

There is this guy, a real Shlemazel, let's call him Hayyim Yankel, who loves to go to the track and bet on horses, but he never wins. One day he was losing as usual, and he noticed a priest step out onto the track and bless the forehead of one of the horses. Lo and behold, this horse -- a very long shot -- won the race.

Hayyim Yankel kept his eye on that priest. Sure enough, as the horses for the next race lined up, the priest stepped out onto the track and placed a blessing on the forehead of one of the horses. He made a beeline for the window and placed a small bet on the horse. Again, even though another long shot, the horse the priest had blessed won the race.

Hayyim Yankel collected his winnings and anxiously waited to see which horse the priest bestowed his blessing on for the 6th race. The priest showed, blessed a horse, he bet on it, and it won! He was elated.

On the last race of the day, Hayyim Yankel went to the ATM, withdrew all the money he could, and awaited the priest's blessing that would tell him which horse to bet on. True to his pattern, the priest stepped out onto the track before the last race and blessed the forehead, eyes, ears, and hooves of one of the horses.

Hayyim Yankel bet every cent, and watched the horse stagger in last, falling down dead at the finish line. He was dumbfounded. He went in search of the priest, and when he found the priest, he demanded, "What happened? All day I watched you blessing the horses, and every single one of them won. The last race, I saw you bless the horse, and he lost! Now, thanks to you, I've lost my savings!!"

The priest nodded and said, "That's the problem with you Jews ... you can't tell the difference between a simple blessing and the Last Rites."

It's true - we Jews do use the term blessing for a dizzyingly wide array of things. We use the term blessing for a prayer expressing gratitude for food, wonder over natural phenomena such as a rainbow, a mediative intention before doing a mitzvah like putting on a tallit or lighting holiday candles, or any number of ways to praise or describe God.

I want to talk about blessing today, going back to the basics of a very simple blessing. When someone sneezes, we might reflexively say "God bless," or Livriyut, both of which are simple blessings, calling upon God to send blessing or protection. The simplest, most powerful form of blessing is what we do when we invoke God's name to wish protection, health, tranquility, wholeness, security, and peace upon another person.

The Torah, in Numbers 6:22-26, describes such a blessing:

"YHWH spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and to his sons, saying: Thus are you to bless the Children of Israel; say to them: **May YHWH bless you and protect you! May YHWH shine his face upon you and favor you! May YHWH lift up his face toward you and grant you shalom!**

בְּרַכָּהּ יי וַיִּשְׁמְרֶהָ: יָאֵר יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנֶּנְךָ: יִשָּׂא יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

The final focus of the blessing is on the word Shalom. Many of our prayers contain or conclude with a prayer for Shalom, which I like to think is the most powerful and important prayer and blessing. The new Mahzor that we are using this year takes its name from a Biblical and liturgical phrase for ideal worship based on the word Shalom. Lev Shalem is a whole heart.

Judaism does not believe that anyone has a perfect heart, because no human being is perfect. We can, however, be whole-hearted. When we devote ourselves to a relationship, to a task, or to

God, we can bring ourselves fully to the task or the relationship, reveal ourselves with all our flaws to our spouse or partner, and be shalem, whole. We are never perfect, but we can be genuine.

The fundamental blessing of Jewish tradition, then, asks God to bless us with Shalom - to make us whole, genuine, human beings. Historically, this blessing has been a central focus of the service. In Israel, near the end of the Amidah, the Kohanim are called up every Shabbat to bless the congregation. Outside of Israel, this happens only on Festivals. Today, for the first time in perhaps 65 years, we are going to invite Kohanim to bless the congregation.

They'll stand in front of the Ark, covered with their tallitot. You won't be able to see this, but their hands will form two letters Shin. You know the story of Leonard Nimoy, Star Trek, and the split fingered Vulcan salutation, right? The letter shin stands for Shalom. Notice, by the way, the significance of that letter in our tradition, how a shin is woven into the Menora wall sculpture on the right side of the Bima. The three branches on the right form a shin, as do the three branches on the left, and the whole thing - the two sides and the center - also form a shin. The letter shin is also part of the depiction of the burning bush on the ark itself - there are three flames on the left side and two on the right side, forming two letters Shin as the three and four branched letters Shin on the Tefillin that we tie to our arms, the total number of branches adding up to seven, the number representing the completeness of creation.

