

Parshat Naso - Birkat Kohanim: A Life of Service

Source Sheet by Michael Emerson

Deuteronomy 18:1-5

(1) The levitical priests, the whole tribe of Levi, shall have no territorial portion with Israel. They shall live only off the LORD's offerings by fire as their portion, (2) and shall have no portion among their brother tribes: the LORD is their portion, as He promised them. (3) This then shall be the priests' due from the people: Everyone who offers a sacrifice, whether an ox or a sheep, must give the shoulder, the cheeks, and the stomach to the priest. (4) You shall also give him the first fruits of your new grain and wine and oil, and the first shearing of your sheep. (5) For the LORD your God has chosen him and his descendants, out of all your tribes, to be in attendance for service in the name of the LORD for all time.

Leviticus 9:22

(22) Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the offering of well-being.

Numbers 6:22-27

(22) The LORD spoke to Moses: (23) Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them: (24) The LORD bless you and protect you! (25) The LORD deal kindly and graciously with you! (26) The LORD bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace! (27) Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.

דברים י"ח:א-ה'

(א) לֹא־יִהְיֶה לַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם כָּל־שִׁבְט לְוִי חֶלֶק וְנַחֲלָה עִם־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁי יְהוָה וְנַחֲלָתוֹ יֹאכְלוּן: (ב) וְנַחֲלָה לֹא־יִהְיֶה־לּוֹ בְּקָרֵב אָחָיו יְהוָה הוּא נַחֲלָתוֹ כַּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר־לוֹ: (ג) וְזֶה יִהְיֶה מִשְׁפֹּט הַכֹּהֲנִים מֵאֵת הָעָם מֵאֵת זִבְחֵי הַזֶּבַח אִם־שֹׁר אִם־שֵׂה וְנָתַן לַכֹּהֵן הַזֹּרֵעַ וְהַלְחִיִּים וְהַקֶּבֶה: (ד) רֵאשִׁית דְּגָנְךָ תִירְשֶׁן וַיִּצְהַרְךָ וְרֵאשִׁית גֵּז צֹאנְךָ תִתֶּן־לוֹ: (ה) כִּי בֹ בָחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִכָּל־שִׁבְטֵיךָ לְעֹמֵד לְשֵׁרֵת בְּשֵׁם־יְהוָה הוּא וּבָנָיו כָּל־הַיָּמִים: (ו)

ויקרא ט:כ"ב

(כב) וַיִּשָּׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת־יָדָיו [יָדָיו] אֶל־הָעָם וַיְבָרְכֵם וַיֵּרֵד מֵעֲשֵׂת הַחֹטְאֹת וְהָעֲלָה וְהִשְׁלֵמִים:

במדבר ו:כ"ב-כ"ז

(כב) וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: (כג) דַּבֵּר אֶל־אֶהָרֶן וְאֶל־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם: (ד) (כד) יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ: (ה) (כה) יָאֵר יְהוָה | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחֲנֶנֶךָ: (ו) (כו) יִשָּׂא יְהוָה | פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם: (ז)

(כז) וְשָׂמוּ אֶת־שְׁמֵי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָנֹכִי
אֶבְרַכֶּם: (פ)

Ramban on Leviticus 9:22

(1) AND AARON LIFTED UP HIS HANDS TOWARD THE PEOPLE, AND BLESSED THEM — “with the priestly benediction: *The Eternal bless thee The Eternal make His face shine upon thee ... The Eternal lift up His countenance upon thee ...*” Thus the language of Rashi. But if so, the section of *Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying: Thus ye shall bless the children of Israel*, in the Book of Numbers, takes chronological precedence over this section! Perhaps it is [indeed] so since it is placed near to that which it says there, *And it came to pass on the day that Moses had made an end of setting up the Tabernacle* [which was on the first of Nisan — “the eighth day” herein discussed].

