

PARSHAS NASO - THE BEIS HA-MIKDOSH IN A SOUND BITE

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The Beis Ha-Mikdosh in a Sound Bite¹

Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying: So shall you bless the Children of Israel, saying to them: "May Hashem bless you and safeguard you. May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you, and be gracious to you. May Hashem lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you." Let them place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them.

The last two of the three sentences of the Priestly Blessing might be considered multiple layers of icing on the cake. Most people would be ecstatic to receive the benefit of the first sentence alone. Looking at these pesukim more carefully, we learn that the three form a sophisticated sequence that sums up the goals and objectives of the Sanctuary. In a manner of speaking, the Priestly Blessing takes the Mikdosh and all it represents and turns it into a text message from G-d to Man.

The first line of Birkas Kohanim speaks of blessing and guarding. Hashem promises here to grant us something that will make us happy. They cannot have the desired effect, however, unless they are preserved for us, and guarded from mishaps. This beracha must refer to a gamut of bodily and material advantages, but freed and guarded from any material or spiritual defect.

Could anything be better? Certainly. Many who have had the benefit of those blessings still find themselves troubled and unsettled. The human spirit demands more than contentment. The second sentence speaks of Hashem shining His face on us, and being gracious. This shining means illumination, knowledge. Having all the blessing of the first sentence leaves a person unsatisfied, unless he understands both its purpose and how he can participate in achieving it. The text speaks not of Hashem, but of His face - where, as it were, G-d "looks to" in expectation that His goals be accomplished. His covenant with us requires that we become His instruments to get the job done by correctly exercising our free will. This illumination, then, is the understanding of how the pieces fit together. We will comprehend what Hashem wants of Man, how the rich assortment of gifts can be used properly when our only concern is His master plan, and what contribution we make as individuals. Armed with such knowledge, we not only accomplish our purpose as Jews, but communicate this vision to the rest of humanity.

Can there be more? Yes. The third pasuk has G-d turning towards us again. He has already turned to us, however, in the previous pasuk. Previously we saw him looking toward us so that we might

receive something from Him: abundant material blessing, and the insight and vision to know what to do with it. This time we want the closeness to Him for the experience of closeness itself. The benefits of the previous two verses now develop a new nuance. Besides their importance in their own right, they are appreciated as precursors to this final step. Living a life in which you seem to give up everything for your personal use in favor of His objectives gains you the most precious thing of all: Hashem Himself. He now turns towards us with the most intense closeness imaginable. When we are privileged to enjoy such closeness, those around us sense that our existence complements their own existence, rather than threatens it or clashes with it. We then live in the harmony with all others that we call peace. With that, the three verses of blessing conclude.

The next verse describes the consequences of achieving the full potency of the three parts of the Priestly Blessing. To grasp G-d in human terms, some turn to images, which of course are forbidden to Jews. The closest we get to making G-d cognizable is using (with His approval!) different Names, each of which emphasizes a different facet of His Being that can be put into words. Here, the Torah tell us that Hashem's conferring blessing, illumination, direction, and closeness, placing them upon His people, will itself be a Name. It will make His Being more evident and manifest to people.

Chazal describe curious differences between the recitation of the Priestly Blessing in the beis ha-mikdosh and all other places. In the Temple, they are merged into one sentence, rather than three. The response of the people changes from the familiar "amen" to "baruch Shem kevod malchuso le-olam va'ed." Finally, the kohanim hold their hands above their heads, rather than at shoulder level.

All of these can be understood if we grasp the core message. What happens in the beis ha-mikdosh is universal, not particular. When birkas kohanim takes place within its precincts, it makes a statement that applies far beyond them, projecting to all of mankind. It is nothing less than a statement of what the mikdosh, the place on earth that can host and contain a Divine Presence stands for, what it tells Man, and what it hopes to accomplish. It is all one message, not three. Individual people standing outside the Temple must individualize its blessings. They internalize its values one step at a time. Each person must make the three parts his own. He declares his gleeful personal acceptance of those values by answering "amen," - the standard manner in which an individual declares his full belief in a statement made by another. Because the Blessing within the Temple is an ideal, the kohanim lift their hands heavenward, pointing to the place from which it issues. Outside the Temple, the purpose of the Blessing is for every individual to draw from it in his own way. There, the kohanim hold their arms out directly in front of them, emphasizing that G-d is not remote and inaccessible, but available wherever we are, waiting just above where we find ourselves.

Just what is this universal message? Nothing less than a word-picture of the floor plan of the Temple, in all of its rich symbolism. The first pasuk, with its promise of material success, corresponds to the Shulchan, which held the loaves of bread that signified that all sustenance comes from Hashem. The second pasuk, which speaks of illumination, corresponds to the light of the Menorah.

The Shulchan and Menorah stand in front of, and displaced to the sides of, the Aron. Together, the Shulchan and Menorah serve the Ark, sitting behind a partition in the Holy of Holies, just as the first two psukim lead up to the third. The Aron was the exact spot where the Divine and the human met, where the Voice of G-d was heard. It housed the luchos, the tablets that contained the revealed Word of G-d, His perfect instructions to Man.

The three parts of the Priestly Blessing are a Temple in words, conveying both its message and its potent blessing, wherever we may be.

1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 6:23-27
