

Parshat Naso
The Power of Blessings
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Every Friday night my husband and I bless each of our children in turn. It is an intentional moment with each child, our hands on his and her heads. We murmur the traditional words of biblical text, asking for God's protection, kindness, and peace for our children.

The LORD bless you and protect you!

יְבָרֶכֶךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶכָּהּ:

The LORD deal kindly and graciously with you!

יְאָר ה' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְיִחַנְנֶכָּהּ:

The LORD bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!
(Numbers 6:24-26)

יְשֹׂא ה' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְיִשֶׁם לָךְ
(במדבר ו:כד-כו) שְׁלוֹם:

This feels very personal as I think of moments from the week that has just ended where I am proud of my children and also to moments in the week ahead where I am sure they will need God's blessing to overcome challenges. We are reciting God's blessing, but also offering our own. At the conclusion of the classic prayer, my husband then bends down and whispers in each ear - May your world be peaceful. It is his way of adding a personal message - this isn't just a blessing given from God, but a hopeful direction given from a parent. As perhaps many parents do, we convey the blessing and also co-opt it. Can we add to this blessing, in word or intention? Or, are we just a conduit for God's blessing and shouldn't deviate from the proscribed text?

If we look at the text of the bracha, which is found in this week's parsha, we find this question in the pesukim. In 6:23 God commands Aaron and his children

thus **you** shall bless

כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ:

This might lead the reader to think that this is a bracha that originates from within the kohanim. God is asking them to bless the people. However, the section of blessing concludes with the words

And **I** will bless them

וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם

This seems to indicate this is actually God's blessing. Is this the Kohanim's blessing to the people? Are they conveying God's blessing on God's behalf?

The Abarbanel delineates three different types of brachot. The first is where God gives a blessing directly to people. For example, God blesses Avraham in Breishit 24:1 "And God blessed Avraham with everything." The second type of bracha is where we, as people, offer God praise and thanks in the form of blessings as described in Divrei Hayamim 1, 29:10 "And David blessed the Lord." The last type of blessing is when people give blessings to each other, offering the hope that God will ultimately bless that person. For example, in Breishit 28:1 Yitzhak gives a blessing to his son, Yaakov "So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him." We have the power to wish and hope that good things happen and we can articulate those hopes however we want, but we don't have the power to grant them, as God does.

So which type of bracha do we see here? Is this a bracha from God to the people where Aaron and his sons merely translate it on God's behalf or is this a bracha they are creating and giving to the people?

The Abarbanel suggests this is the first type of bracha. He explains this is why verse 23 ends with the words "אָמַר לָהֶם - say to them". God had already commanded Aaron and his sons to bless them, why does he then say again, "say to them"? The Abarbanel answers that it means the following three pesukim, the blessing itself, is being dictated by God. As people, the Kohanim can act as a catalyst for the divine blessings but are not the true blessing givers, only God can do that.

Perhaps this is why the Rambam states that all Kohanim are allowed to perform the Birkat Kohanim. In Hilkhot Tefilah v'Brachot, chapter 15, halacha 6, he says that even Kohanim who are not smart or those not careful about their religious practice may give the bracha to the people. He explains in halacha 7 that this is because the Kohanim are merely performing their duty and through it God, in God's mercy, will bless B'nai Yisrael according to God's will.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik explains there is an added element to the Birkat Kohanim that goes beyond the simple transmission of the bracha, a bracha that the Kohanim convey, but God gives. The Rav suggests there is *hashra'at ha-Shechinah* (the manifestation of Hashem's presence) when the Kohanim give this bracha. In *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, the Rav elaborates that "*Nesiat kapayim* (the "raising of the hands," as in the priestly blessing) – a face-to-face encounter between G-d and the Jewish people – leads to *hashra'at ha-Shechinah*. It reflects G-d's act of extending kindness." Today we rarely feel God's blessing directly the way some did in Tanach. The Birkat Kohanim is special, because even when it is transmitted by mere humans, there is an extra divine touch that comes through that we do not usually have the privilege of feeling.

On Friday night when I bless my children, in many ways I am simply the conduit for God's blessing. I try to allow the bracha to flow through my fingers and onto my children's upturned heads and hope that in performing my duty, God, in God's mercy, will bless my children. In the moment, I hope that my children and I feel the *hashra'at ha-Shechinah*, God's extending kindness. However, I believe there is an added reason for parents to convey this particular blessing to their children weekly, instead of just the formal recitation of the bracha in shul. In this less formal context, we are able to blend the first type of bracha with the third. The act of giving blessing creates connection. I want my children to know I share those hopes and visions of protection, kindness, and peace and that together we may spend the week working in partnership with God to achieve them.



Yael Keller holds a Masters degree in Public Policy and in Jewish Professional Leadership and a Bachelors degree in Government and Politics. She has served on staff for Maharat Uri L'Tzedek (the Orthodox Social Justice movement), the Joint Distribution Committee in Israel, Impact Boston, the Jewish Community Relations Council of Greater Washington and Hillel's Schusterman International Center. Yael also studied at the Pardes Institute of Judaic Studies before attending graduate school.