It is possible to say that Aaron spread forth his hands towards heaven and blessed the people, just as Solomon did, as it is said, *And Solomon stood before the altar of the Eternal in the presence of all the congregation of Israel, and spread forth his hands, toward heaven*, and there it is said, *And he stood, and blessed all the congregation of Israel with a loud voice, saying*, etc. Therefore Scripture does not mention that Moses commanded him to do so [i.e., to say the priestly blessing, since it had in fact not yet been given].

In the Beraitha of the section of consecration in the Torath Kohanim I have seen it said: “*And he blessed them*. This is an unspecified blessing [the nature of which] you do not know. Scripture [therefore] went back and explained it further on: *The Eternal bless thee, and keep thee. The Eternal make His face to shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee. The Eternal lift up His countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.*” Nonetheless, I could still say that the Rabbis of this Beraitha were saying as follows: “This

רמב"ן על ויקרא ט':כ"ב

(א) וישא אהרן את ידיו אל העם ויברכם ברכת כהנים יברכך יאר ישא לשון רש"י (רש"י על ויקרא ט':כ"ב) ואם כן תהיה פרשת דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר כה תברכו את בני ישראל שבחומש הפקודים (במדבר ו כג) מוקדמת לזה ואולי כן הוא כי סמוכה למה שנאמר שם (ז א) ויהי ביום כלות משה להקים את המשכן ויתכן לומר כי אהרן פרש כפיו השמים וברך את העם כאשר עשה שלמה שנאמר (מלכים א ח כב) ויעמד שלמה לפני מזבח ה' ויפרוש כפיו השמים ושם (ויקרא ט':נ"ה) נאמר ויעמד ויברך את כל קהל ישראל קול גדול לאמר ולפיכך לא הזכיר הכתוב שצוה אותו משה לעשות כן ובברייתא של פרשת מלוואים בת"כ (ריש פרשת שמיני ל) ראיתי ויברכם זו ברכה סתומה שאי אתה יודעה חזר הכתוב ופירש להלן יברכך ה' וישמרך יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך ישא ה' פניו אליך וגו' ועדיין יש לי לומר שכך אמרו ברכה זו שברך אהרן את העם מעצמו סתומה היא ולא פירש לנו הכתוב מה היא אבל ברכה שנצטוו הכהנים לדורות נתפרשה והיא שוה בכל הכהנים לעולם או שהם סבורים שכאן צוה אותו בנשיאות כפים ליום זה ולהלן נתנה ברכה זו לו ולבניו לדורות:

blessing with which Aaron blessed the people of his own accord, is unspecified, and Scripture did not explain to us what it was. But the blessing that the priests have been commanded to say in all future generations, has been expressly set forth, it applying to all priests alike forever. Or it may be that [the Rabbis of this Beraitha] are of the opinion that here He commanded him [to say] the priestly blessing for that day, and later on [as stated in the Book of Numbers] this blessing was given to Aaron and his sons for the succeeding generations.

What purpose is served by the fact that this precept enjoins that these benedictions should proceed from the priests to the people? Surely it is He on high Who blesses and what is gained or added whether the priests bless or refrain from doing so? Is it up to them to assist Him?

Rashbam Bemidbar 6:23

THIS IS HOW YOU SHOULD BLESS THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL: In other words, [God is saying,] "Do not bless them using your own words, as someone might say 'May it befall so-and-so that' Rather pray to Me that I should bless them.

Chullin 49a

The Gemara clarifies: **What is** this, i.e., where does Rabbi Yishmael help the priests? **As it is taught** in a *baraita*: The verse states with regard to the priestly benediction: "**So you shall bless the children of Israel**" (Numbers 6:23). **Rabbi Yishmael says: We learn** from this verse about **a blessing for Israel from the mouth of the priests**, but **we have not learned** about a blessing **for the priests themselves**. **When it says** afterward with regard to the priests: "And they shall put My name upon the children

