part of Numbers 6:22–27 records for us what is commonly known as the “Aaronic Benediction.” We conclude this week’s commentary by examining this blessing.

1. Definitions

“To bless” is one of the most difficult words to define in English. In Hebrew it is related to the word for “knee.” This may imply that to bless someone meant to take a humble position before that person, even to serve him.

Nehama Leibowitz attempts to deal with the difficulties in understanding the meaning of the word “bless.” In doing so, she quotes from the trusted medieval commentator, Abravanel, who defines “blessing” thus:

“Blessing” is a homonym referring both to the good emanating from God in His creatures... and the blessing proceeding from man to God in the sense of praise.¹

Abravanel seems to be saying that a blessing from God is something that He gives to us, usually in the physical realm, but not limited to that. In contrast, since people really cannot give God something He does not already possess, a blessing from man to Him is merely the praise and honour He rightly deserves for who He is.

2. What a Poem!

Let us first take note of the structure of this blessing, both in Hebrew and in English:

“May the Lord bless you and keep you.”

Yevarekhekha Adonai v’yishmerekha.

יברכך יהוה וישמרך

“May the Lord shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you.”

Ya’er Adonai panav elekha vichunekha.

יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויחנך

“May the Lord lift up His countenance to you and establish peace for you.”

Yisa Adonai panav elekha v’yasem l’kha shalom.

ישא יהוה פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

Even if one does not know any Hebrew, it is easy to see the physical structure of this blessing just by looking at it. We can see that the blessing is cast in poetic form.

In this format, there are three lines, each line building upon the other as they add an additional thought to the previous one. In addition, each line in the Hebrew builds on the previous one by adding a symmetrical number of words: first 3, then 5, then finishing with 7 — the number for perfection and completion. This

may suggest that the fulfilment of these blessings would contribute to make one a whole and complete person. Note especially in this regard that the last word of the blessing is “peace,” *shalom* (שלום). The root of this word (ש-ל-ם) also signifies wholeness.

3. Scattered Thoughts

Before we analyse each line, we have a few more scattered observations. First, each line begins by invoking the sacred Name of God, יהוה. This is the Name that stresses God’s covenant-keeping attributes. By repeating it three times, the text puts the proper emphasis where it belongs — on the Lord Himself, Who is the only source for any blessing.

Since there are three parts to this blessing, we note that יהוה appears three times. This might indicate to us that the Godhead in its entirety — Father, Son, and Spirit, is involved in granting the unconditional benefits to the people.

Moreover, for those who know Hebrew, we can easily observe that the pronoun at the end of the verbs is in the singular. This would seem to suggest that this blessing, although addressed to the children (plural) of Israel, speaks to them as if they are one.

Rabbi Munk indicates that in the introduction to the blessing in 6:23, the kohanim are told to “speak” to Israel. The word that the text used is from the root, *a-m-r* (א-מ-ר), which means, “to say.” His comments on this are beautiful. He says, “The root אמר, say, in contrast to [d-b-r], דבר, speak, often connotes speaking in a low or soft voice.”² This insight may indicate that it was really the soft, gentle voice of the Bridegroom (the Messiah), which was intending to communicate blessing upon His beloved wife through the priests.

4. The Meaning

We have read very few expositions on these priestly blessings that have been more edifying than that of Rabbi Dr. J. H. Hertz, the late Chief Rabbi of the British Empire, in his *Pentateuch*. Please purchase it and study it. Many commentators see a three-fold division in this blessing, based on the addition of a new Hebrew verb to each line. We will utilize this outline to look something like this:

The God Who Keeps

The first request for blessing is to ask the Holy One to keep Israel. This word “keep” is the usual word for “guard” or “protect,” *yishmerekha* (ישמרך), from the root *sh-m-r* (ש-מ-ר). The Scriptures teach that the Lord is the Keeper of Israel. Only He has the ability to preserve the nation from sin, war, and famine. While He planned difficult times of distress and trial, ultimately this blessing will come true. Israel, despite all of her sin and her enemies, will be kept secure by the Holy One (cf. Jeremiah 31:33–37).

