Nasso: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?



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The headcount of the Israelites is completed. God instructs Moses in the law of the Sotah, a wife suspected of being unfaithful to her husband, as well as in the law of the Nazir, a person who takes an oath of piety, forgoes wine, lets his or her hair grow long, and avoids contact with dead bodies. Aaron and his descendants, the Kohanim, or priests, are shown how to bless the people, and the parsha concludes by counting the identical offerings brought by the leaders of each tribe, repeating each in detail to show that **each matters individually**.

" May God bless you and watch over you. May God shine His face to you and endow you with grace. May God be partial toward you and grant you peace.”"

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha contains the priestly blessing parents recite as they hold their hands on their children's heads each Friday night: "May God bless you and watch over you. May God shine His face to you and endow you with grace. May God be partial toward you and grant you peace."

But to truly understand this seminal blessing, we must look at its placement in the parsha. It arrives right as Moses finishes erecting the Mishkan, or God's temporary dwelling place on earth. The Hebrew word the Torah uses to mark the conclusion of this work is *kalot*. And that, Rashi explains, is an interesting choice, because *kallah* is also Hebrew for bride. "On the day the Mishkan was erected," Rashi explains, "the Israelites were like a bride entering the nuptial canopy," or chuppah.

And this is the theme of the entire parsha right there: Love.

"If there is peace between a husband and a wife," the Talmud tells us, "the *Shechinah* dwells between them." **The Divine Presence, then, can only dwell in the world if the Jewish people love each other**, which means not merely the absence of strife but real, deep care and empathy. "Peace," the 15th century Spanish Rabbi Isaac Arama wrote, "is the thread of grace issuing from Him, may He be exalted, stringing together all beings, supernal, intermediate, and lower. It underlies and sustains the reality and unique existence of each."

Which is why the Sages instituted a blessing over *Birkat Kohanim* like no other: "Blessed are You… who has made us holy with the holiness of Aaron and has commanded us to bless His people Israel with love." No other mitzvah speaks of love! Why this one? And aren't we commanded to fulfil all mitzvot with love?

The late Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks explained this is because the *Kohanim* aren't really doing anything when they bless the people; they're merely channeling God's love for us. They are being selfless, and selflessness is the source and essence of true love. To bless and be blessed is to love and be loved, and bring great joy and new life into this world.

The power of the priestly blessing, then, is reassuring each one of us that **God is looking out for us**, specifically, and that **we're not just another face in the crowd, unnoticed and unloved**.

"Faith," Rabbi Sacks wrote, "means that I believe that God cares about me. I am here because He wanted me to be… That is the most profound inner source of peace. We do not need to prove ourselves in order to receive a blessing from God. All we need to know is that His face is turned toward us. When we are at peace with ourselves, we can begin to make peace with the world." Amen to that.

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