**S.A.L.T. PARASHAT NASO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Naso introduces the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*, which requires the *kohanim* to bless the rest of the nation. God commands Moshe, “Speak to Aharon and sons, saying: Thus shall you bless the Israelites” (6:23), and He then proceeds to dictate Moshe the precise text of the brief blessing that the *kohanim* should confer upon the people.

The *Sefat Emet* observes that God does not actually command the *kohanim* to bless *Benei Yisrael*, but rather commands them to use this specific text when blessing them. God does not instruct, “Bless the Israelites,’ but rather says, “Thus shall you bless the Israelites.” Apparently, it was self-evident that the *kohanim* would bless the people, and now God instructs the *kohanim* as to how exactly this is to be done. The *Sefat Emet* offers a remarkable explanation for why the command is formulated this way:

One who serves Hashem must recognize the stature of the simple Jews, that they are worthy of blessing, as it says, “Thus shall you bless” – implying that Hashem knows that the righteous *kohen*’s desire is to bless the Israelites, and He shows them the way how to bless them.

Indeed, it was taken for granted that the *kohanim* wanted to regularly bless the people. Having been elevated to the lofty stature of *kehuna*, to the elite position of God’s ministers in His *Mikdash*, it was naturally assumed that they loved the people and wished to confer a blessing upon them. Therefore, God did not have to command the *kohanim* to bless *Benei Yisrael*, and needed simply to command them which text should use.

In fact, the *Mishna Berura* (128:37) cites sources forbidding a *kohen* to recite *birkat kohanim* if he feels animosity towards the congregation, as the blessing must be recited with love. This *halakha* is a striking expression of the *Sefet Emet*’s theory, that the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* does not take effect unless a *kohen* truly wishes to bless the nation. If the *kohen* feels hostility towards the people, then he bears no obligation to bless them, because the obligation applies only once a *kohen* feels the kind of love and affection that he is expected to feel towards his fellow Jews.

Unfortunately, it often happens that growth in Torah knowledge and spirituality yields an attitude of disdain towards those who have not undergone such a process. “*Kohanim*,” people who have achieved stature in Torah study and observance, sometimes look condescendingly upon the “simple Jews” whose knowledge and level of observance leave much to be desired. The *Sefat Emet*’s insight teaches us how grave a mistake it is to allow one’s spiritual achievements to result in disdain or disrespect for his fellow Jews, regardless of their religious stature. From the perspective of the *Sefat Emet*, love and affection for “simple Jews” is an integral part of *avodat Hashem*, and, as such, religious growth must deepen, not dull, our feelings of respect and concern for our fellow Jews.

Sunday

The *Beit Ha-levi* (Chanukah section) advances the theory that a *kohen* cannot fulfill his obligation of *birkat kohanim* – to bless the congregation – by listening to another *kohen*’s recitation. Normally, when *Halakha* requires reciting a certain text, one is able to satisfy his requirement through the mechanism of *shomei’a ke-oneh*, which means that listening is akin to reciting. As long as both the one reciting the text and the listener have in mind that the recitation should count even for the listener, he can fulfill his obligation in his manner. However, the *Beit Ha-levi* asserts that *birkat kohanim* marks an exception to this rule. The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (38a) establishes that a *kohen* must recite the blessing “*be-kol ram*” – in a loud, audible voice. The *Beit Ha-levi* asserts that although the concept of *shomei’a ke-oneh* allows one to be considered as having recited a text which he heard, it does not suffice to meet the condition of “*be-kol ram*.” The listener can fulfill a halakhic requirement to recite a certain text, but the requirement to speak audibly can only be fulfilled if he himself recites the text in a loud voice. *Shomei’a ke-oneh* can “transfer” the actual recitation from the speaker to the listener, but it cannot “transfer” the volume.

A number of *Acharonim* questioned the *Beit Ha-levi*’s assertion, noting instances in which *Halakha* imposes external conditions on a recitation requirement, yet allows for fulfilling the requirement through *shomei’a ke-oneh*. For example, *kiddush* must be recited specifically over a cup of wine, and one can fulfill his obligation by hearing another person recite the *kiddush* text over a cup of wine, even though the listener does not have a cup of wine. Likewise, we fulfill the obligation of *keri’at ha-Torah* by hearing someone read from the Torah, even though we only hear the reading and do not have a *Sefer Torah* in front of us.

