**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT NASO**

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Naso presents the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* – the special blessing with which the *kohanim* are to bless the rest of the nation. This blessing concludes, “The Lord shall show you favor, and grant you peace” (6:26).

The Gemara, in a famous passage (Berakhot 20b), tells that the angels in the heavens “challenged” this blessing, noting that it seems to run in opposition to an explicit verse later in the Torah. In Sefer Devarim (10:17), Moshe lists numerous qualities of the Almighty, including the fact that “*lo yisa fanim*” – He does not show favor to one people over another. How, the angels wondered, could God be prepared to show favor to *Benei Yisrael*, as expressed by the final verse of *birkat kohanim*, when He is described as never showing favor? God responded to the angels’ challenge by saying, “Should I not show favor to Israel? I wrote for them in the Torah, 'You shall eat and be satiated, and you shall [thereupon] bless the Lord your God' (Devarim 8:10), yet they are exact with themselves even for a *ke-zayit* and for a *ke-beitza*!” Despite His general policy not to grant special favor to any particular individuals, God grants us favor because of our strict observance of the obligation of *birkat ha-mazon*. Whereas He commanded us to recite a blessing to express gratitude after eating to satiation, we have accepted the practice enacted by *Chazal* to recite *birkat ha-mazon* even after eating smaller amounts.

This practice, of reciting *birkat ha-mazon* even after eating just a *ke-zayit*, despite not experiencing satiation, has been viewed by many as reflecting the quality of *histapkut* – contentment and gratitude despite not receiving all that we desire. Our Sages taught us through this provision that we are to give praise and express appreciation to God for everything we have, even when this falls short, or even far short, of satisfying all our wishes. We are to train ourselves to feel content after receiving just a *ke-zayit*, modest amounts of material blessing, and avoid bitterness, frustration and jealousy when we fail to obtain all that what we want.

On this basis, Rav Shmuel Kaufman, in his [*Tiferet Shmuel*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=6567&st=&pgnum=122&hilite=)*,* offers an insightful explanation of the Gemara’s comment. In the final verse of *birkat kohanim*, we are blessed, “The Lord shall show you favor, **and grant you peace**.” The special “favor” the *kohanim* ask God to bestow upon us is the blessing of peace. God’s response to the angels was that the blessing of peace does not, in truth, require a special degree of favor granted by God. Rather, it is a natural outgrowth of our *histapkut*. When people feel content with even just a *ke-zayit*, without experiencing envy or resentment over what they have not been given, then they are far more likely to live together in peace. Anger and discord are more likely to erupt when there is discontent and dissatisfaction, when people feel their current circumstances are intolerable, that they cannot live with their current conditions and need to have more. Thus, God does not “violate” His own rule of “*lo yisa fanim*” by granting us His special blessing of peace. This special blessing comes naturally once we collectively master the art of *histapkut*, when we all learn to accept what we have, even if there is much more that we would ideally want.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Naso outlines the procedure to be followed in the case of a *sota* – a woman whose husband had reason to suspect her of infidelity. If the husband warned his wife not to be found with a certain man, and witnesses testify to having subsequently seen the wife go into seclusion with that man, then the couple may not engage in marital relations until they follow the procedure outlined here by the Torah. The woman is brought to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where she is given special waters to drink which determine her innocence or guilt. If she is guilty of infidelity, then the waters kill her, and thus if she survives the ordeal, her innocence is proven and the couple may resume normal relations. The Torah writes that in the latter case, when the woman is innocent, “she shall bear offspring” (5:28). According to one view in the Gemara (Sota 26a), this means that if the woman is childless, she is blessed with children.

The simple explanation of this concept, as Ibn Ezra writes, is that she is rewarded – or, perhaps more precisely, compensated – for the humiliation she endured through the public *sota* ordeal. A number of writers added that although the *sota* committed a transgression by going into seclusion with a man other than husband, and is certainly to blame for arousing her husband’s suspicion, nevertheless, she deserves reward for having been accused of a grievous offense which she did not commit, on account of which she endured public humiliation. Therefore, if she had been infertile, she becomes worthy of conceiving in the merit of having suffered this humiliating ordeal.

