

Shabbat Parashat Naso Blessing Our Children

In this week's *parasha*, we find one of the first blessing texts in Judaism. We are most familiar with *brakhot* beginning with the official formula *Barukh Atah Adonai...* (Blessed are You...). However, these words do not appear in the *Tanakh* (Hebrew Bible) when blessings are being recited or passed between individuals. The blessing that appears in this week's Torah reading is called *Birkat Kohanim*, the Priestly Blessing. God and Moses instruct the *Kohanim* to bless the people with the following words (the full Hebrew, transliterated and translated text are below):

May God bless you and keep you;
May God shine God's face toward you and be gracious unto you;
May God show you favor and grant you peace.

With the destruction of the Temples and the end of almost all kohanite function in Jewish ritual life, this *b'rakha* made its way into Jewish liturgy – most notably into the *Amidah* (the central prayer of the *shaharit* (morning), *mincha* (afternoon), and *ma'ariv* (evening) services) where the service leader recites the verses of the blessing and the congregation responds, “So may it be Your will.” On special occasions (and in some communities, every Shabbat) such as the three Pilgrimage Festivals (*Pesah*, *Shavu'ot*, and *Sukkot*), the High Holy Days (Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur), and *Simhat Torah*, it is common for the *kohanim* of the congregation to go up to the *bimah* to fulfill their role as bless-ers of the children of Israel. The ceremony is elaborate and enriched by pomp and circumstance, making it a powerful experience for all involved.

The Priestly Blessing has an additional place in regular traditional Jewish practice: around the Shabbat dinner table on Friday night. While the exact timing of the recitation of the blessing differs from household to household, the text of *birkat kohanim* is used by parents to bless their children each *Erev Shabbat*. The text of the blessing is as below, with an additional introductory line – one for sons and another for daughters. Place your hands upon your child's head as recite as follows:

FOR SONS:

יְשִׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים	Ye'simcha Elohim
כְּאַפְרַיִם וְכִמְנַשֶּׁה:	ke-Ephraim ve'chi-Menashe
May God make you like Ephraim and Menashe.	
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יְבָרְכְךָ יי וְיִשְׁמְרְךָ:	Ye'varech'echa Adonoy ve-yish'merecha.
יָאֵר יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֲנֶנְךָ:	Ya'eir Adonoy panav eilecha viy-chuneka.
יֵשָׁא יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ	Yisa Adonoy panav eilecha,
וְיֵשֶׁם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם:	ve-yaseim lecha shalom.
May God bless you and watch over you.	
May God shine His face toward you and show you favor.	
May God be favorably disposed toward you, and may He grant you peace.	

FOR DAUGHTERS:

יְשִׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים	Ye'simech Elohim
כְּסָרָה רִבְקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה:	ke-Sarah, Rivka, Rachel ve-Leah
May God make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah.	
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יְבָרְכְךָ יי וְיִשְׁמְרְךָ:	Ye'varech'echa Adonoy ve-yish'merecha.
יָאֵר יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֲנֶנְךָ:	Ya'eir Adonoy panav eilecha viy-chuneka.
יֵשָׁא יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ	Yisa Adonoy panav eilecha,
וְיֵשֶׁם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם:	ve-yaseim lecha shalom.
May God bless you and watch over you.	
May God shine His face toward you and show you favor.	
May God be favorably disposed toward you, and may He grant you peace.	

Whether or not a traditional Shabbat dinner is held at home, taking the opportunity to bless our children is the chance to build love and closeness within the family unit. In the same way as the recitation of this blessing brought the Priests closer to the larger Israelite/Jewish community at the time that they recited these verses from Torah, so too can it bring parents and children (no matter what their ages) closer together after a long and hard week of labor. Reciting a blessing forces us to take pause and to take stock. When we do so for our children, by laying our hands upon their heads and kissing them when we are through, we send them strong messages about the love and holiness that are key ingredients to meaningful family interaction. Take this *b'rakha* from this week's *parasha* and make it yours. You will not regret the additional blessings it will bring into your home on Shabbat and other days as well.

Shabbat Shalom!