



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Naso

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June 18, 2016

Naso

**The Secret of the Priestly
Blessing**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

The Priestly Blessing – which is recorded in this week’s Torah reading, Parshat Naso – is bestowed upon Israel by the *Kohanim*, the priestly family descended from Aaron, the first High Priest.

What does this blessing mean to us today? What does it promise to the Children of Israel?

This sermon addresses the nuances of the Priestly Blessing and its cosmic effect on ourselves, our environment, and our world – especially when we see a world increasingly spiraling out of control (as in the latest terrorist attack in Orlando). And it demonstrates that unlocking the secret to world peace (contained within the Priestly Blessing) requires us to answer the following question:

How can we earthly creatures raise up our faces to G-d in heaven, so that He, too, will turn His face toward us and shine His light down upon us?

The answer is intriguing and comes by way of the Talmud, the Midrash and the mystical insights of the Alter Rebbe. Hint: it has to do with one tiny olive and one small egg.

THE SECRET OF THE PRIESTLY BLESSING: AN OLIVE AND AN EGG

1. Family Tradition (Joke)

A fellow comes to a synagogue and says to the rabbi: “Rabbi, I want to be a *Kohen*.”

The rabbi answers: “You know, son, not everybody can become a *Kohen*.”

But the fellow persists: “I really want to be a *Kohen*! I must be a *Kohen*! I am willing to do anything!” To which the rabbi sadly gives the same reply.

“Look,” says the fellow. “I am willing to donate a million dollars to your synagogue, if you just help me become a *Kohen*.”

Hearing that and thinking of the benefit to his synagogue and congregation, the rabbi tells the fellow that for that kind of money he will confer upon him the title of “Honorary *Kohen*.”

The fellow agrees, and after the transaction is complete, the rabbi asks: “Would you please tell me why it was so important to you to be a *Kohen*?”

“Very simple,” answers the fellow. “You see, my father was a *Kohen* and his father before him was a *Kohen*, so I just wanted to stick to the family tradition!”

2. Of Priests and Priesthood

The *Kohanim*, the family of priests, are descended from Aaron, the first High Priest (*Kohen Gadol*) of Israel. The status of *Kohen* is inherited,

conferred via the paternal line: if your father was a *Kohen*, then you are a *Kohen*. There is no other way to enter the priesthood, but once you're in, you are in for life – there is really no way to leave it.¹

Back in biblical times, the *Kohanim* served in the Temple. In addition to the various services they performed – from bringing offerings to conducting purifications – they also blessed all of Israel.

Indeed, the Priestly Blessing (*Birkat Kohanim*) is a mitzvah – one of the 613 mitzvot of the Torah – which commands the *Kohanim* to bless the children of Israel every single day.

Unfortunately, in the Diaspora, this mitzvah is observed only on the major holidays. We just experienced it last week during Shavuot. However, if you are fortunate enough to live in the Land of Israel, you will see this mitzvah observed daily in most synagogues. As well there is usually a special mass Priestly Blessing at the Western Wall (the Kotel) during the festivals of Passover and Sukkot.

3. Parshat Naso: Priestly Blessing

I am speaking about the Priestly Blessing today because it is a key feature of this week's Torah reading, *Parshat Naso*, which relates that G-d instructed Moses as follows:

*"Speak to Aaron and his sons, telling them: 'This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them: "May the L-rd bless you and protect you. May the L-rd shine His face upon you and be gracious to you. May the L-rd raise His face toward you and grant you peace."' They shall bestow My Name upon the Children of Israel, so that I will bless them."*²

As you may have noticed, this blessing is actually comprised of three parts, after each one of which we respond "Amen."

1. *May the L-rd bless you and protect you.*

¹ Though one may be deemed unfit or disqualified from serving.

² Numbers 6:22-27.

2. *May the L-rd shine His face upon you and be gracious to you.*

3. *May the L-rd raise His face toward you and grant you peace.*

What is the secret of this three-part blessing? This is the question I want to address today. With the Temple still in ruins, why does this mitzvah continue to be so important? And how does it impact our modern-day lives?

