

SPEAK IT OUT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Naso contains Birkas Kohanim, the Priestly Blessings (6:22-27). Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: So shall you bless the Children of Israel, say to them: 'May Hashem bless you and guard you. May Hashem illuminate His face toward you. May Hashem show you favor, and grant you peace.'"

Mefarshim (commentaries) note that the phrase "say to them" appears to be superfluous. The Torah could simply have said, "So shall you bless the Children of Israel: 'May Hashem bless you...'"

Rashi addresses this phrase, but it's not clear that his comment answers the question, nor is it clear exactly what he means to say at all:

"Say (emor) to them" - It's similar to 'remember (zachor)' and 'safeguard (shamor).'

Rashi seems to be noting the similarity of the verb form in our verse, "say," to similar verbs found in the Ten Commandments with regard to keeping Shabbos, "remember" and "safeguard." What is the significance of this comparison? Generally, Rashi wouldn't compare verbs unless there was something significant missing in the simple translation which is illuminated by the comparison.

The famous tzaddik R' Hersh Kohen zt"l was also known as R' Hersh Meshamesh, R' Hersh the beadle. This was because R' Hersh did not descend from an illustrious line of tzaddikim, and prided himself mainly in that he was the personal attendant of the holy R' Mendele Mi-Rimanov. In truth, R' Hersh was a tremendous tzaddik on his own accord, and the fact that he chose to identify himself as the humble servant of R' Mendele was due to his extreme humility, and R' Mendele's fine sense for true piety.

As a young man, R' Hersh so desired to serve R' Mendele that he would beg his then-meshamesh to allow him a turn - just once - to lay R' Mendele's bed. It happened one day that the meshamesh was in a big rush, so he turned to R' Hersh and asked him if he would mind taking over and laying the rebbe's bed. When R' Mendele came to his room some time later, he immediately sensed something was amiss, and asked the meshamesh who made his bed (the meshamesh was under strict instructions that no one but him should lay the rebbe's bed). He tried to avoid the issue, but eventually R' Mendele got it out of him; it was Hershel. "From now on," R' Mendele said, "only R' Hersh may touch my bed." After R' Mendele died in 5575 (1815), his disciples begged R' Hersh, who - despite his humble position as meshamesh, not unlike Yehoshua bin Nun, was widely recognized as a great and holy tzaddik - to take the reins of leadership. In his humility, he declined, and spent the

next 12 years in the courts of other chassidic greats, primarily the holy R' Naftoli of Ropshitz, before ultimately returning to Rimanov to accept the leadership of R' Mendele's orphaned flock.

It was during this period that, one Shabbos, R' Hersh found himself in Vishnitsa (a village in Galicia, not to be confused with Vizhnitz) at the court of the holy Aryeh Leib, also known as the Aryeh D'Bei Ilei. It was parshas Naso, and R' Aryeh Leib turned to R' Hersh and asked him if he had any thoughts on the above Rashi, which has puzzled many Torah giants throughout history.

"In fact, I do," he said.

"One week, when I was serving the holy rebbe, R' Mendele, it happened that there was no fish for Shabbos. All the stores had already closed - not that it mattered, because there was no money with which to pay for fish, which was very expensive at the time, anyway. But Shabbos without fish was out of the question. I knew that somehow or another we would have fish for Shabbos, but it was getting very late and time was running out to cook it up (this was before Chicken of the Sea was invented). 'Rebbe,' I said, 'there is no fish for Shabbos, yet.'

"Indeed,' he said. 'We must do something about that. Take a pot and fill it with water and begin cooking it up on the flame. Chop up some onions, and carrots, and cook them up in the pot. Mostly, don't forget to say" lichvod Shabbos kodesh/in honor of the holy Shabbos" each step of the way.'

"I still didn't see where the fish was going to come from, but I didn't for a moment doubt the rebbe, and began cooking the pot and adding the vegetables and other ingredients, all the while saying lichvod Shabbos kodesh.

"As I was standing there over the pot, there was a commotion outside. I went to see - a wealthy chassid that unexpectedly decided to come to spend Shabbos with the rebbe had just arrived at the court. Unpacking his bags, he removed a large, fresh fish. 'I thought the rebbe might like some fresh fish for Shabbos,' he said. I quickly through the fish into the pot, and went to tell the rebbe about the 'miracle fish.'

"It's no miracle,' the rebbe told me. 'The Holy One, Blessed is He, prepares a beautiful Shabbos for every Jew - making sure we'll have everything we need both materially and spiritually. But it's up to us to open up and allow the Shabbos to come to us. All Heavenly blessings descend to earth through dibbur - speech. (The world was created with ten utterances, and since then, everything the world has to offer must descend through speech.) By verbally preparing for Shabbos, you brought about the blessing - and the fish arrived!'

"It was then," R' Hersh told the Aryeh D'bei Ilei, "that I understood the mysterious Rashi. Rashi was puzzled by the superfluous wording (as explained above) 'say to them.' Obviously the blessings are meant to be said! On the other hand, what is the point of these priestly blessings? If Hashem means to bless the Jews, can He not do so without the 'aid' of priestly blessings?

"But in fact one question addresses the other. Hashem created a world in which blessings and all

good are meant to come about through the power of dibbur - speech - be it prayer, blessings or the words of holy Torah study. Just like we find by Shabbos that endless blessings are ready and waiting to descend through the words with which we offer honor to Shabbos, so to Hashem's daily blessings for the Jews await the blessings of the holy Kohanim.

"This is Rashi's intention: Say to them - like 'remember' and 'safeguard.' Just like 'remember' and 'safeguard' - which allude to the blessings of Shabbos - must come about through our verbal preparations, so too the words of the Kohanim's blessings are the conduit through which Hashem's daily blessings descend to the Jews."

R' Aryeh Leib kissed R' Hersh Kohen on the head. "I had a feeling this Kohen would give me the true meaning of a Rashi about Birkas Kohanim!" Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright © 2009 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Torah.org](#)**