**Parashat Naso – 2**

**(Middle Portion in Triennial Cycle)**

**B’midbar (Numbers) 5:11 to 6:27**

***Eitz Hayim* 796; Plaut 1051; Hertz 588**

This is the second time that I have prepared a d’var on Parashat Naso with emphasis on the priestly blessings that appear near the end of the oral Amidah in most Jewish siddurim. I could have just repeated what I said in 2015, but I found an excellent, new source of information. That source is a book by the late Rabbi Reuven Bulka that was published shortly after his death and that brings together a collection of otherwise unpublished material. Typical chapters are, “Choose Life or Choose Good,” “Fixing Tikkun Olam,” and, what is most relevant to my d’var, “The Wonderfully Enigmatic Priestly Blessing.” Indeed, I want this d’var to be a tribute to Rabbi Bulka, someone for whom I had increasing regard no matter whether we agreed or disagreed on some issue, and someone who made contacts for me in the Jewish communities of Beirut and Damascus when my professional work with IDRC took me to Lebanon and Syria.

First, I will present an introduction to the priestly blessings, taken from my 2015 d’var:

Ignoring two short verses of introduction and one of conclusion, the priestly blessing consists of three verses in B’midbar / Numbers (6: 24, 25, and 26) that we all know well:

 *The Lord bless you and safeguard you.*

*The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you.*

*The Lord bestow favour upon you and grant you peace.*

Structurally, the three verses Increase from 3 to 5 to 7 words, and from 15 to 20 to 25 letters. The grammar is also systematic. Each verse begins with a verb in the future tense. The second word is the tetragrammaton, that is yud-hey-vav-hey, as a substitute for God’s name. And the third either is or leads to a verb.

24: verb + tetra. + verb

25: verb + tetra. + object + pronoun + verb

26: verb + tetra. + object + pronoun + verb + pronoun + object

During 1st Temple times, this blessing was only said in the Temple, but during 2d Temple times it was also said by priests in the synagogue attached to the Temple. Thus, it was an easy step to accommodate it to any synagogue service after the Temple was destroyed. Today, it is repeated in most Conservative congregations when there is an oral repetition of the Amidah. The same words can also be said at other times--as a benediction that closes the service, or at weddings, and bnai mitzvah services. However, only in the oral repetition of the Amidah does the congregation collectively confirm that it hears the blessing with the words: *Ken yhi ratzon* ( ). *Eitz Hayim* notes (802; note to Appendix) that the Hebrew wording has not changed since at least the 7th century BCE, a rare example of pre-exilic Judaism surviving into the modern era.

Returning to Rabbi Bulka’s book, most of his chapter titles have a subtitle. In this case the subtitle is, “A Conduit to Ahavat Yisrael.” Those added words throw one right into a dilemma from the fact that, as R. Bulka says, “the *kohanim* are obligated to *generate* the blessing on all Israel.” He then goes on to explain (109): “I use the word ‘generate’ deliberately since it is not the *kohanim* who bless Israel; it is God who blesses Israel. . . . The difficulty in this exercise is beyond obvious. . . If God wants to bless Israel, if Israel needs or deserves God’s blessing, “why does not God simply go and do just that—bless Israel?”

From that opening, R. Bulka goes on to suggest more questions: How do we show that we are worthy of such a blessing? Why must we entreat the blessing? Why do we need the kohanim’s assistance? And, if those questions are not enough, what about the blessing itself (112)? “The words are nice but appear somewhat repetitive, and their meanings are not clear.” For example, in the first blessing, what does the word “safeguard” add? If something is blessed, is it not also safeguarded? As for the second blessing, what exactly happens when God “shines” on us, and what does it add to being gracious to us? And, finally, what does the third blessing add to the first two? Rabbi Bulka treats answers to most of the questions quickly. For example, the added words of introduction are meant to indicate that (112), “the words are not to be pronounced hurriedly or hastily but instead . . . devoutly and with a full heart.”

When dealing with the three blessings, Rabbi Bulka turns to Rashi mainly because he likes to review our most revered commentators with views that are different from the norm. As for the first blessing, Rashi does not seem to be bothered and does not see any overlap between “blessing” and “safeguard.” In contrast, Rabbi Bulka suggests that the two words imply that the blessing has a twofold meaning (114): “that one be worthy of receiving the blessing and also worthy of maintaining that very blessing.” The second blessing is given a boost in the form of its permanence so that it is not just given to you but becomes a part of your lifestyle; for example, you do not just do kind things; you become a kind person. The third blessing requires even more imagination. The answer is as unconventional as it is necessary because blessings can bring out the best in us, or they can bring out the worst. Therefore, the third blessing must implicitly be as follows (115): “May God conquer (or suppress) God’s anger.” Rather than deal harshly with people who do not fully live up to the spirit of God’s blessing, God should (116), “instead grant them tranquility or calm so that their wealth does not destroy them.”

Even when he is near the end of his essay on the priestly blessing, Rabbi Bulka is not through with celebrating its “wonderfully enigmatic” qualities. He points out that the *b’arakhah* is mostly what we would expect but, uniquely compared with all other *b’arakhoth*, adds the word, *b’ahavah* (with love). In other words, the entire Jewish community is loved by God, and God wants us to know the reality of that love. Rabbi Bulka’s own final words end by advising us (119): “That we have to work hard to get beyond the superficial to uncover the true essence, . . . “

I feel more than a bit chutzpedic in leaving Rabbi Bulka’s book to conclude with some of my own thoughts about the priestly blessing. As indicated above, the blessings come from God and their object is the Jewish people. Unfortunately, this distinction between roles creates its own theological problem. It seems to imply a cause-and-effect relationship: Jews recite the threefold benediction, and then God then sends down the blessing. According to the clearly troubled Rabbi Plaut (1066)[[1]](#footnote-1):

This appears to suggest that the threefold blessing has special qualities in that it forces the hand of God: a human word, delivered by the right person in the right manner, will call forth a predictable divine response. . . .

R. Plaut does recognize that statements similar to the Birkhat Hacohanim appear in almost all religions, and also appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, as with the blessings that Isaac and Jacob give to their children. He criticizes them, as follows:

Not only is the borderline of religious magic uncomfortably close, but the assumptions of permanent special status in relationship to God are difficult to accept.

As a result of his concerns, R. Plaut argues that we must not think of the three verses of the priestly blessing as statement or as invocation, but rather as prayer. They reflect our aspirations, our hopes, but without any assurance that they will be fulfilled. Plaut suggests that we should understand the words in the same way as the common expression, The Lord be with you really means ***May*** the Lord be with you.

Even with this change of perspective, the Birkhat Hacohanim is still powerful. In many ways the words are sanctified by their poetry, and by 2-1/2 millennia of tradition. Of course, God may or may not respond positively, according to criteria that we have no way of understanding, which is why our response to each of the three blessings is appropriately modest: *Ken yhi ratzon* May it be your (*i.e*., Gods) wish. As Jews, we do not assume the blessing but rather hope for it.

Shabbat shalom, and may our thoughts about Rabbi Bulka be for a blessing,

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)