

The Power of a Blessing

Rabbi Eliezer Diamond, Rabbi Judah Nadich Associate Professor of Talmud and Rabbinics, JTS



A rabbinic colleague of mine, who had just attended an interfaith conference, complained that when it came to blessings the Jewish clerics could not hold a candle to their Christian counterparts. At each meal at the conference, someone would be invited to offer an opening blessing. The Christian clergy—most likely Protestant clergy—would offer creative and spontaneous blessings, often tailored to refer to a particular concern or hope. “Whereas, what have we Jews got? ‘*Barukh atah . . .*’”—my friend rattled off a quick *hamotzi*. “Well,” I replied, “it’s all in the delivery. Imagine reciting the *hamotzi* this way: *Barukh . . . atah . . . hashem . . . Elohenu . . . melek . . . ha-olam . . . hamotzi . . . lehem . . . min . . . ha-aretz.*’ And as you slowly enunciate each word, you follow it in your mind with the appropriate translation: ‘*Barukh*’ . . . (blessed) . . . ‘*atah*’ . . . (are you), and so on. Now you have a meditative ritual instead of a rote recitation.”

I mention this because this week’s Torah portion includes the blessing that the priests are supposed to bestow upon the people of Israel. A standard translation follows:

May God bless you and watch over you.

May God shine God’s face towards you and show you favor.

May God lift up God’s face to you and grant you peace.
(Num. 6:24–26)

Anyone I know who grew up in a synagogue where the *kohanim dukhened* on the *Yamim Tovim* remembers this as one of the peak moments of their synagogue experience. There are many reasons for this: the strange sight of men (and now women) standing with their hands extended and with their heads and upper faces covered by tallitot, the fact that we were in fact not to gaze upon this startling spectacle, and the sense of protection afforded to those of us whose

parents covered them with their own tallitot during the rendering of the blessing in order to protect them from the potentially harmful effects of looking upon the *kohanim*. In my college days, a must-read book was *The Idea of the Holy* by Rudolph Otto, which posited that holiness is a potentially dangerous force. Divine power is infinitely greater than ours; our frail beings can only hold so much Godly energy. To be exposed to too much divine power or to receive it when one is unworthy of receiving it results in a sort of energy overload that can be fatal; think of Aaron’s sons, Nadav and Abihu. Our being told that we could be blinded by looking at the *kohanim* as they blessed us was an expression of that notion.

Birkat Kohanim was also the only time in a prayer service when each word of a liturgy was chanted slowly, not once but twice: first by the prayer leader and then by the *kohanim*. The power of the blessing derived in part from the attention lavished on each and every word, suggesting that each had an inherent power apart from its role in creating one of the verses of the blessing.

The structure of the blessing also lends to its liturgical power. It consists of three verses of three, then five, then seven words, a gradual increase. This symbolizes what we often imagine blessing to be, growing and prospering over time.

Each verse is actually two blessings, each ending with the syllables “*ekha*” or something similar (indicating the blessing’s object)—with the exception of the final blessing, which ends with the word “*shalom*,” peace. God’s name is the second word in each verse, making it clear that it is God, not the *kohanim*, who is the source of the blessing; the priests are merely a conduit for conveying God’s bounty.

The Torah itself makes this clear “And they [the priests] shall place my name upon Israel and I will bless them” (Num. 6:27).

In many homes, it is the practice to bless one’s children with the Priestly Blessing on Friday night. I do my best to call my children, my sons-in-law, and my grandchildren Thursday night or Friday to bestow the *Birkat Kohanim* upon them. If I can’t deliver the *berakhah* in real time I leave a voice message or even, if necessary, a text. My manner of delivery varies from recipient to recipient. Some require an accompanying English translation, some don’t. For young grandchildren, my delivery must be quick and funny. When the call is made close to the beginning of Shabbat, or my children are busy being parents or are at work, I must be briskly efficient, doing my best to recite the words quickly while still lavishing upon them the attention they deserve. I enjoy most bestowing the *berakhah* after having had a long conversation with a child or grandchild about their week and mine. It is a way of enriching our relationship by invoking God’s presence.

I don’t know what my children and grandchildren believe about the *berakhah* they are receiving. What I know is that as a parent and grandparent it is a way of expressing my love and concern for those I care about. I also treasure the fact that I recite the same words each week for each family member. After all, how can I know what blessing would serve each of them best? And even if I did, if I used my own words, I would be expressing nothing more than a hope. Using God’s words enables me to say: I don’t know what would be best for you. I leave it in the hands of a Power greater than both of us to have the wisdom to know, and I ask that Power to bring the blessing you need to fruition.

May each of us receive the blessing we need and the wisdom to know that we have received it.