



To Be a Blessing • Parshat Naso

I was recently in a small store and overheard the clerk speaking Hebrew to a man at the register. The customer bought nothing but then gave the clerk a lengthy blessing for long life, good health, happiness with his family, and financial success. I asked in Hebrew if this came with every purchase and how I could get this special blessing for myself. When the customer left, the clerk turned to me and said, “This man has lost everything and came to ask me for work. I try my best to help him.” When I asked about the blessing, he responded softly, “He is a *cohen* [a priest]. The only thing I could give him today was the opportunity to bless me so that he can help me.”

I felt tears welling up. This clerk understood how to equalize a relationship of charitable giver and receiver by giving this man a sense of dignity through the instrument of a blessing. It was a magnificently tender moment of grace, one that made me think about the power of giving a blessing. How wonderful it would be if every time we felt blessed, we blessed others. And here, this unfortunate man who did not feel blessed was, nevertheless, willing to bless someone else.

The exchange made me think of the scene in Genesis when Jacob encountered Pharaoh and gave him a blessing on the way in and the way out of Pharaoh’s chambers (Gen 47:7-10). Jacob was a man broken. His homeland Canaan was in a crippling famine, but Jacob maintained his self-respect and self-worth by giving Pharaoh what he

did still have: the capacity to bless. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his book *Celebrating Life* explains what this important impulse can do: “Making a blessing over life is the best way of turning life into a blessing.”

In fact, it is this that God commanded Abraham to do in the first act of revelation Abraham received: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse the one who curses you; And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you” (Gen. 12:2-3). God blessed Abraham with the expectation that Abraham would become a blessing, give his blessings to others, and establish a nation which would be a blessing to the world. God articulated an endgame; founding a nation is insufficient. Abraham and those who followed him would only succeed if he and they were regarded as a blessing by others. This was essential to his leadership. For Rabbi Sacks, giving a blessing and being a blessing was an important theme in his work. In “We Are What We Do Not Own” (*Behar*, Covenant & Conversation), he wrote, “In life, ask not ‘what can I gain?’ but ‘what can I give?’ Be a blessing to others and you will find that life has been a blessing to you.”

When we turn to our parsha, *Naso*, we find the blessing that the priests gave to Israel: “God spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus, shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

God bless you and protect you!

God deal kindly and graciously with you!

God bestow [divine] favor upon you and grant you peace!

Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:22-27).

Rabbi Yishmael, one of the great sages of the Talmud, reviewed one of the verses in this passage, “You shall bless the children of Israel.” He asked if the priests bless the people, who blesses the priests? To answer, he cited a verse later in the same chapter: “And they shall put My name upon the children of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num. 6:27). He concludes from this verse that just as the priests bless Israel, does “the Holy One, Blessed be He, bless the priests” (BT *Hullin* 49a). Everyone deserves and needs to give and receive blessings.

Many parents give their children this very same blessing every Friday night. Blessing our children and grandchildren is one of the highlights of my week, almost a culmination of what all of the work of the week and the blessing of Shabbat is leading me to: blessing our children and helping them see the blessing they should be to others. Wherever we or our children are in the world, we try not to miss this special ritual that brings us together and also links us all the way back to this week’s Torah reading. Sometimes guests in our home for Shabbat who do not have this custom or do not know Hebrew say, “I wish we had this family custom.” My response is always the same, “Now’s a great time to start.” In person. On the phone. It may be awkward at first but as with any practice, it gets easier over time. And it only takes a few minutes. Hebrew, English, Spanish, French – it

doesn’t matter. It’s a Jewish language of love.

Priests are spiritual leaders. Parents are leaders in their families. There are leaders in corporate and non-profit life, in intellectual life, in politics, and in houses of worship. All need to be a blessing, to be blessed, and to give blessings. The Irish poet John O’Donohue (1956-2008) wrote of the blessings leaders need in his poem “For a Leader.” I want to share a few stanzas:

May you have the grace and wisdom

To act kindly, learning

To distinguish between what is

Personal and what is not

May you be hospitable to criticism.

May you never put yourself at the centre of things.

May you act not from arrogance but out of service.

May you work on yourself..

May you learn to cultivate the art of presence

In order to engage with those who meet you.

When someone fails or disappoints you,

May the graciousness with which you engage

Be their stairway to renewal and refinement...

May you have good friends

To mirror your blind spots.

May leadership be for you

A true adventure of growth.

**So, what’s the best blessing you have received?
What’s the best blessing you’ve ever given?**