



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

.....Family Edition.....

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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בס"ד

נשא תש"ף
Naso 5780

**The
Blessing
of Love**

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

A society whose members seek one another's welfare is holy and blessed.



PARSHAT NASO IN A NUTSHELL

In Naso we continue last week's description of the preparations the Israelites made for their journey from Sinai to the Holy Land.

Naso discusses many different topics which at first seem unconnected. These include the roles of two of the families from the tribe of Levi - Gershon and Merari; the census (counting) of the Levites as a group; rules about the purity of the camp; the laws of the Nazirite (who chooses to live an especially holy lifestyle, avoiding things like haircuts and drinking wine); and the priestly blessing, which the Kohanim still use to bless us today. This is the same blessing

parents use on their children every Friday night and on festivals.

The *parsha* ends with a long description of the offerings brought by each of the tribes at the dedication of the Mishkan.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why do you think there is a custom for parents to bless their children every Friday night?



THE CORE IDEA

In this week's parsha, God teaches the Priests how to bless the People of Israel on His behalf. This is the blessing they learn:

"May the Lord bless you and protect you.

May the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord turn His face toward you and grant you peace."

(Bamidbar 6:23-27)

These are among the oldest continuously-used words of blessing ever. We have never lost this tradition, from the day the Priests were given these words, until today. We recite them every day at the beginning of the morning service. Some say them last thing at night. They are the words used to bless Jewish children each Friday night. They are often used to bless the bride and groom at weddings. They are widely used by non-Jews also.

The simplicity of the words, their increasing three-word, five-word, seven-word structure, their movement from protection to grace to peace, all make them a miniature gem of prayer whose power has not faded in the more than three thousand years since they were first spoken.

Here is another special quality about this blessing that we should note: Before the Priests use these words to bless the people, they make a *brachah* first where they specify that God has "commanded us to bless His people *with love*". No other blessing over a command specifies that it be done with love.

When you bless someone you demonstrate that you wish the best for them – this is what loving them means. When the Priests bless the people, they show them what love of one's fellow looks like. That is why the *brachah* they make before they bless the people mentions love, because love is how blessings enter the world. The Kohanim are modelling

this for the people, so the people will understand how to bring blessings into the world themselves – by caring for others.



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

On the eve of Yom Kippur in 1945, after the Second World War had ended, fifteen-year-old Edith Cohen was living in a crowded Displaced Persons camp called Feldafing. She had survived the nightmare of Auschwitz, but her parents and four siblings had perished. Despite her weakened state, the prospect of fasting that Yom Kippur did not faze her. She had gone hungry many times before. But the emotional pain of having no parents to give her the traditional blessing before Yom Kippur was unbearable.

Rabbi Yekutiel Halberstam, the Klausenberger Rebbe from the Sanz dynasty, was also a resident of the displacement camp, but his wife and 11 children had not survived. The Rebbe had been working tirelessly to help the other residents in the camp learn to embrace life once more. On the eve of Yom Kippur though, he was taking some time to mediate and study Torah in isolation, when he was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door. There stood young Edith with tears in her eyes. "My parents died in the camps. I have no one to bless me," she pleaded. Without

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think we use these same words of blessing at so many different times?
2. How does love lead us to blessing and caring for others?

hesitation, and with pure love in his eyes, he raised his hands over her head, and blessed her with the words of the ancient priestly blessing.

Soon there was another knock, and a second orphaned girl was asking, "Please bless me, Rebbe." Again, he lovingly obliged. Then another knock, and another. Soon a long queue of several dozen girls formed, each one waiting patiently to receive a blessing of love from the Rebbe until it was time for Kol Nidre to begin. The Klausenberger Rebbe missed out on his private pre-Yom Kippur meditation, but from that day forward he acted as a parent for all the orphans of the camp.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What do you think parents feel in their hearts when they give their children this blessing?
2. Do you think the Rebbe felt the same for these children?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

One obvious question here is, why were the family of Priests chosen to give this special blessing, with love, to the Children of Israel? Why not Prophets, Kings, Sages or saints? And why were human beings asked to bless the people at all? It is God who blesses humanity and His people, Israel. He needs no human intermediary. Our passage says just this: "Let them put My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them." The blessings come not from the Priests but from God Himself. So why require the Priests to "put His name" on the people?

