

Naso 5781

נשא תשפ"א



Parenting Lessons from the Priests

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“Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them: ‘The LORD bless you and protect you! The LORD deal kindly and graciously with you! The LORD bestow the Lord’s favor upon you and grant you peace!’ Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them. (Numbers 6:23–27)

It is a beautiful moment in this week’s parashah: God asks Moses to instruct Aaron and his sons to bless *B’nei Yisrael* on God’s behalf. Not only is the sentiment and poetry of the priestly blessing stirring in and of itself, but given its use in contemporary religious life, it carries even further resonance. In Jewish households across the world, parents offer this blessing to their children as part of their Friday night ritual. In my own experience, I have vivid memories of my grandparents and parents blessing me and my sisters with these words, and I am grateful to have the opportunity to do the same for my children each Shabbat. Those few precious moments—where my husband and I get to hold each of our kids, whisper these ancient verses, and kiss them “Shabbat shalom”—have become a sacred occasion in our home. I’ve repeated these phrases now over many weeks and years and, at times, with little thought to the meaning behind the words. A closer reading of the text, though, has affirmed for me some essential parenting lessons.

It goes without saying—parenting is challenging work. Given the chaos of our day to day and, especially, the additional difficulties this year has posed, we are not always our best selves. We can get frustrated and short-tempered, and when homework isn’t done and siblings are arguing,

it can be hard to remember our children's better qualities. The priestly blessing on Friday night can serve as a necessary reset: we are messengers of God's blessings, but the blessings we bestow are entirely God's. As Jacob Milgrom notes in his commentary on the book of Numbers, the wording of our passage underscores the priests' role in blessing *B'nei Yisrael*. "The blessing issues solely from [God]; the priests' function is to channel it." In this way, parents are reminded—each week—that, despite the difficulties and frustrations, our children are sources of blessing and imbued with godliness, and parents are partners with God in the growth and development of their unique gifts.

And while the words are the same, the blessing is to be given to each child individually, "*al pi darko*," according to their own individual path (Proverbs 22:6). Although given from Aaron and his sons to all of *B'nei Yisrael*, the blessing is written in the singular: God blesses you, each individual person. It extends to all, but it is meant to be received as a private communication. Here, too, we are sending our kids a powerful message: you matter, and we see you for who and all you are.

By engaging in this ritual (and in many of our other Jewish observances), we are also supporting our kids' emergent spirituality. In her book *The Spiritual Child*, Lisa Miller explains that children who have meaningful and robust spiritual lives thrive relative to their peers: they are more optimistic, happier, flexible, and are better equipped to handle life's inevitable twists and turns. Miller is unequivocal about a parent's role in this; parents, she contends, are "ambassador(s) of transcendence, the guide(s) on the ground who introduce a child to the spiritually attuned life" (p. 90). While recognizing that children's spiritual development can happen outside religion and often does, it regularly occurs through shared religious practice. This Friday night ritual, then, can be a powerful instrument in our parenting toolbox, a weekly opportunity to foster our children's spiritual connections and an intimate reminder of God's presence in the world.

What an honor and a responsibility it is to offer blessing on God's behalf.

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