65 years ago, Ahavas Israel made a decision to remove the Priestly blessing from the service. We don't know exactly why - the synagogue may have wanted to modernize the service, and the idea of the Priestly blessing may have seemed archaic or uncomfortably magical. They might have been uncomfortable being blessed by priests -- I'll address this idea in a moment -- or the Kohanim themselves may have been uncomfortable standing in front of the congregation and pronouncing words of blessing.

As we restore this part of the ancient service as instructed by God in Numbers, the first thing to remember is that the Kohanim are not really doing the blessing. The passage from numbers ends with, "... they are to put my name upon the Children of Israel, that **I myself may bless them**, וַאֲנִי אֶבְרַכְכֶם." The blessing comes not from the Kohanim, but rather from God. The Kohanim serve merely as channels for the blessing. They are selected by the power of their ancestral connection to the loving nature of Aaron, who our tradition describes as "loving peace and pursuing peace, loving all beings and drawing them near to Torah, אֵהָב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם אֵהָב, אֵת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמִקְרָבָן לְתוֹרָה" (Avot 1:12) While they ought to be people of good character, respected by the community who show devotion to the community, the actual blessing that they give comes from God. The Torah didn't appoint a charismatic or powerful leader like Moses or Joshua to give the blessing. This is to deemphasize the human role in blessing, and stress the Divine role instead.

Another way we focus on the idea that the blessing comes from God, rather than from the Kohanim, is through the custom of covering ourselves with our Tallit or looking downward, so we are not looking at the Kohanim during Birkat Kohanim. The Kohanim are under their Tallitot, unable to see us, and we are not looking at them. Nevertheless, we are still to face the kohanim and receive the blessing as given "like a friend to a friend." The effect of the posture and choreography is that we are invited to imagine that the blessing truly is coming from God.

Here's what will happen. At a certain point in the repetition of the Amidah, the Kohanim will briefly leave the Sanctuary along with a Levi, who will help them wash their hands. When we are almost at the end of the repetition, the Kohanim will come up to the Bima and stand in front of the Ark. When it is time for the blessing, both we and they will be standing, just as service in the Temple was done while standing. The Kohanim will begin by reciting their own blessing to prepare, concluding with the words, *Asher Kidshanu b'kedushato shel Aharon v'tzivanu levarech et Amo Yisrael B'ahava*, "who sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron, and commanded us to bless God's people Israel with love."

The foundation of the Priestly Blessing is love. The Zohar teaches (III 147b): "any priest who does not love the people, or who is not beloved by them must not spread his hands to bless the people, as Scripture says: 'One who sees all with goodness shall be blessed (*tov ayin hu yevorakh*)' (Prov. 22:9) – A midrash suggests, do not read 'shall be blessed' but 'shall bless (*hu yevarekh*).'" One who sees all with goodness, he or she has the power to bless.¹

The Kohanim will lift up their hands, and repeat the blessing word for word after the Hazzan. Birkat Kohanim is sometimes known as *nesi'at kapayim*, the lifting of the hands. Hands signify the work that we do in the world. They are symbolic of our efforts and our potential. Hands symbolize whatever we do best in the world, our fundamental quality. When they lift their hands, kohanim are drawing upon Aaron's fundamental quality to spread love over the congregation.

The blessing is always done in Hebrew, as God said in Number, "כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ," "thus will you bless," another way to stress that the blessing comes from God - it is done in the original sacred language given to us by God, not in a translation.

Each word is sacred - the Hazzan says a word, the Kohanim repeat it. The pace is careful and deliberate and thoughtful. We don't rush the blessing. The Kohanim do not begin to say a word until the hazzan has finished saying it. After each phrase, the congregation responds Amen - and we have to make sure that the Kohanim have completed the phrase before we jump in with the Amen. The Hazzan should not begin to say the next part until we have finished saying "Amen."

And when the blessing is concluded, our hope is that a feeling of shalom descends over us. As the service at this point draws to a conclusion, and as we prepare to leave the synagogue and go back to our homes, we hope that the sense of peace and blessedness remains with us and inspires us to noble living. May God bless us with protection, favor, and peace. Let us say, Amen.

1. from **NETIVOT SHALOM** (trans. Institute for Jewish Spirituality), Shemini s.v. *vayisa aharon et yadav el ha'am vayevarkhem* (pg. 41)