The *Sefer ha-Chinnuch* answers this question by explaining that the Priests were the sacred group within the people. They ministered in the House of God. They spent their lives in Divine service. Their life's work was sacred. So was their habitat. They were the guardians of holiness. They were therefore the obvious choice for the sacred rite of bringing down God's blessings upon the people.

A second question we might ask is, why is there such an unusual *Birkat ha-Mitzvah*, (the *brachah* made by the Priests before they bless the people). "Blessed are You, our God, King of the World, who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless His people with love." No other blessing over a command specifies that it be done with love. There are two different interpretations: perhaps the Priests

must feel this love when they bless the people, or perhaps the reference is to God and His love for Bnei Yisrael.

This second interpretation reverses the word order of the blessing and reads it not as "who commanded us to bless His people with love," but rather, "who in love commanded us to bless His people." In this case, the blessing speaks of God's love, not that of the Priests. Because God loves His people, He commands the Priests to bless them.

The first reading is grammatically more plausible. It states that it is the Priests who must love. This is the basis of the statement in the Zohar that "a Priest who does not love the people, or a Priest who is not loved by the people, may not bless." We can only bless what we love. Remember how Isaac, when he was elderly and blind, said to Esau, "Prepare me the tasty food that I love and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my blessing before I die" (Bereishit 27:4). Whether it was the food that Isaac loved, or what it represented about Esau's character – that he cared enough for his father to find him the food he liked – Isaac needed the presence of love to be able to make the blessing.

Why then does the blessing for this mitzvah and no other specify that it must be done with love? Because in every other case it is the agent who performs the *ma'aseh mitzvah*, the act

that constitutes the command. Uniquely in the case of the priestly blessings, the Priest is merely a *machshir mitzvah* – an enabler, not a doer. The doer is God Himself: “Let them place My name on the children of Israel and I will bless them.” The Kohanim are merely channels through which God’s blessings flow.

This means that they must be selfless while uttering the blessings. We must let God into the world and into our hearts to the degree that we forget ourselves and focus on others. That is what love is. We see this in the passage in which Jacob, having fallen in love with Rachel, agrees to Laban’s terms: seven years of work. We read: “So Jacob served seven years to get Rachel, but they seemed like only a few days to him because of his love for her.” (Ber. 29:20) The commentators ask the obvious question: precisely because he was so much in love, wouldn’t the seven years have felt like a century? The answer is equally obvious: he was thinking of her, not him. There was nothing selfish in his love. He was focused on her presence, not his impatient desire.

There is, though, perhaps an alternative explanation for all these things. As I explained a few weeks ago in the *Covenant and Conversation* for the double parsha of Acharei Mot - Kedoshim, it was the Priests who taught the people the specific ethic of holiness.

The key text of the holiness ethic is Vayikra 19: “Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy.” It is this chapter that teaches the two great commands of interpersonal love, of the neighbour and the stranger. *The ethic of holiness, taught by the Priests, is the ethic of love.*

That ethic is the result of the special vision of the Priest, set out in Bereishit 1, which sees the world as God’s work and the human person as God’s image. Our very existence, and the existence of the universe, are the result of God’s love.

The prophetic and wisdom voices are based on other things – the Prophets on Jewish history, especially the exodus, and wisdom on observation of the way the world works.

By blessing the people, the Priests showed them what love of one’s fellow is. Here is Rambam’s definition of what it is to fulfil the command of “You shall love your neighbour as yourself”: “*One should speak in praise of his neighbour, and be considerate of his money, even as he is considerate of his own money, or desires to preserve his own honour.*” Blessing the people showed that you sought their good – and seeking their good is what loving them means.

Thus the Kohanim set an example to the people by this public display of love – or what we would call today “the common good.” They thus encouraged a society in which each sought the welfare of all – and such a society is blessed, because the bonds between its members are strong, and because people put the interests of the nation as a whole before their own private advantage. Such a society is blessed by God, whereas a selfish society is not, and cannot, be blessed by God. No selfish society has survived for long.

Hence our answers to the questions: why the Kohanim? Because their ethic emphasised love – of neighbour and stranger – and we need love before we can bless. Hence the mention of love in the blessing over the commandment, because love is how blessings enter the world. And why have human beings bless, and not God directly? Because the Kohanim were to be role models of what it is for humans to care for the welfare of others. **I believe that *Birkat Kohanim* contains a vital message for us today: A society whose members seek one another’s welfare is holy, and blessed.**

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why did God choose the Kohanim to be the ones to deliver his blessing to the people?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

What was new and remarkable in the Hebrew Bible was the idea that love, not just reciprocity, is the driving principle of the moral life.

