

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



What Would You Pack?

Rabbi Tim Daniel Bernard, Director of Digital Learning and Engagement, JTS

1 pair of pants, 1 shirt, 1 pair of shoes and 1 pair of socks

Shampoo and hair gel, toothbrush and toothpaste, face whitening cream

Comb, nail clipper

Bandages

100 U.S. dollars, 130 Turkish liras

Smart phone and back-up cell phone

SIM cards for Afghanistan, Iran and Turkey

—contents of Iqbal's backpack on arriving in Lesbos, Greece (emphasis added)

Iqbal, from war-torn Kunduz Province in Afghanistan, is a refugee featured in a photo essay by the International Rescue Committee. He said that he hoped that his cosmetics and grooming would make it less likely that he would be identified as a refugee and detained.

Two sections of our parashah (Num. 4:21-49, 7:1-9) deal with the instructions to the Levite clans responsible for transporting the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The tales of these contemporary refugees' packs remind us just how remarkable it is that the Israelites carried substantial (and seemingly nonessential) structures through the wilderness.

Perhaps, as with Iqbal's hair gel and comb, the Mishkan was a means of protection: it was the camp's dwelling-place for God, who provided the Israelites with food, water, and defense against unfriendly peoples. However, I suspect that Iqbal's ability to keep himself looking respectable also helped him maintain a sense of who he was: a young man with dignity. The Mishkan played a similar role: as the spiritual and geographical center of the camp, it reminded the Israelites that they were one people united not only by blood, but also by their intimate relationship with God.

If you had space in your backpack, what would you take to remind you of who you are, or who you want to be?



Naso 5777

נשא תשע"ז



The Problem with Priests

Rabbi Daniel S. Nevins, Pearl Resnick Dean of The Rabbinical School and Dean of the Division of Religious Leadership, JTS

Modern Judaism has a problem with the priesthood. The notion of hereditary holiness—that one segment of the Jewish people is set apart from others, given ceremonial privileges, and invited to bless the people—conflicts with our egalitarian ethos. The strange rituals of the priests, especially when they are invited to raise their hands in blessing the people, feel magical and irrational. For these reasons, many non-Orthodox communities have diminished or even eliminated the priestly privileges such as reserving the first aliyot for *kohanim* and *Levi'im*. On festivals, when priests traditionally ascend to the bimah during the *Musaf* service and chant the biblical blessings from underneath their tallit, many of our congregations simply assign the role to the leader, regardless of tribal status.

Yet there remain passionate defenders of the priestly prerogatives, and they, too, have their reasons. First, of course, the Torah itself defines an elaborate role for the tribe of Levi and within it, the descendants of Aaron. In our portion this week we read, “And they shall set My Name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them.” R' Yehoshua b. Levi states in the Talmud (BT Sotah 38b) that a *kohen* who refuses to bless the people violates three commandments (for the three times that the Torah instructs *kohanim* to bless the people).

Beyond the biblical imperative, the priestly blessing also infuses ritual with mystery. Further, it is a deeply meaningful family tradition for many *kohanim*. Although traditionally women were excluded from the ritual, the CJLS approved a 1994 responsum by Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz called “Women, Raise Your Hands,” which argued that women from priestly families also have the ability to bless the community, and therefore may play all of the liturgical roles traditionally assigned to male priests. These reasons suffice for many of

our congregations to continue, restore, or initiate the traditional practice of inviting priests to bless the community from the bimah (*dukhening*) on festivals.

When I was a pulpit rabbi, I served a congregation that was founded in the 1940s, during the height of 20th-century rationalism, and had never included the ritual of *dukhening*. With the dawn of the 21st century and increasing interest in the mystical side of Judaism, as well as in the exploration of family genealogy, I proposed that we institute the priestly blessing on festivals. While most congregants supported the move, and we did indeed begin the practice, others were unhappy and even offended. The most passionate objection was that putting the priests on a pedestal to bless the congregation was not appropriate, because they were not necessarily better models of piety than anyone else. One congregant raised a sensitive concern that this practice would invite others to make unflattering comments along the lines of, “If you knew what I know about Mr. Cohen, you wouldn’t want his blessing.”

This congregant had a good point. Indeed, there are many centuries of literature addressing precisely her concern. In the Talmud Yerushalmi (Gittin 5:9, 47b), Rav Huna says that even if there is only one *kohen* (priest) present to say the blessing, the prayer leader should still cry out in the plural, “*kohanim*,” to show that it is the tribe, not the individual, that offers blessing. He continues: “This is lest a person should say, *this kohen has had illicit sex, or shed blood, and now he is going to bless us?* God says, *the priests will pronounce My name, but I will bless the people.*”

Concerns about the attitudes of the people to the priests are explored in the halakhic literature (See Shulhan Arukh OH 128). Some of these concerns seem to be reasonable. For example, according to Rabbi Karo, a *kohen* who has killed a person, even unintentionally, may never again raise his hands in blessing lest it distract the people, just as the Yerushalmi fears. Even so, Rabbi Moshe Isserles permits a *kohen* who has killed but then repented to offer blessings, lest his repentance be discouraged. The people are instructed to be forgiving, and thus worthy of the blessing.

What about the attitude of the *kohen* toward the people? Does it suffice for the *kohen* to say the words and trust that God will show mercy upon the people, even if the *kohen* himself is filled with anger or indifference toward them? This is a question where the mystical book of Zohar effectively weaves together the biblical and rabbinic materials to influence the

halakhah in a very meaningful fashion. In the book of Proverbs (22:9) we read, “one who is generous will be blessed”; an alternative translation would be, “only a person who looks well upon others may bless them.” In the Talmud (BT Sotah 39a) R’ Zeira teaches in the name of R’ Hisda that before uttering the priestly benediction, the *kohen* says the following blessing: “...who has commanded us regarding the holiness of Aaron, commanding us to bless God’s people Israel with love.” Those final two words, “with love,” imply that the priest needs to be filled with mercy at the time of blessing. The Zohar expands upon this theme (Vol. 3, 147b; see Daniel Matt edition, vol.8, 479f), saying, “Any priest who does not love the people, or whom the people do not love, should not spread his hands to bless the people.” The Zohar cites our verse from Proverbs to prove the point.

So, is it mystical and irrational to invite the priests up to bless the people? Yes, it is, in the best possible sense. When a congregation can set aside its disagreements and accept the blessings of even unpopular members, that is irrational and mysterious. When a *kohen* who is an otherwise plain person with no leadership profile is nevertheless invited to offer a blessing, and when that person does so with love, that, too, is irrational and mysterious.

Thank God for such irrational and mysterious behaviors! To be critical of each other and filled with harsh judgment is frequently rational and fully justified. We are living in a highly rancorous environment where our worst assumptions of other people are being confirmed each day. Nothing can be more rational than to criticize and even despise our fellow citizens. But the mystery of faith is animated by the power of mercy to overwhelm judgment, and love to banish hatred. When the priests pronounce God’s name in love, then mercy links heaven and earth, and the world becomes fertile with blessing. What is true of the priests is true of each of us—after all, we, too, are commanded to love our neighbors as ourselves. May we summon the irrational and mysterious ability to ignore the faults of others, and to bless them with love. In so doing, may we in turn receive God’s mysterious and irrational blessing.

The publication and distribution of the *JTS Parashah Commentary* are made possible by a generous grant from Rita Dee (z”) and Harold Hassenfeld (z”).