



דבר אחר | A Different Perspective

Light Shine Through

Rabbi Danielle Upbin, JTS Florida Rabbinic Fellow

We are Hollow Bamboo

Open up your heart and let the light shine through

Light shine, light shine through!

Light shine, light shine through

Words and music: traditional, with variation in second half by Billy Jonas
Copyright 2008 Billy Jonas, Bang-A-Bucket Music / BMI (based on a traditional song)

Joyously, I have uttered the Priestly Blessing for b'nei mitzvah on the bimah and for lovers under the huppah. I have poured out the same blessing over the heads of my children as a recurring Shabbat gift. These perfectly constructed phrases of blessing transport us through history to an ancient command:

The Lord spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

May God bless you and protect you!
The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you!
The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace!

Thus shall they link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.
(Numbers 6:22–27 [NJPS])

Myriads of priests, parents, and clergy have bestowed this blessing over the centuries. But, ultimately, who is the *source* of blessing? The speaker—a mere mortal, scarred, marred, or otherwise unfit? Or is the source “The Source,” as the end of the verse suggests? As many commentaries have affirmed, surely God is the one true source of blessing. However, in sacred moments of family and community bonding in love and joy, the “blesser” becomes a hallowed vessel, connecting pure spirit with flesh and bone. We speak, and God whispers through our words.

Modern folk singer Billy Jonas offers a captivating rendition of a traditional song, “We Are a Hollow Bamboo.” The sweet voices of Jonas and the children joining him remind us that we, too, can open our hearts and become conduits of blessing. The how-to is simple: Close your eyes, breathe into the deep spaces of mind and body, and heed the ancient call to bless. Picture yourself as a bamboo reed bowing with the gentle breeze. Become a spirit vessel hallowed and hollowed to receive and give light, compassion, and peace. Repeat as necessary.

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TORAH FROM JTS



Parashat Naso 5776

פרשת נסא תשע"ו



Answer Me

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In a plaintive and anxious song by Israeli singer Ehud Banai called “*Aneh Li*” (“Answer Me”), the challenge of communicating with God is rendered as an increasingly panicked monologue by a man waiting for a voice he’s sure is on the other end of the phone line:

You’re breaking up—there’s background noise—it’s like the ocean.
I guess there’s no reception here—you’ve disappeared.
I’m still waiting on the line for my turn.
I’m holding the connection, in case you return . . .
Are you still with me?
Answer me.

Banai’s vision comes to mind as I read in this week’s portion:

When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him, he would hear the Voice addressing him from above the cover that was on top of the Ark of the Covenant—from between the two *keruvim*; thus He spoke to him. (Num. 7:89)

The two *keruvim* were the sphinx-like figures fixed to the lid of the Ark; their extended wings formed a canopy beneath which God’s presence was understood to hover. Our verse identifies the space just below the two wings as the place from which God’s voice emanated. In a teaching recorded in Bemidbar Rabbah 14:22, Rabbi Akiva emphasizes the specificity of this location. He explains that the voice was not audible from throughout the Tent, nor even from the full surface area of the Ark’s lid, but only from that exact spot beneath the wings.

On the one hand, Numbers 7:89 suggests easy communication between Moses and God, as if God maintained office hours—the very opposite of Banai’s song. Indeed, it seems the model of communication that Banai craves.

On the other hand, our verse suggests that, in order to converse with God, Moses could stand in only one spot. That is, Moses had severely limited means of communication with God.

Rashi, drawing on the Sifra, addresses a contradiction, between two *other* verses, and explains how Numbers 7:89 resolves it:

[When there are] two contradictory verses, a third one comes to reconcile them. One verse says, “The Lord spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting” (Lev. 1:1), which implies outside the curtain, whereas another verse says, “and speak to you from above the Ark cover” (Exod. 25:22) [which is on the interior, behind the curtain]. Our verse comes to reconcile them: Moses came into the Tent of Meeting, and there he would hear the voice [of God] coming from [between the *keruvim*], above the Ark cover.

Like a beam of light redirected by a mirror inside a microscope, God’s voice would descend from heaven and be redirected from beneath the *keruvim* to Moses standing in the outer Tent of Meeting.

But additional complications emerge upon closer reading. In Bemidbar Rabbah 14:19 we learn:

Our verse [Num. 7:89] says, “When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him,” but in Exodus 40:35 it says, “Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.”

Bemidbar Rabbah resolves the contradiction with the phrase “because the cloud had settled upon it.” When the cloud—that is, the cloud signifying God’s presence—had settled upon the Tent, Moses could not enter. But once the cloud was lifted, Moses would go in and speak with God.

The presence or absence of the cloud is complex. Bemidbar Rabbah also teaches that when Moses could not enter, it was because it would have been dangerous to do so. The cloud signaled that, in God’s anger, He had unleashed destructive forces; Moses could not safely enter. With the retreat of the cloud, the threat retreated and Moses was free to seek God’s counsel.

And then there is the nature of the communication between God and Moses. Who was talking? Our verse tells that Moses went to the Tent “to speak with God” (לדבר עמו, *ledaber imo*). Up to this point, we understand that both Moses and God will speak. But the verse says that Moses would hear God’s

voice (מדבר, *middabber*) from atop the Ark. This unusual verb is reflexive, indicating that what Moses hears is not God speaking *to him* but God speaking to Godself. Rashi explains that Moses walking up to the Tent and having a conversation with God would suggest too much intimacy. In this telling, we don’t have a model of the divine teacher and his disciple during office hours, but rather of the supplicant-seeker receiving didactic instruction from the barely approachable Master.

In contrast, a wonderful essay by Gilad Sasson of Bar-Ilan University explores a later tier of commentaries that show God lovingly inviting Moses into direct communication inside the cloud in the Tent. (“*U-vevo Moshe el Ohel Moed*”, Daf Shevui #1173, Faculty of Jewish Studies of Bar-Ilan University) Deep study and open-hearted prayer open these lines of communication for some, while being out in nature or a pervasive sense of God’s love open them for others. But the notion of communication with God being fraught, limited, and perhaps one-sided better describes the experience of many. That’s the kind of experience expressed in Ehud Banai’s song.

To facilitate our own communication with God, we might start by paying attention to how Moses came to have a place for such communication. Remember that the Tabernacle was built by human hands. And it was built because God wanted it. God sought a place to be present among the people whose lives and destinies He had covenanted, at Sinai, to journey through with them. Neither a conversation with nor direct guidance from God can be had easily. But that sweet spot beneath the wings of the *keruvim* was fashioned by people, and at God’s direction. The confidence that God seeks to be in communication with us and that we are capable of fashioning opportunities for connection can give us cause to hope. If we pay attention, perhaps we can begin by hearing and learning from God *middabber*—God speaking of our lives to Godself.

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