The Tolna Rebbe suggested upholding the *Beit Ha-levi*’s ruling by noting the unique nature of the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*. In the *berakha* recited by the *kohanim* before conferring the priestly blessing, they give praise to God who commanded them “*le-vareikh et amo Yisrael* ***be-ahava***” – “to bless His nation, Israel, **with love**.” As we noted yesterday, citing the *Mishna Berura* (128:37), a *kohen* does not recite *birkat kohanim* if there is tension between him and the congregation. As the blessing must be recited “*be-ahava*,” the obligation cannot be fulfilled in the absence of genuine feelings of affection towards the people. And for this reason, the Tolna Rebbe explained, it stands to reason that a *kohen* cannot discharge his duty by listening to the recitation of *birkat kohanim* by another *kohen*. Even if we concede that the mechanism of *shomei’a ke-oneh* can “transfer” external conditions to the listener, and not merely the actual recitation, it would still stand to reason that this does not extend to the *kohen*’s emotional state. Emotions are intangible and personal, and thus, presumably, cannot be experienced by proxy, even in the strictly formal, halakhic sense. A *kohen* must therefore personally recite *birkat kohanim*, because even if he can be halakhically considered “reciting” through listening, he does not fulfill in this manner the obligation to bless with sincere feelings of love and concern for his fellow Jews.

Monday

The final section of Parashat Naso tells of the special gifts brought by the *nesi’im* – *Benei Yisrael*’s twelve tribal leaders – in honor of the *Mishkan*’s consecration. This section begins with the words, “*Va-yehi be-yom kalot Moshe le-hakim et ha-Mishkan*” – “It happened on the day when Moshe completed erecting the *Mishkan*.”

The *Midrash Tanchuma* (12) advances an unusual reading of the first word of this verse – “*va-yehi*,” suggesting that it be read as “*vay*” – an expression of angst. While we would have naturally assumed that the occasion of the *Mishkan*’s formal consecration was one of great joy and celebration, the Midrash comments that it actually caused the Almighty anguish, so-to-speak. The Midrash draws an analogy to a king who had a whiny, argumentative wife. Once he asked his wife to make a special garment for him, and when she completed the project to satisfaction and brought it to him, he was pleased by what he saw, but he cried out in angst. When his wife asked him why he reacted this way to her skilled handiwork, he explained, in the words of the Midrash, “I found the work very satisfactory, but throughout the time you were involved in the work, you were not angry and you did not complain to me. But now that you are idle, I am afraid that you will anger me.”

Similarly, the Midrash comments, the completion of the *Mishkan* was a source of anguish, as it were, to the Almighty, as He anticipated that *Benei Yisrael* would now resume their complaints against Him.

When we are involved in lofty and important tasks, we are less inclined to fret over petty “problems” and concerns. As we focus our attention on the sublime, the issues and worries that would otherwise occupy us and break our spirits are put in perspective and tolerated without much effort. Pursuing meaningful and significant goals changes our outlook so we are not bothered by trivial concerns. And thus as *Benei Yisrael* labored to construct the *Mishkan*, they did not complain about their conditions. The complaints returned once this undertaking was completed and they were no longer intensively engaged in a lofty project.

*Chazal* here remind us to keep our minds and attention focused on lofty goals and aspirations, and to avoid allowing ourselves to get bogged down by vanity. We are to spend our limited time in this world involved in the “*Mishkan*,” in idealistic, spiritual pursuits, rather than worrying and complaining about matters which are, in the long run, petty and inconsequential.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Naso presents the text of *birkat kohanim*, the special blessing with which the *kohanim* are to bless *Benei Yisrael*, which includes, “*Yisa Hashem panav eilekha*” – which is generally translated as, “The Lord shall show you favor.” The implication of this blessing is that God should grant us even more than what we strictly deserve, out of His special affection for us.

