

Rabbi Noa Kushner
Parashat Nasso
June 2, 2023
Close Your Eyes and Receive It

1.

Story number 1:

Sometimes I get unusual questions
And a few years ago a younger rabbi told me that she was
approached by a congregant who felt she had been cursed.

Not that this person had bad fortune but that someone had
cursed her.

Anyway, this congregant wanted the young rabbi to remove the
curse. And the young rabbi was calling me to ask what to do.

"I say do it." I said.

"Our job is to serve. Do anything you can to help this person
know you have removed the curse. It is not exactly in the rabbis'
manual but just do the best you can."

Story number 2:

I officiated at a wedding last year
It was beautiful, powerful, they all are – you have to work really
hard to have a lackluster jewish wedding

And it was right after covid so there was the added intoxicating strangeness of being in a group, the relief of being in person Everything felt extra technicolor, leveled up

So I was and was not surprised when, after, two people approached me politely and asked me for private blessings.

Something about the wedding huppah and the day made them feel as if I could extend whatever happened under there to them, and to their lives.

I did it.

In both cases, with my younger colleague and I, we were not being asked for advice or encouragement or even love But rather, actually, to put ourselves and our proclivities aside, and to channel something, to summon something from on high.

2.

In this week's Torah, Nasso
We have our oldest blessing
Bircat Haco Hanim / Priestly blessing

All our other prayers are authored or sampled or written by the rabbis

This is the only prayer we have from the temple times that we say just as it was said then

At The Kitchen we chant it on shabbat morning

We invite people to put tallitot over their heads or around each other, arms, to bless one another

And then we chant the words

And even though I want you to hear it, I am purposefully not going to chant it, as this is not an official time to say it, consider this a bonus

I'm just going to give you hebrew and the translation

But you can close your eyes anyway

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ

May god bless you and keep you

יֵאָר יְהוָה וּפְנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְךָ

May god shine god's face toward you and favor you

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה וּפְנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וַיַּשֵּׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

May god lift up god's face toward you and grant you wholeness, peace

We usually chant it

But in temple times, it was far more regimented

the priests would have washed their hands, they would be called up in a certain place, in a certain choreographed way, they would raise their arms, spread out their fingers, face the people, everything would stop for this mysterious, concentrated blessing

3.

Now when I was studying for this shabbat I learned that the rabbis, especially Rashbam, make a big distinction between when people bless one another, even in Torah and when the priests offer this blessing.

We do have lots of examples of people blessing each other in Torah

Rachel's family sends her on her way with a blessing

There are many scenes of deathbed blessings, dramatic moments when parents offer blessings for children

These are meaningful and powerful moments to be sure,

According to the rabbis

they are just qualitatively different from what the priests are doing

Because in the moments when someone is blessing another person, a person is summoning good will and favor for another, perhaps offering a vision of the future for the one being blessed. Think about the good blessings on a bat mitzvah morning, from parents to children and you get the idea.

But in the *bircat hacoahanim*, the priests are *directly* invoking God's blessing. They are agents. They do not make up the words.

In fact, they don't improvise at all, it is a completely strict script, from where the priests stand to who is allowed to chant, to where they hold their hands (shoulder level inside the temple,

but up towards the head when outside the temple) and when the words are uttered.

In fact, it says in the Jerusalem Talmud¹ that even if somehow everyone in the room is a priest, they *still* offer this blessing, and they then offer it for any relatives living in the North or South – and in the Bavli they say that in the same circumstance the priests can say the blessing for anyone working in the fields who can't make it to services – as if to underscore that the ritual of this blessing is not even connected just to the people in that room in that moment

Rather it is part of something eternal that needs to take place
Like planets circling overhead or waves crashing to the shore
A need of God's
A need in which the priests just play their parts

4.

But this raises a key question
If God is the one who needs to just give this blessing
And we are certainly in no position to turn down blessings
And since there are other times in Torah when God seems to just bless us directly

If God wants to give the blessing and we're ready for it
Why do we need the priests altogether?
You have to admit it is a pretty elaborate set up

¹ Gittin 5:9:3

In fact, in midrash, when God first sets up the priesthood,
when God first sets up the priesthood
the people – namely, us – we are yelling and crying and asking
just this very question:

“God, we always had a very close relation with you! What is
this?!”