Relevant to this topic, the Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (31b) tells that when Chana offered her famous prayer in Shilo, beseeching God for a child, she invoked the reward promised to an innocent *sota*. The Gemara comments that Chana made a “threat,” as it were, declaring that if God did not grant her a child, she would go into seclusion with another man so that her husband would need to bring her to the *Mishkan* and have her drink the *sota* waters. Since she would be innocent of adultery, she would then be rewarded by conceiving. Several *Acharonim*, including the *Penei Yehoshua*, explain that Chana did not actually “threaten” to violate the prohibition against secluding oneself with another man. Rather, she was asking to be treated no worse than a *sota*. If a *sota*, who brought humiliation upon herself through her inappropriate behavior, is granted a child, then certainly Chana is deserving of having a child, as well.

The concept underlying Chana’s contention, it would seem, is that God looks kindly and compassionately upon the downtrodden and brokenhearted. As the verse states in Tehillim (34:19), “*Karov Hashem le-nishberei leiv*” – “The Lord is close to the brokenhearted.” God accepts the prayers of an infertile *sota*, despite the improper conduct of which she is guilty, and which resulted in her humiliation, because, regardless of the circumstances, she has suffered and feels broken and humbled. Chana petitioned God to accept her prayers for the same reason. She, too, was broken and humbled. She suffered daily the taunts of her husband’s other wife, Penina, and lived in a constant state of shame and humiliation. As “the Lord is close to the brokenhearted,” Chana begged, her prayers should be answered, just like those of the childless *sota*.

The Gemara’s comment thus teaches us that even if we are not strictly deserving of having our prayers answered and our wishes granted, we are nevertheless entitled to appeal to God’s unlimited mercy, as long as we approach Him with a genuinely broken heart. The case of a childless *sota* demonstrates the special attention that the Almighty gives, as it were, to people experiencing pain and shame, even if they are otherwise not necessarily deserving of His blessing and assistance. And thus we are to approach Him in prayer with humility and sincere emotion, and ask that He compassionately treat us no less than the infertile *sota*, and grant us the assistance we need even if we are unworthy of it.

Monday

The Torah in Parashat Naso introduces the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim* – the special blessing with which the *kohanim* are required to bless the rest of the nation. The Midrash, in a separate context (*Bereishit Rabba* 43:8), asks, “From where did Israel earn the merit of the priestly blessing?” Surprisingly, the Midrash felt that this *mitzva*, more than others, required some special source of merit. The Midrash cites three different views among the *Tanna’im*, claiming, respectively, that this merit comes to us from Avraham, from Yitzchak, and from Yaakov. Each Tanna supports his view by noting that the word “*ko*,” with which the Torah introduces the law of *birkat kohanim* (6:23), appears also in reference to each of the patriarchs. This subtle association between *birkat kohanim* and each of the three patriarchs alludes to the fact that this *mitzva* is attributable to their merit.

How might we understand the Midrash’s question? Why did it find it necessary to identify a source for the merit through which we earned this particular *mitzva*?

Rav Yitzchak Stollman, in his [*Minchat Yitzchak*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2477&st=&pgnum=188), offers an insightful explanation for the Midrash’s question, suggesting that the Midrash refers not to the *mitzva* of *birkat kohanim*, but rather to the broader concept of a clerical class bringing blessing upon the nation. Among many other religious groups, Rav Stollman writes, the designation of a special class of religious figures bred corruption and greed, and drove a wedge between these figures and the commoners. The clerical class quickly morphed into a bureaucracy, and became a group that demanded special privileges and detached themselves from the masses. *Birkat kohanim* represents the diametric opposite of this kind of clerical class. The *kohanim* are to be a source of blessing to the people. They are to declare every day a beautiful *berakha*, with their faces turned towards the nation, sincerely wishing them God’s blessings of wealth, safety and peace. Although they work in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and not in the fields, factories or shops, they are not in any way to detach themselves from the commoners. To the contrary, they are to guide, instruct and inspire the people to elevate themselves and live joyous, meaningful lives in the faithful service of God. As Rav Stollman observes, this definition of the *kohanim*’s roleis demonstrated through, among other things, the *sota* ceremony, which the Torah outlines earlier in Parashat Naso, and which requires the *kohen* to involve himself to restore trust to a strained relationship between a husband and wife. The Torah’s concept of *kehuna* is one which brings blessings to people’s families and homes, rather than serving only the *kohanim* themselves.