This is also the same on the spiritual level for all who rely on the Holy One. If we are part of the holy community, the redeemed community by faith in the atonement and resurrection of Yeshua the Messiah, the Lord will also keep us, for “no one can snatch them out of My Father’s hands,” says Yeshua (John 10:29). Of course this would include us. If there is no spiritual or physical force in the entire universe, according to Romans 8:37–39, that can cause us to fall out

of God's love for us, what then makes us think that we ourselves have that ability? It neither matters where we walk nor what we get into. If we are truly His, if we have been born from above and have received new life from the father in Heaven, then He promises that He will keep us, just as He promised to keep Israel.

The God Who is Gracious

How is it that God can keep and guard such a people who knowingly sin against Him? The answer lies in the second request, the second blessing, "The Lord be gracious unto you."

The Hebrew word translated "gracious" is from the root *ch-n-n* (ח-נ-ן). According to BDB it can be translated "to show favour" or "to be gracious." This word, in conjunction with its Greek counterpart in the Renewed Covenant is just rife with unconditional forgiveness.

The best illustration of this word is in the story of Hosea and Gomer. Just as Hosea was instructed to relate to his estranged and unfaithful wife Gomer, so does God relate to his sometimes estranged and unfaithful people, Israel. Despite their sorry spiritual state, God always grants forgiveness freely.

This also is the same way He is toward us. Ephesians 1:7 teaches that God "lavished" His grace on us who believe in Yeshua, despite knowing how rebellious some of our flesh can be.

Specifically, Ephesians 1:7–8 says that we have "forgiveness of our sins in accordance with the riches of God's grace." This can be compared to a beggar who approaches a millionaire for a gift of money. If the millionaire gives him 100 we can say that he gave *out of* his riches. However, if he gives the beggar 100,000 then we can say that he gave to the beggar *in accordance with* his riches. God's grace account in His bank is far more than in the millions. It is limitless. Accordingly, Ephesians tells us that He gave to us grace, "in accordance with" and not "out of" the riches of His grace. Beloved, that is a lot of grace! Hence, it is on the basis of His grace that He can keep us. An unlimited source of grace means an unlimited amount of keeping!

One expression of God's grace is that He makes His face or countenance to shine upon us. Hertz informs us that,

To cause the face to shine upon one is the Biblical idiom for to be friendly towards him. When God's "face" and/or "countenance" is said to be toward man and to shine upon him, it implies the outpouring of divine love and salvation.³

The God Who Grants Peace

If God is our friend, as we just learned, if He also keeps us, and if He freely lavishes us with His grace, as this blessing requests, then one thing is certain — we will have His Peace. The midrash talks about shalom and it says:

Great is peace, for no vessel can retain blessing so effectively as peace. The blessings are of no avail unless peace goes with them.⁴

Peace certainly is one of the "pillars of the world," according to the Talmud. In seeking to bless the Israelites with peace, the Holy One undoubtedly meant wholeness of life, and freedom from war with their enemies. However, perhaps it

goes much beyond that, as great as those blessings are. “Peace,” according to the *ArtScroll Chumash*

is not simply the absence of war. It is a harmony between two conflicting forces. It is the proper balance between the needs of the body and his higher duty to the soul.⁵

Yeshua, the Prince of Peace, said that He came to give us such peace (John 14), the “peace that passes all understanding, guarding our hearts and our minds” (Philippians 4:7).

5. Bearers of “My Name”

The Aaronic Blessing finishes, as does this commentary, with the note that the Lord told Aaron to bless Israel with those words and to “place My Name upon the children of Israel.”

By the use of the Aaronic Benediction, the priests will put the sacred Name of the Lord into the hearts and minds of His people and this will result in a blessing upon the nation.⁶

When God puts His Name upon us it is as if He wants us to fully identify with Him. It is also as if He wants everyone to know that we belong to Him. He is saying that He is not ashamed to have us, His People, bear His name through all the earth. What a solemn responsibility. What an awesome privilege!

¹ Nechama Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bamidbar*, 63.

² Elie Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Bamidbar*, 66.

³ J. H. Hertz, *The Pentateuch and Haftarahs*, 595.

⁴ Bamidbar Rabbah 11.7

⁵ *ArtScroll Chumash*, 765.

⁶ R. K. Harrison, *Numbers* (TOTC), 134.