We only want to hear the blessings right from your divine
mouth”

(Now I have to add, If you want to know where some of our
people get the extra impulse to ask to ‘talk to the manager’ at
the drop of a hat, here is the origin story for that trait, you heard
it here first)

But seriously, in that moment, we want, we demand from God a
direct blessing, none of this priest intermediary business (!)

But God says to us, more or less – so beautiful

“When the priests are there raising their arms, I will be standing
there too, right there, as if looking through a window

And when the priests spread their fingers to bless, I am peering
through, (like it says in *shir ha shirim*), I am peering through as if
‘my beloved is peering through a lattice’”

In other words, it is as if God is teaching us that we can
sometimes be closer with a little distance

That the priest here is not meant to be red tape between God
and us

But rather that sometimes the filter can be the conduit

Counter-intuitively, *strengthening* the connection

“Before you even call, I will answer”² says God

A divine game of hide and seek

And what does God say when found?

What, asks the midrash, does “my beloved say to me?”

(“You found me – ”)

“בְּרַכְךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ”

May I, god bless you and keep you”

Why are the priests in charge of blessing?

Maybe to teach that we may sometimes be closer with a little distance.

And I was heartened to read in Sotah that while if we purposefully stand behind the priests so that we intentionally cannot see, we will not receive the blessing, it is unequivocal

If we have the *intent* to be blessed in that moment, *nothing gets in our way*, no tall people standing in front of us (it really says that), not the ark, not even an iron wall can interrupt God from blessing us through the priests in that moment, that is how strong this blessing is.

5.

There is another idea, another answer to our question
Why would God want the priests to bless us?

² NR, 11:2, p. 415, Isaiah 65:24, SHSR 2:9:2, p. 119

Back in Torah, in Genesis, as I mentioned, God blessed a lot of people directly

Even when, in one of the most poignant stories

Abraham, who literally kind of invents our idea of blessing

Surely he gets the mother of all blessings, "to be a blessing"

In a very ironic moment that the rabbis do not miss

When Abraham dies, Abraham does not bless Isaac his son

The fact that we are all still somehow paying for the therapy bills as a result of that particular father son dynamic is beside my point on this particular shabbat

Tonight I just want to teach what our midrash offers, and I think this is so profound and so beautiful –

That since Abraham did not bless Isaac

God blesses Isaac

God blesses Isaac with all he needed because Abraham could not

But the midrash then continues,

God says, "In the beginning I blessed everyone, I filled in the gaps, but now the priests will bless My children."

That is, why the priestly blessing? Because

God wants us, through the priests,

to channel, summon (!) God's direct blessing

God waits, I imagine, impatient, pacing, God waits, tapping her nails on the desk, waiting for the priestly blessing,

Waiting for the point in the service when the *bircat hacoanim* would be said so that her blessing would be revealed yet another time through the mouths of the priests

Because this is literally how the world was designed, how god made the world: *that if we wanted God's blessing, this special kind of God's blessing – we would still need each other. And of course, God would need us.*

6.

And this leads me to my third and last answer, at least for tonight

For why God wanted the priests to bless us

The *Akeidat Yitzchak* taught that this *bircat hacoanim*, this priestly blessing

So prescribed, so ritualistic, the words just so

That the giving of this blessing is also like a real time teaching, a demonstration

A regular invitation

I have heard people say who know this blessing as it is practiced even today

Where kohanim, descendants of the priesthood, members of the community

(And if you are a Kohen, let me know)

Stand in front and wrap themselves in tallitot

And raise their hands and channel the holy one for the rest of us

I have heard that everything stops

That everyone bows their heads because it is not just the words

Although the words are needed
It is not just the melody, although that melody too feels like an
amulet on a golden chain
It is not just the melody, *it is the act of being inside a public
blessing itself*
Just exactly as we have in Torah
I have heard it said that as the blessing arrives in service
Whether you are ready or not
Whether you signed up for it or not
It feels as if the kohen is saying, "See?" "Remember?"
"Everything flows from God,
"Everything, you just can't usually feel it –
"But here, now, today remember
"Remember you deserve blessing
"That you are the intended recipient of this most concentrated
blessing
"That this blessing was not only written for you / יְבָרְכֶךָ
"That not only do you need this blessing
most desperately / וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ
"God is waiting for you to close your eyes and receive it."