

What Blessing Do You Need Now?

Rabbi Andrea Merow (LC '92, RS '97), The Jewish Center (Princeton, NJ)



Friends, I want to be honest. I am writing this in May and at this point the thought in my head and heart is that we just do not know what the Jewish world will look or feel like when you read this. Since October 7th, anytime I prepare in advance I wonder what unthinkable act may occur. In more optimistic moments, I ponder what redemptive acts could change the current state of Jewish Peoplehood, or the State of Israel, for the better.

In the past months, concerned Jews have been on an emotional rollercoaster, much of the time brooding over what may come next. Many of my beloved colleagues note that they have not given many, or any, *divrei Torah* in the last 7 months that do not connect in some way to October 7th and its aftermath. The ground under us does not feel so stable right now.

In a time of war and division, in a time of rising and shocking antisemitism, in a time when we have seen the narratives of how our people are perceived change, we need to lift each other up with words of blessing, because ultimately, we need hope. More than anything else I believe we need to name our blessings, and help others to feel blessed, so that our souls can find ways to move forward.

In Parashat Naso we learn the blessing used by so many, called *birkat kohanim*, the blessing of the priests. Amid our longest parashah, nestled between laws of the Nazirites and final preparations for how to use the Tabernacle, our holy space, God teaches that people can use their words and actions to bless one another, all while noting that our blessings come from The Holy One.

The Holy One (*Adonai*) speaks to Moses with instructions for Aaron and his sons (the priests) for how to bless the People of Israel. You know these sacred words. Someone sang them to you at your naming or brit or at your bat or bar

mitzvah. Maybe you remember a parent whispering them to you on a Friday night, or you might be the one who offers this blessing to another:

יברכך ה' וישמרך

יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך

ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

May Adonai bless and protect you!

May Adonai deal kindly* and graciously with you!

May Adonai bestow favor upon you* and grant you shalom.

*(lit: Adonai turn God's face towards you)

Many commentators look for meaning in each word, and even in the order of the blessing. The 20th-century Torah scholar Nehama Leibowitz wrote that,

“ . . . the three sections of the priestly benedictions illustrate an order, starting with a blessing concerned with man's [people's] material needs and then dealing with his [her/their] spiritual wants, and finally reaching a climax combining both these factors together, crowning them with the blessing of peace. This ascending order and increasing surge of blessing is reflected in the language and rhythm. (*Studies in Bamidbar*, 67)

Leibowitz teaches that the blessing deals with physical and spiritual gifts, and that until one's material needs—like sustenance, shelter, and protection—are met, it is difficult to experience grace or wholeness. She helps us consider that the very cadence of the text, the repeating of God's name,

the nostalgia of these words, and their aspirational nature can bring us comfort and even hope. We also learn that though blessings come from God, they can also flow through the words of people.

Elsewhere in our Torah we read that “Aaron lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them . . . (Lev. 9:22). Rashi says that this was the priestly benediction. Why did Aaron lift his hands? Ramban notes that “it is possible that Aaron spread his hands out towards heaven and then blessed the people . . .” This might indicate that Aaron’s hands were facing up to God, in the form of a plea, and not towards, or on, the person receiving a blessing. That is certainly not how most of us picture this scene but visualizing it differently allows us the possibility to understand God’s greater involvement in the blessing. Placing our hands on or towards another reminds us to see and feel their humanity. Also, perhaps the fact that Aaron “lifts his hands” is a reminder to us to bless others not only with our words, but with the work of our hands.

As a *mamleket kohanim*, a sovereignty of priests, we each have the ability, and dare I say obligation, to bless others with our words and with our deeds. So many people in our lives need protection, first and foremost. And we all need so much kindness and grace right now. We live with much brokenness in our world and we as individuals, our country, and Israel need a sense that we can strive to create shalom—peace and wholeness—even when it seems far away. And we need to hear this from people who know and love us.

Birkat kohanim can be the start of a *berakhah* (blessing) that we give to another, but not its end. We should continue with our own words that are specific to the needs of the person or people in front of us. I learned this from our teacher Rabbi Naomi Levy, who one day asked colleagues to listen to each other and to then give another a *berakhah* that they specifically need.

The *berakhah* that we give to others can also be reminiscent of Aaron lifting his hands. It can literally be the work of our hands: bringing a meal, driving someone to a doctor’s appointment, being present for them in their time of vulnerability, helping them in concrete ways to feel a bit

more whole. This week can we endeavor to bless others with both this moving, ancient text, and with new, individualized prayers for others? This week I hope that you can extend to someone else the blessings of having enough, of being and feeling protected, of sensing God’s presence, of experiencing kindness, grace, and wholeness. Shabbat Shalom.