Three loves. ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your might’, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself,’ and, repeated no less than 36 times in the Mosaic books, ‘Love the stranger because you know what it feels like to be a stranger.’ Just as God created the natural world in love and forgiveness, so we are charged with creating the social world in love and forgiveness. That love is a flame lit in marriage and the family. Morality is the love between husband and wife, parent and child, extended outward to the world.

Morality, pp. 72-73



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. What do you think is the power in the ancient words of this priestly blessing?
2. Why do the Priests have to love to deliver the priestly blessing in God’s name?
3. Can you see this value of caring about the welfare of others in society today? Where do you see it?



QUESTION TIME

Do you want to win a **Koren Aviv Weekday Siddur**? Email CCFamilyEdition@rabbisacks.org with your name, age, city and your best question based on the ideas from the *Covenant & Conversation Family Edition*. **Entrants must be 18 or younger**. Thank you to Koren Publishers for kindly donating these wonderful siddurim.



EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. Shabbat begins each week as the sun sets on Friday, and this has always been the time when Jewish families can pause, breathe, and catch up and be together after a busy week. At this time, the children specifically, and the family unit in general, becomes the focus, (rather than during the rest of the week, when there are many other competing distractions such as work, school, and leisurely pursuits). As we explore in this week's *Covenant & Conversation*, the act of blessing others is an expression of love. Parents give this blessing to their children on Friday nights as they refocus on the children and their love for them.

THE CORE IDEA

1. These beautiful words ask for God to protect us, show us grace, and to also grant the ultimate gift - peace. They express the wish for goodness to a depth rarely seen in any other place. Therefore they are deeply appropriate words to use in all the instances mentioned (such as a wedding days, Friday nights, *chaggim*, or even in the regular daily worship of God).
2. If we love another person, we wish the best for them. This leads us to care for them, and also to bless them, in the hope that God will also care for them.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The answer here is love. Simple as that. But this could also be the opportunity to guide a conversation that helps the reader understand the ultimate message of this week's *Covenant & Conversation* – that the *Birkat ha-Mitzvah* (the blessing for the mitzvah) mentions love, because love is central to the concept of giving a blessing, and the Kohanim are our role-models in this when they bless us.
2. The story describes a pious Chassidic Rebbe who had just lost his entire world, and yet found love in his heart for the orphans he had never met before. Knowing more about his life (see *C&C Family Edition: Between Hope and Humanity - Shemini 5779*, for example), it is obvious that he was a man of overflowing love for his fellow Jews and for all of humankind, and a worthy role model for us all.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. It was the Priests who taught the people the specific ethic of holiness. The key text of the holiness ethic is Vayikra 19: "Be holy for I, the Lord your God, am holy." It is this chapter that teaches the two great commands of interpersonal love, of the neighbour and the stranger. The ethic of holiness, taught by the Priests, is the ethic of love. That ethic is the result of the special vision of the Priest, set out in Bereishit 1, which sees the world as God's work and the human person as God's image. Our very existence, and the existence of the universe, are the result of God's love. Because their ethic emphasised love, they were the right leadership to convey this message in this blessing.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. Part of the power is in that these are such ancient words, used as a blessing for thousands of years. There was tremendous excitement in 1979 when silver amulets 2,800 years old, engraved with the priestly blessing in the exact same words as the Torah text, were found in Jerusalem by a thirteen-year old volunteer archaeological digger (see <https://www.cityofdavid.org.il/en/article/priestly-blessing>) demonstrating the importance of these words throughout Jewish history. But the words themselves are also particularly powerful, calling for God to give the people protection, grace, and peace.
2. The essential ingredient of a blessing is love. If the blessing is authentic, then it will come from a place of love, so the Kohanim were commanded to give the blessing on God's behalf through love, thereby modelling this for us. By blessing the people, the Priests showed them what love of one's fellow is. Blessing the people showed that you sought their good – and seeking their good is what loving them means.
3. We can find examples of this in all areas of society, despite the parallel existence of selfish and destructive behaviour also. In Rabbi Sacks' new book *Morality*, he calls for society to go from being "I" centred (where people only worry about their own needs, something that has happened more and more in recent generations) to being "We" centred. We have seen many examples of care and concern for others in recent times during the Covid-19 crisis, and hopefully this is a silver lining from this difficult time, and a sign that we are moving in the right direction with this.