The Gemara, in a famous passage (Berakhot 20b), tells that the angels approached God and asked how this blessing could be reconciled with Moshe’s proclamation in Sefer Devarim (10:17), “*asher lo yisa fanim*” – that God does not show favor to anyone. Moshe there affirms that God judges in strict fairness, without granting any special dispensations due to a person’s status. How, then, can the *kohanim* bless us, “*Yisa Hashem panav eilekha*”? The answer which God gives the angels, the Gemara says, is that the Jewish People deserve special favor in the merit of the *mitzva* of *birkat ha-mazon* – reciting a blessing after meals. Specifically, we make a point of reciting *birkat ha-mazon* even after eating just a *ke-zayit* of food, despite the fact that the Torah obligation requires reciting the blessing only after experiencing satiation, as indicated in the text of the command of *birkat ha-mazon*: “You will eat and be satiated, and you shall bless the Lord your God” (Devarim 8:10). Since we thank God for even small amounts of food, we are deserving of His special favor, even though He generally does not show favoritism.

Rav Simcha Bunim of Pashischa explained that when a person receives a gift from a person of prominent stature, he treasures it, regardless of its size or value. Even the simplest object becomes a cherished possession if it was given by somebody important or distinguished. This, Rav Simcha Bunim explained, is the significance of reciting *birkat ha-mazon* over even small portions of food. If we truly view everything we own, have and enjoy as a gift granted to us by the Creator and King of the universe, then we would value and treasure it all, even if we do not experience “satiation.” Regardless of whether we have all we want, we are nevertheless capable of feeling grateful and joyous over every small “*ke-zayit*” if we recognize that everything has been given to us as a gift from the Almighty.

On this basis, Rav Simcha Bunim explained the Gemara’s comment. If we value even the unsatisfactory assets that we have due to the greatness of the One who gave them to us, then God will, in turn, value even our unsatisfactory level of Torah devotion in consideration of who we are. He will recognize that we are flawed and limited human beings, whose inclinations often lure us away from fulfilling the divine will. He will recognize that even the small amounts that we achieve reflect a strong and sincere desire to observe His commands and draw close to Him. If we appreciate and treasure the small gifts we receive in consideration of who it is who gave them, then God will appreciate and treasure our small “gifts” in consideration of who we are – complicated, deficient beings who struggle against internal and external pressures, often unsuccessfully, out of a genuine desire to fulfill His will.

Wednesday

The Gemara in Masekhet Megilla (27b) tells that Rabbi Elazar ben Shamua was asked to identify his special merits on account of which he lived a long life. He responded by enumerating several admirable habits that he had, including, “*lo nasati kapai be-lo berakha*” – he ensured never to recite *birkat kohanim* without first reciting the introductory blessing which is to precede the *berakha* given to the congregation.

The implication of Rabbi Elazar’s response is that this introductory blessing (“*Baruch…asher kideshanu…le-varekh et amo Yisrael be-ahava*”) is not strictly required. If it constituted an outright halakhic obligation, then, seemingly, Rabbi Elazar’s consistent observance of this practice would not be remarkable and would not have rendered him worthy of an especially long life. Indeed, the Vilna Gaon, in his notes to the *Shulchan Arukh* (*Bei’ur Ha-Gra*,O.C. 128:13), writes on the basis of this Talmudic passage that the introductory blessing which the *kohanim* customarily recite before *birkat kohanim* is not strictly required.

Evidently, as noted by Rav Elyakim Pashkes (in *Ka-matar Likchi*, Parashat Naso), the Gaon maintained that *Chazal* did not institute a formal *birkat ha-mitzva* before *birkat kohanim* as they did for other *mitzvot*. Leaving aside the question of why *Chazal* established introductory *berakhot* for some *mitzvot* but not others, it appears, at least according to the Vilna Gaon, that no such *berakha* was established for *birkat kohanim*. Although *kohanim* customarily recite a *berakha* before *birkat kohanim* whose text follows the familiar format of *birkot ha-mitzva* (“*asher kideshanu…ve-tzivanu*”), this is not a standard *birkat ha-mitzva*, but is rather a different kind of blessing.

Rav Pashkes noted that this also appears to be the view of the Rambam, who rules (*Hilkhot Tefila* 14:12) that the *kohanim* recite the introductory *berakha* before they turn around to face the congregation in preparation for conferring the *birkat kohanim*. When a *birkat ha-mitzva* is recited before the performance of a *mitzva*, it must be recited immediately before the *mitzva* is performed, and no earlier. Presumably, this is why other opinions – as codified by the *Shulchan Arukh* (O.C. 128:11) – require the *kohanim* to recite the introductory blessing as they turn around to face the congregation, but not beforehand. Since this blessing, in their view, is recited over the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*, it must be recited immediately before the *kohanim* begin declaring the blessing. The Rambam, however, perhaps understood that this *berakha* does not fall under the category of *birkot ha-mitzva*, and for this reason did not require reciting it immediately before conferring the *birkat kohanim*.

