

Naso 2016

Richard Wolfe

One of the pleasures I take from the few times I have given a Drosch is in deciding which part of the Parshah I will concentrate on.

This week was no different. The task was somewhat easier in that the opening and ending cover those areas which are easily dismissed. They cover endless repetitions; being the census of the Gershonites, from the age of 30 to 50, and their tasks in respect of the tabernacle, and then the Merarites in nearly identical terms and then the Levites. And the last portions, from Numbers 7:1 to 7:89, all 89 verses describe in mind numbing details and total repetition the offerings of each tribe, for each day after the tabernacle was set up. For example:

On the sixth day, the chieftain was of the sons of Gad, Eliasaph the son of De'uel.
His offering was one silver bowl weighing one hundred and thirty [shekels], one silver sprinkling basin [weighing] seventy shekels according to the holy shekel, both filled with fine flour mixed with olive oil for a meal offering.
One spoon [weighing] ten [shekels] of gold filled with incense.
One young bull, one ram and one lamb in its first year for a burnt offering.
One young he goat for a sin offering.
And for the peace offering: two oxen, five rams, five he goats, five lambs in their first year; this was the offering of Eliasaph the son of De'uel.

And then for each tribe. Whether the Torah was given by God on Mount Sinai or is written by man and is divinely inspired the obvious question is why there is such repetition going on and on. The Torah is so full with words of such import, then why would the author so burden us with passages such as these. I have no idea, perhaps others know, and that can be the topic of another drosch.

The second part of Naso is somewhat better. The message is simpler and an historical perspective of life in the camp, how to keep the camp ritually and physically pure, how to ensure it remains holy, how to restore a transgressor to the community. Life in the camp, with such a large number in a confined area, must have been difficult, and we can see in a relatively simple context how this was handled. Adultery is a sin of the highest order and we are being reminded of this immediately after Shavuot and the giving of the ten commandments, and it would be interesting to look more deeply at the ordeal which a woman (and not a man) had to go through to prove her innocence. The Mishnah and the Talmud look at this extensively and the ordeal is problematic, can a husband force God to make known the truth, we should not rely on miracles and so on.

I was somewhat tempted to look in depth at the vows of the Nazarite, the next part of the Parshah. There is something about fanaticism or at least taking things to the extreme which in general appeals to me but when I saw that the next five verses included the priestly blessings, the Birkat Kohanim, then my decision was easy.

No doubt most here, if not all, will know far more about this than me but without wishing to be too selfish this was going to be an ideal opportunity for me to learn more and hopefully impart

something new.

A poem does not have to be long and to me the three verses of the Birkat Kohanim are poetry of the highest order. Hertz called it “the crown and the seal of the whole sacred order”.

It is among the oldest of all prayer texts. It was used by the priests in the Temple. It is said today by the cohanim in the reader’s repetition of the Amidah, in Israel every day, in most of the Diaspora only on festivals. It is used by parents as they bless their children on Friday night. It is often said to the bride and groom under the *chuppah*. It is the simplest and most beautiful of all blessings.

In it lies the simple and precise structure of the three verses.

The first blessing consists of 3 words, the second 5 words and the third consists of the 7 words. These are said to remind us of the foundation of all blessings, the three Patriarchs (or alternatively the three attributes of God, being Mercy, Courage and Glory), the five books of Moses and the seven heavens, (as in the Talmud and the second book of Enoch). The first blessing has 15 letters, the second 25 and the third 35, making 60 in total. 60 being the basis of the sexagesimal system of Babylon. The second word in each blessing is “The Lord”. This precise structure reminds me of Japanese Haiku which consist of 17 syllables in three phrases of 5, 7, and 5, or the structure of English Sonnets.

Just as the three verses expand in length they expand in the depth of their plea, building up to a crescendo.

יְבָרֶכֶךָ יְהוָה, וְיִשְׁמְרֶכָּךְ

May the LORD bless you and guard you –

Bless you with what? With material wealth. And guard you against what? Against the evil which may result from prosperity. Guard us against the possessions possessing us. May the Lord guard you,” - may God protect you from the blessing turning into a curse.

יְאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וְיַחַנְּנֶךָ

May the LORD make His face shed light upon you and be gracious unto you–

A higher level, a spiritual one, a moral blessing.

שָׁא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וְיָשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

May the LORD lift up His face unto you and give you peace

Peace, the greatest blessing of all. The only reward Abraham received was ‘peace’. Peace is a pillar of the world. Maimonides writes that the whole Torah was given to make peace in the world

The priestly blessings are all in the singular, emphasizing that God blesses us not always collectively but also individually.

So the blessings become both longer and more profound: from the external blessing of material goods to the inter-personal blessing of grace between ourselves and others, to the most inward of them, the peace that comes when we feel that God sees us and hears us.

And I quote R Sacks - "Protection, grace, peace – these are God's blessings, communicated by the priests. We are what we pray for. If you seek to understand a people, look at its prayers. The Jewish people did not ask for wealth or power. They did not hunger after empire. They had no desire to conquer or convert the world. They asked for protection, the right to live true to themselves without fear; for grace, the ability to be an agent for good in others; and peace, that fullness of being in which each of us brings our individual gifts to the common good. That is all our ancestors prayed for, and it is still all we need."

The Birkat Kohanim is one of the oldest, if not the oldest Jewish blessing. In 6.22 Moses says to Aaron "Thus you shall bless the people of Israel) and so the blessing was recited by the priests of the 2nd and most likely the 1st temple, the descendants of Aaron.

It is known in rabbinic literature as the raising of the hands (nesiat kapayim). The blessing was given on a raised platform, a dukhan, and so the blessing is also known as Dukhanem.

In the synagogue there are rules on who can give the blessing:-

- Male Kohanim over 13 and all kohanim

- Minyan

- A Kohen who is drunk or on bad terms with his congregation or does not wish to give the blessing should not give it

- The prayer leader should not be a Kohen

- Congregants often cover their heads and do not look at the Kohanim.

- Raising the hands, the nesiat kapayim, to form Shin which is an emblem of Shaddai. The hands are covered, as tradition states the Divine Presence would shine through the fingers of the priests as they blessed the people, and no one was allowed to look at this out of respect for God.

The blessing is recited by Jewish parents to bless their children on Friday night before the beginning of the Shabbat meal. Rabbis will say the blessing to a boy at his bar mitzvah or to a girl at her bat mitzvah.

Catholics have used this blessing since the first centuries CE, Anglican , Lutherans, Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Morgan Freeman and of course Leonard Nimroy, also known as Spock on Star Trek for his use of this widely-known symbol.

Finally there is no doubt on its ancient and widespread usage. In 1979, in a minor archaeological dig outside the walls of Jerusalem, a 13 year old volunteer unearthed a treasure trove of ancient artifacts. Amongst them was a purplish-coloured object that resembled a cigarette butt and after further analysis, the experts realized it was a tiny rolled up silver scroll. This and another scroll turned out to be amulets made of silver, engraved with the Birkat Kohanim. It is the oldest surviving fragment of biblical literature. It comes from the era of the First Temple, built by King Solomon. It is so old that it is not written in the Hebrew alphabet as we recognise today, which dates from the Babylonian exile, but rather in the ancient Semitic script, the first alphabet known to mankind. What moves us and what we recite today moved us and was recited 2,700 years ago.