

TORAH TABLE TALK – *PIRKE AVOT*

Shalom: The Sum of all Blessings

Parshat Naso, Leviticus 4:21 -7:89

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

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Midway through *Parshat Naso* we find some of the best known words in the *Torah*: the priestly benediction. These three simple phrases have become the refrain of Jew and Christian clergy alike. On Shabbat Jewish parents bless their children with these words. And in Israel, people who are of priestly descent continue to publicly bless the community daily with these words.

It is no accident that the final word of the priestly blessing is *shalom*. *Shalom* is considered the greatest of all blessings; it is referred to in rabbinic literature as a “blessed vessel.” Prayer must end with *shalom*, and the greatest of all pursuits is the pursuit of peace, as we see in *Pirke Avot*. The sages rhapsodize endlessly about the greatness of peace. Elsewhere in *Pirke Avot* we are told that the world endures on account of three things: justice, truth and peace. And when justice and truth conflict with peace, peace apparently takes precedence, as we see below!

Shalom is more than an absence of war. It is often pointed out that the word comes from *shelaymut*, wholeness or perfection. Dr. Avi Ravitzky writes that *shalom*, “ranges over several spheres and can refer in different contexts to bounteous physical conditions, to a moral value, and, ultimately, to a cosmic principle and divine attribute.” But we are left to wonder why the priestly benediction is found here in the midst of *Parshat Naso*. What does its context tell us about the blessing of peace?

Pirke Avot 1:12 Hillel said: Be a disciple of Aaron: loving peace and pursuing peace, loving your fellow creatures and bringing them closer to the Torah.

Sources

Numbers 6:22-27

The Lord spoke to Moses: speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them: May Adonai bless you and protect you! May Adonai deal kindly and graciously with you! May Adonai bestow favor upon you and grant you Shalom!

Bemidbar Rabbah 11:7

Rabbi Levi said: Peace is precious, for the blessings [following the Shema and the blessing of the *Amidah*] conclude with peace. Then, too, the priests' blessing ends with "The Lord give thee peace" (Num. 6:26), by way of saying that none of the blessings avail at all unless peace is with them.

...Rabbi Ishmael said: Great is peace, for we find that the Holy One allowed His Name, which is written in sanctity, can be erased by water in order to bring peace between husband and wife. Great is peace. For the sake of peace, the Holy One changed the words a person uttered, as when the angel quoted Sarah as having said, "Shall I of a surety bear a child, who am old?" (Sarah originally said her husband was old.)

Avot D'Rebbe Nathan Chapter 12

“Loving peace” What does this mean? It means that a man should love [to foster] peace in Israel between one person and another, just as Aaron loved [to foster] peace in Israel between one person and another, as is stated, "The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips; he walked with Me in peace and uprightness, and did turn away from iniquity" (Mal. 2:6).

R. Meir said: What is meant by "and did turn many away from iniquity"? Whenever Aaron walked along the road and met a wicked man, he would greet him warmly. On the following day, when that man was about to commit a transgression, he would say to himself: Woe is me! After doing this, how can I lift my eyes and look Aaron in the face? I would be ashamed before him, since he greeted me so warmly. Consequently, that man will hold himself back from transgression.

Similarly, when two people quarreled, Aaron would go and sit with one of them and say, "My son, see what your companion is doing! He beats his breast as he moans, 'Woe is me! How can I lift my eyes and look my companion in the face? I am shamed before him, since it is I who offended him.' "Aaron would sit with him

until he had removed all rancor from his heart. Then Aaron would go and sit with the other man and say likewise, "My son, see what your companion is doing! He beats his breast and moans, "Woe is me! How can I lift my eyes and look my companion in the face? I am ashamed before him, since it was I who offended him." Aaron would sit with him also until he had removed all rancor from his heart. Later, when the two met, they would embrace and kiss each other.

Commentary

At first glance the Priestly Benediction appears to be out of place. One would expect to find this passage in Leviticus, or at least a more prominent place in the Torah. Instead, we find it in between a passage dealing with the rules of the Nazirite and a list of offerings that were brought by the chieftains of the twelve tribes. The Priestly Benediction appears as an afterthought.

It could be that the Priestly Benediction appears here as a way of emphasizing the importance of the priesthood before we speak of the special honors given to the chieftains of Israel. The *Kohanim* were not commanded to bring special offerings as part of the dedication of the tabernacle like the chieftains. Their special honor would be to bless the people or at least to be a conduit for God's blessings. Still, the presence of the Priestly Benediction appears to be lost in this particular context.

We can begin to understand the role of the Priestly Benediction if we consider the role of community in the first part of Numbers. The opening section of Numbers defines community. The Israelites were organized in a cohesive, harmonious structure that emphasized that each person and tribe had its place and its own special role. Following this structure the Torah goes on to discuss those people whose actions or identity upset this basic harmony. The husband who suspected his wife of infidelity would undermine the basic structure of family; the *Nazir* who took on extreme forms of ascetic practice would create division and disharmony in the community. Even leaders, vying for recognition, could cause discord. The Priestly Benediction, then, was meant to serve as a means of restoring harmony in society. God's blessings were for all the people. And the culmination of the blessing was *shalom*, wholeness and harmony.

Our role in the world is to seek and pursue *shalom*: not just 'peace' but a harmonious working together of all human beings no matter how diverse they are. In the sources above, we see some of the diverse ways in which the sages understood *shalom*. *Shalom* is even more than these definitions suggest for it is part of the essence of God who brings *shalom* to the universe.

Questions to Ponder

1. What is the connection between the two meanings of the word *shalom*: peace and completeness?
2. How does 'bringing people closer to the Torah' help us to seek peace? Do you think this statement is meant specifically for Jewish people or for all people? Does living *Torah* promote peace?
3. The priestly benediction is made up of three phrases? What do they mean?
4. *Naso* contains the law of the *Sotah*, the suspected adulteress. If a husband suspected his wife of infidelity, he could force his wife to undergo a ritual in which words (containing the name of God) written in ink on a parchment were dissolved in water which the woman was made to drink. If she was innocent nothing would happen; if she was guilty the mixture would kill her. How does the statement above understand this ritual as a metaphor for peace? How do you feel about this ceremony? Do you think it is fair to the woman?
5. When angels tell Abraham that his wife would give birth, Sarah laughs at the prospect of her old husband impregnating her. God changes her words - he tells Abraham that she is the one who claims to be too old to get pregnant. Why? Are there times when a white lie is the appropriate course of action; if so when?
6. Aaron was willing to go to extremes to promote peace between people even if this meant lying or fooling people. What limits would you place on the pursuit of peace? Do you think that peace trumps justice and truth?

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