The question then becomes, if this introductory blessing does not constitute a standard *birkat ha-mitzva*, then what kind of blessing is it?

Apparently, Rav Pashkes writes, this *berakha* is an expression of praise given by the *kohanim* over the privilege they are given to bless *Am Yisrael*. They recite this *berakha* not in reference to the halakhic obligation of *birkat kohanim* – like the *berakhot* we recite before fulfilling certain halakhic obligations, such as *sefirat ha-omer* – but rather over the privilege and honor of blessing the Jewish Nation. It thus resembles other *berakhot* we recite to express praise to the Almighty over different experiences and phenomena, and, according to the Vilna Gaon, it does not constitute a strict halakhic requirement.

If, indeed, we view this blessing as an expression of praise over this privilege, then we may perhaps derive a meaningful lesson from this practice. Namely, we should see the opportunity to bless our fellow Jews and to wish them well as a great privilege and source of joy. If the *kohanim* give special praise to God before blessing *Am Yisrael* over this privilege, then we must perceive blessing fellow Jews as a great honor. The opportunity to wish another Jew well and convey words of blessing and encouragement is something we should cherish and which brings us joy and excitement.

Sometimes, unfortunately, we relish specifically the opposite opportunity – those instances when we discover something negative about a person’s character and conduct. These situations give us the chance to enjoy feelings of superiority and vindication, to view ourselves as better than others. The introductory blessing to *birkat kohanim* should perhaps teach us to feel privileged to admire and feel fondness for people, not to look down on them. The opportunities we should cherish are the times when we genuinely like people and wish them well, and not the times when we can arrogantly look down on them with ridicule and scorn.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Naso introduces the law of *sota*, which addresses the situation of a man who suspects his wife of an adulterous affair. If a husband warns his wife not to be secluded with a certain man, and the woman is seen violating the warning and going into a secluded room with that individual, she and her husband may not engage in marital relations until she undergoes the process outlined here in the Torah. This process entails her drinking special waters, and if she survives, then she is considered innocent and may resume normal relations with her husband.

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Sota 1:2) raises the question of whether these laws apply in the case of a husband who warns his wife not to go into seclusion with an immediate family member, such as her father or brother. According to one view, violating this warning does not render the woman a *sota*, and she and her husband may continue living together as husband and wife. The classic commentators to the Yerushalmi (*Korban Ha-eida* and *Penei Moshe*) explain that the Yerushalmi’s question is whether the laws of *sota* hinge upon the prohibition of *yichud* – secluding oneself with a member of the opposite gender other than one’s spouse. According to the aforementioned view, the concept of *sota* is applicable only if the suspected adulterer is somebody with whom the wife is halakhically forbidden to be secluded. If she secludes herself with somebody with whom seclusion is halakhically permissible, such as her father, then even though her husband had warned her not to seclude herself with that person, the laws of *sota* do not apply.

Interestingly enough, this issue may have important practical halakhic implications. The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (26b) cites Shemuel’s comment that the laws of *sota* apply even if the man with whom the husband forbids seclusion is *shachuf* (impotent). Although it may be presumed in such a case that no adulterous act occurred, nevertheless, the laws of *sota* apply. The Gemara, somewhat surprisingly, reacts to Shemuel’s comment by asking, “*Peshita*” – why such a self-evident *halakha* needed to be stated. In the Gemara’s eyes, it is obvious that the laws of *sota* apply irrespective of the suspected adulterer’s sexual capabilities. The Gemara answers that Shemuel’s ruling was necessary because the Torah introduces the laws of *sota* by describing the scenario of a suspected adulterous relationship that included semenal ejaculation (“*shikhvat zera*” – Bamidbar 5:13). For our purposes, however, it is significant that the Gemara initially found Shemuel’s ruling intuitive and self-evident. As noted by Rav Moshe Yehuda Leib Zilberberg, in his *Zayit Ra’anan* (E.H. 1:1), this would seem to prove that the prohibition of *yichud* forbids even an impotent man from secluding himself with a female. After all, if *yichud* in such a case would be permissible, then the status of a *shachuf* with respect to the laws of *sota* would hinge on the aforementioned debate in the Yerushalmi. According to the view that a wife does not become a *sota* by being secluded with a family member, this would be true also in the case of a *shachuf*. As such, Shemuel’s ruling would hardly be obvious. Evidently, Rav Zilberberg reasons, the Gemara worked off the assumption that *yichud* is forbidden even for an impotent man who is incapable of intercourse, and therefore Shemuel’s *halakha* initially seemed self-evident.