And how does it affect the world in which we live – a world increasingly spiraling out of control, as in the latest terrorist attack in Orlando?

4. A Talmudic Take on Blessings

The Talmud mentions this blessing when it debates the issue of reciting blessings before and after eating:

Said the ministering angels to the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the Universe, Your Torah describes You [as One] *who will not raise His face [and favor anyone]...*³ and yet you raised Your face toward Israel, as it is written, *May the L-rd raise His face toward you.*”⁴

Said He to them: “How can I not raise My face toward Israel, whom I have commanded in the Torah, *And you will eat and be sated, and you will bless the L-rd, your G-d,*⁵ when they [fulfill this mitzvah] with such great precision, [blessing Me] even when they eat just an olive or an egg?”⁶

The Talmud relates that the angels questioned G-d why he seemingly favored Israel, when He promised not to favor anyone. To which G-d replied: “When Israel is careful to bless My Name even on such small food items as an olive⁷ or egg⁸ I am compelled to raise My face toward them and show them favor.

³ Deuteronomy 10:17.

⁴ Numbers 6:26.

⁵ Deuteronomy 8:10.

⁶ Berachot 20b.

⁷ According to Rabbi Meir (Rashi).

⁸ According to Rabbi Yehudah (Rashi).

5. The Midrash

The Midrash repeats this message even more forcefully:

Said the Holy Blessed One: “Just as they raise their faces toward Me so shall I raise My face toward them. Why? Because I wrote in my Torah, *And you will eat and be sated, and you will bless the L-rd, your G-d.*⁹ [And I see] a man of Israel is sitting down to eat with his family but they do not have enough food to feel sated, yet, he still raises his face to the heavens to bless G-d and recite the grace after meals, even if he only ate an olive or egg!”¹⁰

Although the Torah requires us to make a blessing only if we are fully sated, the Sages ordained that we should bless G-d even if we just eat a little something, even when it is as small as an olive or an egg.¹¹

Seeing the Jewish people being so scrupulous with His commandments – raising their faces to Him in thanks – G-d is inspired and compelled to raise His face toward the Jewish people and be gracious to us.

All that is very nice, but a few questions arise:

- Why does the Torah require us to make a blessing after eating only when we are sated?
- Why did the Sages decide to go further and institute a blessing requirement even on something as small as an olive or an egg?
- Why does this specific mitzvah of blessing and saying grace inspire G-d to raise His face toward us and treat us with favor more than any other mitzvah?

⁹ Deuteronomy 8:10.

¹⁰ Numbers Rabbah 11:14.

¹¹ Berachot 45a.

6. The Alter Rebbe's Explanation

The 18th century founder of the Chabad Movement, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, also known as the Alter Rebbe, explains all this as follows:¹²

The opening of the Priestly Blessing, *May the L-rd bless you and protect you*, is a blessing to fulfill our purpose here on earth.

The purpose of life is to plant the field and grow produce that is sustaining and filling. This is the literal purpose and the figurative purpose – to inhabit and civilize our world through virtue and kindness, through Torah and mitzvot. We achieve this through sanctifying every detail of our lives, down to even an olive or an egg, which symbolize even the smallest things in life.

This purpose is fraught with challenges. Going into the field – whichever field it may be [whether the agricultural field or our field of professional endeavor] – is not easy and has many risks; therefore, the blessing states *May the L-rd bless you and protect you*. In a life filled with challenges we are indeed in need of blessings of protection.

The things in life that are filling and fulfilling are blessings from G-d. These blessings are realized when we work hard in the field to sow and reap and afterwards be sated and fulfilled. And, because this is our purpose, G-d protects us, guaranteeing that we influence the earth more than it influences us. And this is also why it is a Torah obligation to bless G-d when we are sated, to acknowledge and recognize the divine blessings in our lives.

The second part of the Priestly Blessing, *May the L-rd shine His face upon you and be gracious to you*, is the result of first part. When we work hard to earn our bread and fulfill our purpose here on earth, then this causes G-d to turn to us and treat us with favor. It's cause and effect – when we do our work down below this leads G-d shine His light down upon us from on high.

