

Priestly Blessings in a Museum and on a Train

Parashat Naso, Numbers, Chapters 4-7 | June 9, 2022

In the late 1970s, the archeologist Gabriel Barkay oversaw an excavation of an area in the Valley of Hinnom outside of ancient Jerusalem. It was in this area, Josephus reports, that Titus first gathered his Roman forces to prepare for the siege and destruction of Second Temple in Jerusalem. Rome is not the only empire that left reminders of its former presence; a Byzantine church had occupied the site, and the *Chicago Tribune* tells us that:

Closer to the surface, the excavators found beer bottles left by British soldiers in the 1920s, when Britain ruled Palestine, and rifles left by earlier Ottoman Turkish rulers.

To excavate in Israel is to encounter the empires that once bestrode the world and set their sights on Jerusalem. Babylon, Persia, Rome, Byzantium, the Ottomans, the British. But buried beneath the remains of these world powers was an ancient amulet discovered by Barkay, bearing words from the Book of Numbers. It can be seen today in the Israel Museum—one of the most astonishing emblems of Jewish eternity.

This week, we will focus on three verses in the Torah that lie at the heart of a six-verse passage. It may seem strange to devote so much attention to so few sentences of Scripture, but as I will argue, it is the Jewish people who have so devotedly lavished love throughout the ages on these verses:

And the Lord spoke unto Moses, saying:

*Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying:
This way shall ye bless the children of Israel:
say unto them:*

May the Lord bless thee and protect thee:

*May the Lord make his face shine upon thee
and may he grant grace unto thee:*

*May the Lord lift up his countenance
unto thee, and may he grant thee peace.
(Numbers 6:22-26)*

This is known as “*Birkat Kohanim*,” the “Blessing of the Priesthood.” It is one of the smaller passages in the Pentateuch and, it is safe to say, one of the most beloved. These words are designated for pronunciation by the priests in the Temple, and also, as it is recited by the priests today, during communal prayer. The obligation of blessing Israel is for the priesthood alone, but the words have become part of Jewish parlance and liturgy beyond the realm of the original obligation. They are utilized by many in blessings bestowed from parent to child in Jewish homes before the Sabbath. Every morning, moreover, at the beginning of daily prayer, when Jews give gratitude to God for the gift of the Torah, they immediately follow their invocation with a bit of Torah study, with a reading from sacred Scripture. For centuries, the sentences said have been these: “*May the Lord bless thee and protect thee...*” And what is incredible is that Gabriel Barkay’s excavation made it quite clear that the Jewish love of these verses, the penchant for singling them out, goes back thousands of years.

Like many archeological discoveries, Barkay’s came through a combination of effort and accident. According to an excellent article on the City of David website, Barkay recollected how one of the volunteers was only 13.

“...there was one annoying kid named Nathan, who was always tugging at my shirt.” He sent him off to clean one of the tombs from rubble. “I thought

this was an ideal place to put him—he would be out of my sight. I told Nathan the repository had to be as clean as his mother’s kitchen. It had to be clean for photography.”

Nathan had a hammer, and as many of you may know, thirteen-year-old boys are a lot more interested in banging than in cleaning, so he took his hammer and broke open a mosaic.

Nathan saw through the hole he had created what appeared to be a piece of pottery. He came back to Barkay with it, and the astounded archeologist came back to the repository to discover that this annoying kid had discovered one of the greatest treasure sources in the history of archaeology: a chamber filled with ancient objects. Barkay reports how he now had to engage in an excavation of buried treasure while keeping it a secret in a society where people like to tell things to one another, saying that:

It was very hot. We had to change teams every few hours. There was a lady who was in charge of coffee and sandwiches. Everyone was sworn to secrecy—they weren’t allowed to tell parents, spouses, or friends. If word got around Jerusalem that there was such a treasure, the California gold rush would be nothing compared to what would happen here.