עקידת יצחק במדבר שער עד (פרשת נשא)
א. כי מה תועלת במצוה הזאת רצוני בשיאמרו אלו הברכות מפי הכהן אל העם כי הוא יתעלה הוא המברך ומה יוסיף ומה יתן כי יברכו הכהנים או יחדלו וכי היה להם לסייעו

רשב"ם במדבר ו' כ"ג

(כג-כז) כה תברכו את בני ישראל – כלומר: לא תברכו מברכת פיכם, כאדם שאומר תבואת(ה) לראש פלוני כך וכך. אלא אלי תתפללו שאברכם אני

חולין מ"ט א

מאי היא דתניא (במדבר ו, כג) כה תברכו את בני ישראל רבי ישמעאל אומר למדנו ברכה לישראל מפי כהנים לכהנים עצמן לא למדנו כשהוא אומר ואני אברכם הוי אומר כהנים מברכין לישראל והקדוש ברוך הוא מברך לכהנים רבי עקיבא אומר למדנו ברכה לישראל מפי כהנים מפי גבורה לא למדנו כשהוא אומר ואני אברכם הוי

of Israel, **and I will bless them**” (Numbers 6:27), **you must say: The priests bless Israel, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, blesses the priests. Rabbi Akiva says a different interpretation: We learned from the verse about a blessing for Israel from the mouth of the priests, but we have not learned about a blessing for Israel from the mouth of the Almighty. When it says afterward: “And they shall put My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them,” you must say: The priests bless Israel, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, affirms their blessing. The word “them” is referring to Israel.**

אומר כהנים מברכין לישראל והקדוש
ברוך הוא מסכים על ידם

Midrash Tanhuma

Said the House of Israel to the Holy One blessed be He: Lord of the Universe, you order the priests to bless us? We need only Thy blessing. Look down from Thy holy habitation and bless Thy people. The Holy One blessed be He replied to them: Though I ordered the priests to bless you I stand with them together and bless you.

Sifrei

How do we know that Israel should not say: Their blessings are dependent on the priests? And that the priests should not say: We shall bless Israel? The Torah states “And I will bless them”

Sifrei Zota

You might think that if they (the priests) desired to bless Israel they would be blessed and that if they did not, they would not be blessed? The Torah states: “And I will bless them”

Chizkuni, Numbers 6:27:2

ואני אברכם, “and I will bless them.” G-d will bless the Israelites in response to the priests invoking this blessing. The priests are never to take credit for having blessed the people, as the blessing stems from the Lord whose messengers they are.

חזקוני, במדבר ו' כ"ז:ב'
ואני אברכם לישראל שלא יהיו הכהנים
אומרים אנו נברך ישראל.

Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch Numbers 6:23

The priest who blesses is but an instrument, a medium through which the benediction is expressed. The death of the two sons of Aaron (Leviticus 10) the first heirs to the priesthood emphasised the irrevocable law that only service "which God had commanded" - could be considered service. Service which "the Lord had not commanded" - human deeds and machinations constitutes something alien and the very opposite of the service desired by the Lord. This same principle applied to the priestly benediction "thus shall ye bless the Children of Israel" - only thus and no deviation whatsoever is permitted ... Only after being summoned by the congregation do they recite the blessing, with the representative of the congregation acting as the prompter so that the congregation invokes the divine blessing through the vocal medium of the priests.

Haamek Davar on Numbers 6:24:1

"May God bless you." Included in this is whatever is appropriate for each person to be blessed with....For one who deals in Torah, in his study. For one who deals in commerce, in his merchandise. Thus is included in this general blessing "May God bless you" an additional blessing for each person about what he has.

Haamek Davar on Numbers 6:24:2

"And protect you." For every blessing requires protection so that it does not become an obstacle, God forbid. A master of Torah needs protection from pride, desecration of God's name and the like. And similarly, that he not forget his learning. A property owner needs protection that his wealth not be to his detriment, like Korach and Navot the Jezreelite and the like. And similarly, protection from theft and loss. And likewise for everything that is in need of blessing, protection from whatever causes trouble is requested.