Rav Eliezer Waldenberg, in a letter to Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv which he then published in his *Tzitz Eliezer* (7:46), disagreed. Among his refutations of Rav Zilberberg’s proof is the fact that the question raised by the Yerushalmi is never mentioned in the Talmud Bavli. Indeed, the Mishna (Sota 24a) makes a generic statement that the laws of *sota* apply to all relatives with whom intimacy is forbidden (“*Al yedei kol ha-arayot maknin*”), which would certainly suggest that they apply even in the case of immediate family members. Quite possibly, then, the Bavli assumed that the laws of *sota* do not hinge at all on the prohibition of *yichud*, and they apply even if the man in question is somebody with whom the wife is halakhically permitted to be secluded. As such, even if *yichud* is permissible for an impotent man, the Gemara justifiably found Shemuel’s ruling obvious. Indeed, Rav Waldenberg rules that an elderly, impotent man who is incapable of intercourse may be secluded with a woman (see *Tzitz Eliezer*, vol. 6, pp. 230-231).

Friday

Parashat Naso begins by outlining the portions of the *Mishkan* which were transported by the Levite families of Gershon and Merari when *Benei Yisrael* traveled through the wilderness. This section is a continuation of the final section of Parashat Bamidbar, which told of the duties assigned to the other Levite family, the family of Kehat.

In discussing the articles assigned to Kehat, God commands the *kohanim* to appoint “*ish al avodato ve-el masa’o*” – each Kehatite to his specific role (4:19). Meaning, rather than leave it to the Kehatites to arrange their family’s workload themselves, the *kohanim* should take responsibility for this arrangement, and order each member of Kehat to a particular job. A somewhat similar statement is made in Parashat Naso with regard to the duties assigned to the family of Gershon: “*U-fkadetem aleihem be-mishmeret eit kol masa’am*” (4:27). The *kohanim* were to assign the Gershonites to their particular roles, so that each knew precisely which parts of the *Mishkan* he was responsible for transporting. This is mentioned in reference to the workload of Merari, as well, only with one interesting difference. The Torah writes, “*u-ve’sheimot tifkedu et kelei mishmeret masa’am*” (4:32) – the various utensils transported by Merari were to be assigned “*be-sheimot*,” by name. It appears that with regard to the portions of the *Mishkan* transported by Merari, the names – of either the utensils or the people of Merari – had to be specified.

The Ramban explains that in truth, there was no difference in this regard between Merari and the other Levite families. Every Levi, from any family, was assigned by name to a particular utensil of the *Mishkan*. The reason why this was mentioned specifically in reference to Merari, the Ramban suggests, is because the Merarites’ responsibilities included the heaviest articles – specifically, the planks and beams. The workload of the Merarites, in particular, lent itself to quarreling, as some might have wished to excuse themselves from the heavier articles and leave them for others. Therefore, it was especially important that the Merarites be assigned to their roles by name, though in truth, this was done for all three Levite families.

Maharil Diskin explains differently. He writes that Merari’s assignment was unique in that it included multiple identical parts. They were responsible for transporting the planks, pillars and sockets, all of which were numerous and indistinguishable from one another. Maharil Diskin noted that just as each plank, pillar and socket needed to be positioned in the same location each time the *Mishkan* was reassembled, it also needed to be carried by the same Levite each time the *Mishkan* was transported. And given that all the planks were identical to one another, as were the pillars and sockets, each needed to be given a name and labelled to ensure that it would be carried by the same person or people each time the nation traveled. This system was not necessary for the families of Kehat and Gershon. The Kehatites transported the sacred vessels – the altars, the ark, the table and the *menorah* – which were, of course, easily distinguishable from one another. And the Gershonites transported the various cloths and curtains, most of which differed from one another significantly, such that each could easily be distinguished from the others. Therefore, it was only the items carried by Merari which need to be labelled by name to ensure that they were all carried by the same *Leviyim* each time *Benei Yisrael* traveled.

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