¹² Likkutei Torah, Naso 26a.

But the final part of the Priestly Blessing is a departure from the previous two, which are predictable – cause followed by effect. *May the L-rd raise His face toward you and grant you peace* is a new and revolutionary blessing.

Consider: A Jew is looking to refine and elevate – and reveal divinity in – an olive or an egg. The things in life that are big and satisfying and satiating are an obligation from the Torah to sanctify. But what about the olives and eggs of life? How are such small and insignificant things sanctified?

These things are sanctified when a Jew raises his face to heaven with every particle and subatomic particle he interacts with. The Jew says: “Sure, the large satisfying feasts are why we are here and I do bless those. But, in between, when I am consuming an olive or partaking of an egg – be it the literal or the metaphorical details of life – I also raise my face to heaven and utter a blessing to G-d. And then G-d returns the favor.

This is why the Sages, elucidators of the Torah’s truths, decreed that we should bless even an olive or an egg.

Why go to such lengths over the minuscule miniature minutia?

In answer, the Alter Rebbe cites the conclusion of the Priestly Blessing: *May the L-rd raise His face toward you and grant you peace*. What is peace? In Hebrew peace is *shalom* which means “completion/wholeness/cohesion.” This is the result of sanctifying everything on this earth even the tiniest thing. Should one detail remain in its mundane state, than the entire picture is compromised. If one corner of the world is at war, we cannot declare that the world is at peace.

7. Musical Metaphor

Imagine a composer says: “You know what, this tiny musical note is inconsequential. My greater symphony is perfect, so who cares about that little A minor – its minor!”

Archduke Ferdinand of Austria said to Mozart, “Beautiful music, but far too many notes.” To which the composer replied, “Yes, your majesty, but not one more than necessary.”

Or imagine a doctor says: “You know what, who cares about that one miniscule blood cell. The body has trillions of them. Forget that one, let it do its own thing, and we shall stay focused on the big picture.”

It’s laughable if not tragic.

G-d forbid one mutant cell among 75 trillion cells can create havoc.

Why? One word: cohesion. *Shalom*, peace is about completion and harmony, every single detail in synchronicity with everything else.

When a Jew raises his face to G-d to bless even a little olive or a small egg, he is doing so because of *shalom*, because of wholeness, oneness, cohesion and harmony in the universe. How can we not bless even a tiny particle when he or she knows it was handcrafted by G-d Himself?

And this in turn inspires G-d: How can G-d not raise His face toward the Jew when the Jew is revealing G-dliness even in the tiniest nuclei of existence?

And now G-d says: *They [the Kohanim] shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.*

8. Personal Lesson (Conclusion)

What does this all mean for us today?

We all have big things and small things in life that we are grateful for. The big feasts and the small olives – those little things that conventional thinking may deem meaningless or inconsequential.

¹³ Mishne Torah, Hilchos De’ot 5:1.

When we lift our heads and raise our faces to thank heaven for the big blessings in life when we are sated, it is a big mitzvah and a wonderful thing. But when we lift our heads and raise our faces to thank heaven even for the figurative tiny olive or single egg, then the Holy Blessed One Himself raises His face toward us. And then He grants us peace, *shalom*, completeness.

We then see how every single note, no matter how minor or major ... how every single instrument, no matter how loud or soft ... and every single musician, no matter if he has perfect pitch or is tone deaf ... how all of it is part of one whole, complete, cohesive symphony.

The personal lesson and personal blessing for each one of us today is to find those metaphorical olives and eggs, those tiny things that seem at first glance to be trivial or negligible, and to bless them by raising our faces heavenward.

Raise up the tiny things and you raise up the world.

The result will be that G-d's Name will be emblazed on the Children of Israel in a revealed way for all the world to see, and this is indeed the greatest blessing of all.

May we do our part and may we be blessed with peace – shalom, both personal peace and world peace, both in Israel and all over the world.

Shabbat Shalom!