



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Naso 5769

By Rachel Farbiarz

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Parshat Naso provides the script for one of the more penetrating segments of the Hebrew liturgy—the *birkat kohanim*, or priestly blessing. Over the millennia, this benediction has remained a seminal means of invoking the Divine in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. In our *parshah*, God dictates the blessing to Moses, who is to teach it to Aaron and his sons—the *kohanim*, or priests:

May God bless you and guard you.

May God make God's face shine upon you and grant grace to you.

*May God lift up God's face to you and give you peace.*¹

At the Sephardic synagogue in which I was raised, Shabbat mornings were punctuated by the eerie call-and-response of the benediction and the congregation's hopeful rejoinder: *May it be God's will.*² Integral to the priests' recitation were the rituals accompanying the blessing that seemed to suspend *kohanim* and congregation together in a humbled thrall.

At a specified time in the service, the community's *kohanim* discreetly excused themselves to perform their preparatory ablutions. The faint sound of the priests' shufflings was followed by a call-to-attention—*Koh-Haahh-Neeeeem!*—summoning them to their posts before the ark. The men of the congregation gathered their children and their children's children under the prayer shawls they had drawn over their heads.

The *kohanim* faced them, cloaked too in their billowing shawls. Their arms outstretched, their fingers extended and conjoined in the cultic v-shape, the priests swayed and chanted the blessing—distending its syllables, trilling its notes. Only after the *kohanim* had finished the blessing did the face-off of masquerading ghosts end: Modestly, the priests turned their backs to the congregation and took down their shawls, unveiling themselves before the ark.

None of this am I actually supposed to have witnessed. All of us, *kohanim* and congregation alike, were to have had our eyes closed or averted downward, to shield ourselves—it is traditionally said—from the awesome power that emanated from between the *kohanim's* fingers.³ I have always suspected though that we protected ourselves not only from the Divine, but also from something very human: the tendency to turn an act of blessing into an act that invests one group with power at the expense of the other.

¹ Numbers 6:22-26.

² One of the major differences between the Ashkenazic and Sephardic liturgy is the timing for the recitation of the *birkat kohanim*. While Ashkenazic custom proscribes that the *kohanim* perform the blessing only on holidays, Sephardic custom indicates that the blessing be performed daily. In Israel it is also customary to perform the *birkat kohanim* every morning. Schoenberg, Shira, "The Amidah," *Jewish Virtual Library*. <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Judaism/amidah.htm>; Wenger, Eliezer, "The Laws of the Priestly Blessing," *Chabad*. http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/261104/jewish/The-Laws-of-the-Priestly-Blessing.htm.

³ Kohler, Kaufmann; Philipson, David & Cohen, Francis L., "Blessing, Priestly," *The Jewish Encyclopedia*. <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/view.jsp?letter=B&artid=1137>.

The tented shawls, the downcast gazes, shield the community from the inevitable psychological contortions that easily transform a blessing into an act that underscores the hierarchy between blesser and blessed. The benediction is therefore given and received blindly: The *kohanim* cannot see those upon whom they confer God's blessing and the congregation cannot identify the priests who have done so. Rather than simply *given* or *received*, the blessing is instead *resident* within a community of both givers and receivers. The heavy presence of this shared blessing, I would proffer, helps explain the palpable mystery that is experienced as *kohanim* and congregation emerge together from beneath their shawls.

The aspiration to draw forth the shared blessing resident within a community is a defining feature of the posture taken by organizations, such as AJWS, in their pursuit of global development and justice through grassroots work. Grassroots work means facilitating change that is realized from within the community that seeks it. The goal is not to achieve blessing via the roles of priest and congregant, blesser and blessed. Rather, it is to discover together the blessing that already lives there—forged by a community's own needs, developed according to its own vision, and pursued via the methods it itself identifies.

Of course, the cultivated blindness of the *birkat kohanim* is in many ways an illusion. We are shielded from the priests' faces, but we know their identities from other liturgical encounters—such as the calling of the *kohanim* to the Torah—that are plainly public. Through these encounters there is thus an already-intact hierarchy of ritual status, in which *kohanim* are separated and elevated from the congregation of Israel. In the moment of blessing, however, we invoke the illusion of blindness—choosing to shed, or at least mask, the hierarchical relationship that is elsewhere respected.

We strive to cultivate similar illusions in pursuing global justice through grassroots work. Inevitably, there are power imbalances between those who give and those who receive aid and assistance. But through grassroots engagement we gesture toward blindness. We pull our shawls over our heads and turn our eyes downward in an effort to undo the hierarchy between giver and receiver, to render ourselves both recipients and givers of blessing.

May it be God's will that when we emerge from beneath our shawls, we—givers and recipients alike—find our global community rife with blessing: guarded from harm, infused with grace and joyful in its peace.



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AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author.

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