

## The Privilege of Blessing Others

### *Shabbat Naso 5785*

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When I was in rabbinical school, a professor told my class that, for the communities we would serve, we would be three things, all starting with “p:” pastor, prophet, and priest.

Only one of those was easy to accept, the pastoral need to be present for people in time of need—illness and bereavement, as well as other moments of pain and distress. The second was more challenging but manageable. We would not be biblical prophets, directly receiving and imparting Divine revelation; but we would deliver prophetic messages—exhorting our communities to feed the hungry, and combat injustice.

The third “p” seemed entirely different. My rabbinic school classmates and I would not be the kind of priests who served in the ancient Jerusalem Temple. They received the people’s sacrifices from their flocks, herds, and crops, offering token portions to God by fire and sharing most in communal celebration. Having been raised in a twentieth century Reform Jewish home, I have never believed that God is best served by animal or grain sacrifices, nor have our Reform Jewish prayer books ever called for the reestablishment of sacrifices, or a Jerusalem Temple rebuilt for that purpose. The Hebrew word for sacrifice, קרבן, is not about giving up goods of value, but instead comes from a root that means, “to draw close.” We come close to God with the offerings of our lips and the gifts of our hands, doing God’s work here on Earth by performing מצות, sacred obligations.

In this week’s Torah portion, God commands Moses to teach Aaron and his offspring the words that have come to be known Priestly Benediction, words to draw God close to the people and the people nearer to God:

יברכך יהוה וישמרך

May God bless you and guard you.

יאר יהוה פניו אליך ויחונך

May God’s light shine upon you and [may God] be gracious to you.

ישא יהוה פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

May God smile upon you and grant you peace.

I regularly spread my hands to extend this blessing over the congregation on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, or above the heads of individuals and couples as we welcome a baby into the Covenant of Abraham and Sarah, or celebrate a Bar or Bat Mitzvah, Confirmation, or wedding. My doing so, though, is considered heresy in a substantial portion of the Jewish world. You see, I am not among the כהנים, people understood to be direct descendants of Aaron and the priests who served in the ancient Temple and the only ones permitted to utter this blessing in any Orthodox and many Conservative synagogues—in many places, only by male כהנים.

Reform Judaism has never recognized exclusive prerogatives for those in the priestly line—or for men, for that matter. Instead, we point to a verse in Exodus, where God promises, “You shall be to me קדוש וגוי קדוש, ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”<sup>i</sup> Ancient and medieval rabbinic commentators tried to limit this gift. They were eager to preserve the prerogatives of the כהנים, descendants of Aaron, to assure that they would be ever ready to take up the priestly mantle to offer grain and animal sacrifices, as soon as messianic redemption rebuilds the Jerusalem Temple. If everybody is a priest, they thought, nobody really is one. They imagined that the “you” who would be “a kingdom of priests” only refers to Moses and Aaron, and that Moses and his descendants would be “princes” or “servants,” not כהנים, real priests.<sup>ii</sup>

In Reform congregations, by contrast, rabbis or cantors are typically the ones who extend God’s blessing. Rabbeinu Bachya, a medieval Spanish rabbi, might have approved. He taught: “God calls the Jewish people ‘kings, priests, and holy nation,’ at the time we received the Torah, to make clear that one who wears the crown of Torah has also attained the stature of the other two crowns, namely priesthood and royalty.”<sup>iii</sup> By this measure, Moses, the quintessential teacher of the Torah and the paradigm for all rabbis, ought to have bestowed the blessing on the people, for by Bachya’s standards, the crown of Torah that he wore also granted him the priesthood. Since the standard for rabbinic ordination is mastery of Torah, the priestly duty of blessing is also a rabbi’s prerogative.

I derive great joy from spreading my hands in blessing over newborns as they enter the Covenant, over a wedding couple, and over a teenager who has worked hard and achieved the milestone of Bar or Bat Mitzvah or Confirmation. Even so, when I do, imposter syndrome is involved.

No, my concern is not that I don’t meet Orthodox requirements, that I’m not among the כהנים descended from Aaron. Instead, I wonder: How can I, how can anyone, possess the authority or the power to convey a blessing that is ultimately

only God's to grant? That is an awesome responsibility—and by “awesome,” I mean that it fills me, and should fill anybody, with awe.

My teachers who created *The Torah: A Women's Torah Commentary*, offer a helpful thought: “Just as the priests devote their lives to the service of the Divine and convey God's will to the people, so Israel [--that is, the Jewish people--] is to assume this role.”<sup>iv</sup> In short, though we most often delegate the extension of the priestly benediction to rabbis and cantors, the privilege of blessing others with God's name belongs to us all.

The last twenty months have been excruciating for the Jewish people, especially for our people in Israel—and, it must be said, also for Gaza civilians and all who love Israelis, Palestinians, and Jews, indeed all humanitarians, worldwide. Tonight, though, I will concentrate on the American Jewish community.

For nine years now, we have experienced a well-documented and even more terrifying increase in antisemitism, first from the white supremacist extreme right and now from an unhinged extreme left that has now brought a form of Hamas terror to these shores. The outpouring of concern for our people in the aftermath of the Pittsburgh massacre in 2018 brought the largest crowd ever known to this building in its fifty years. A considerable throng came, too, after October 7, on Friday, October 13, 2023, when even some of our congregants stayed away, as Hamas had called for global intifada, killing Jews everywhere.

Some progressive Jews feel abandoned by our traditional allies. The line goes, “We stood up for them. Now, they should be here for us.” We who have marched in Pride parades from day one, for example, now often find that Jews are welcome but Jewish groups are not, unless they explicitly disassociate from Zionism. I hasten to add that this exclusion has not taken place in Arkansas, and we have faced no vandalism or violence at Congregation B'nai Israel.

Still, our community is shaken in the aftermath of the antisemitic murders of two young adults, Sarah Milgrim and Yaron Lischinsky, outside the Capital Jewish Museum, and two antisemitic Molotov cocktail attacks—one, on the Pennsylvania Governor's mansion, and the other on individuals peacefully marching to call for release of Israeli hostages in Gaza.

I hope that the Jewish people are a blessing to all the world. Congregation B'nai Israel strives to bring blessing to our neighbors in Pleasant Valley, throughout Central Arkansas, and across the state. Any opportunity to bring blessing, in the words of this week's Torah portion or through our actions, is a blessing to us.

Tonight, though, we are the ones in need of blessing. We have invited our interfaith friends and partners—including public officials, thanks to Judge Rudofsky—to bless us with your presence. By being here, even if you utter not a single word, your message is profound.

We hear you saying, loud and clear: We will not tolerate Jew-hatred in Little Rock. Antisemitism has no place in Arkansas. Your presence is a tremendous blessing to us. Thank you.

So now, as Jana and Perry offer us the Hebrew words and music of the Priestly Benediction, I invite all here gathered, Jewish and Christian, of any faith or none, to rise in body or in spirit, to spread your hands over somebody near you or over the whole congregation, to offer blessing.

May God bless us and guard us. May that be God's will. And let us all say:  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Exodus 19:6.

<sup>ii</sup> See, for example, Rashi, Ramban, Rashbam, and Or HaChaim on Exodus 19:6.

<sup>iii</sup> Rabbeinu Bahya, Exodus 19:6.

<sup>iv</sup> *The Torah: A Women's Commentary*, Exodus 19:6.