Among the artifacts were silver scrolls. Fascinating discussions about them in the *New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, City of David website, and elsewhere describe how the Israel Museum came up with a way to decipher what was on them. Only then did they understand that these were amulets that an ancient Israelite had written for himself. Along with other invocations of the Divine, they suddenly saw on the scroll pieces of sentences that seemed so familiar that it was easy to reconfigure the entire passage: “*Yevarechecha Hashem Veyishmerecha*,” “*May the Lord bless thee and protect thee...*”

What they had found were the words of the Priestly Blessing. These were the oldest words from the Hebrew Bible ever discovered—many hundreds of years older

than the Dead Sea scrolls. This find is on display in the Israel Museum, and discoveries such as this extraordinary amulet are also essential for us today to celebrate, and to hold aloft. For we hear all too often from those seeking to deny the profound roots of the Jewish people in the Holy Land, in Jerusalem, on the Temple Mount. On the amulet, we see these words of *Birkat Kobanim*, buried beneath the detritus of despots and the ash heaps of empires; under the beer bottles of the British, and the rifles of the Ottomans; predating the Byzantines and the Romans, the Persians and the Babylonians; words from the First Temple period; words that the priests, in fulfillment of Moses’ original command, would have utilized to bestow blessings upon the people of Israel. That amulet, that silver scroll, testifies to the roots of Judaism in the Temple Mount itself; words once intoned by the *kobanim* atop the sacred mountain in Jerusalem.

But the discovery also illustrates that millennia ago, the blessings designated for pronouncement by the priests were beloved by Israel. It is often said that *Birkat Kobanim* contains three blessings; yet when we examine these three sentences carefully, we realize that every one of these three sentences contains a double blessing. For example: “*May the Lord bless thee and protect thee.*” If He is blessing you, why does He need to protect you? The answer, suggested Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, is that every blessing needs another blessing. The phrase “to be blessed” often refers to being given something wonderful by God; but what we have can also be wrongly channeled. For Rabbi Berlin, every blessing needs protection, every blessing needs a blessing, lest the original blessing be misused.

We may well understand now why parents have adopted the Priestly Blessing and made it their mantra. They employ it when asking for blessings for their children, and in praying that all gifts with which they are endowed be channeled toward a positive end. And if Jews begin every morning with this passage as their first act of Torah study, it is perhaps because these few select sentences remind them to ensure that the blessings achieved during the day—financial or intellectual, physical or spiritual—truly *be* a blessing to them, and to others.

As such, the discovery of the amulet in ancient Je-

Jerusalem inscribed with the Priestly Blessing speaks to the very nature of *Birkat Kohanim* itself. It teaches us that these verses were always cherished, perhaps because these seemingly concise sentences actually teach us so much. The way in which this amulet was ultimately interpreted by archeologists—through the technological unwrapping of the scroll and the scrutinizing of the words—provides a meaningful metaphor. It is a tiny biblical passage, but its words have been pored over by Jews throughout the centuries and throughout their lives.

In a wonderful article in *Tablet*, Aaron Katz, who made Aliyah from my hometown, the frozen tundra that is Chicago, Illinois, described his daily commute on the train to Tel Aviv. In one of the cars there was a *minyan*, a daily prayer service, and in Israel, during a public prayer service, *Birkat Kohanim* is recited every day. Thus, the blessings of the priesthood recited by ancient Israel in the Temple are now recited in modern Israel on a fast-moving train. Katz, as a *kohen*, as a descendant of the priests of the Temple, took part, and he reflected upon the experience as follows:

I have always found the text of the Birkat Kohanim remarkably uplifting. But as I recite the prayer each morning—on a moving train in the State of Israel—the words have taken on an entirely new meaning for me, and even more so when I am chanting it during the difficult security situation that Israel is currently facing. On a train filled with the spectrum of Israeli society, I have a unique opportunity to provide the passengers, including the soldiers and police officers who risk their lives to defend the State of Israel, with a blessing of protection and peace.

The Talmud explains in tractate Sotah 38b that Birkat Kohanim reaches out to the people “out in the fields” who are unable to be present during the recitation of the blessing. As we literally pass through the fields in the vicinity of Ramla and Lod each morning during Birkat Kohanim, I always smile at how

literal the Talmudic saying has become in my own life. And I wonder, could the rabbis of the Talmud ever have imagined that an immigrant Kohen to Israel would be passing through the fields with a minyan while reciting the Birkat Kohanim and praying for peace?

I do not know if the sages imagined it. But they would have believed it possible; for they believed in the indestructible bonds of the Jewish people. And thus it is that an amulet in the Israel Museum in today’s Jewish state is a true testament to Jewish eternity.

Discussion Questions:

1. Drawing on the commentary of Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, Rabbi Soloveichik points out how even blessings can be misdirected. What are some concrete ways Jewish practice helps us use our blessings for good and not for ill?
2. If ultimately all blessings come from God, why does the Divine need to channel His blessings through the human vehicles of the *kobanim*, the priests?

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