The Midrash, as mentioned, comments that the source of the merit of *birkat kohanim* is the three patriarchs. In light of Rav Stollman’s explanation of the Midrash’s question, we might explain that the source of the *kohanim*’s bringing blessing to *Am Yisrael* is the example set for us by the three patriarchs, each of whom was, in a sense, a “*kohen*,” somebody who cultivated a special relationship with God. Nowhere do we find Avraham, Yitzchak or Yaakov taking unfair advantage of commoners by force of their unique spiritual stature. Nowhere do we find them demanding special privileges or insisting on receiving special honor due to their covenant and singular bond with the Almighty. They understood that the purpose of this covenant, as God told Avraham the very first time He spoke with him, was that all people on earth would be blessed through them (Bereishit 12:3). This example set by the *avot* ought to mold the mindset of the *kohanim* and their understanding of their role as the nation’s religious figures. Their special connection to God is not to detach them from the people, but to the contrary, to bring blessing to the people. And thus the concept of *birkat kohanim* has its origins in Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, the founders of our nation who taught us that religious devotion is to lead to greater concern for and engagement with people, and not, Heaven forbid, the opposite.

Tuesday

One of the subjects discussed in Parashat Naso is the case of the *sota* – a woman whose husband has reason to suspect her of infidelity. Under certain conditions, marital relations between the couple become forbidden until the wife is brought to the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where a *kohen* performs a special ceremony whereby the woman’s guilt or innocence is affirmed.

The Gemara in Masekhet Berakhot (63a), as Rashi (5:12) cites, notes that the section discussing the *sota* is preceded by a brief discussion regarding the *matenot kahuna* – the gifts that *Benei Yisrael* are required to give to the *kohanim*. To explain the connection between these two subjects, the Gemara establishes that whoever withholds *matenot kehuna*, failing to give a *kohen* the required gifts, will ultimately be forced to rely on the *kohen*’s help by suspecting his wife of infidelity and thus having to bring her to the *kohen*. It seems, at first glance, that the Gemara speaks here in terms of a punishment for the sin of withholding one’s *matenot kehuna*. A person who stingily refuses to give his required percentages to the *kohen* is punished by his wife acting inappropriately, in a manner which arouses his suspicion, thus forcing him to bring her to Jerusalem for the humiliating *sota* process. However, it seems difficult to understand why this process would be a fitting punishment for withholding *matenot kehuna*. Moreover, the Gemara speaks of the person “needing” (“*nitzrakh*”) the *kohen*, which perhaps leads us to a different interpretation.

A person who fails to give *matenot kehuna* most likely fails to recognize the value of the *kohanim*. He feels that the *kohanim*, the religious leaders and ministers in the *Mikdash*, do not provide an important enough service, or make a significant enough contribution to the nation, to deserve a percentage of the rest of the nation’s material blessings. It is only when this individual ultimately requires the services of the *kohen* that he begins to appreciate the value and importance of the *kohanim*’s role. The Gemara here, perhaps, speaks not of a punishment for withholding *matenot kehuna*, but rather of a very common phenomenon – of people failing to appreciate others until they find themselves in a situation where they benefit from their skills or fine qualities. Just like a person might not appreciate the service performed by the *kohanim* until a difficult situation arises that requires the *kohen*’s involvement to resolve, similarly, we often fail to recognize and appreciate the qualities of other people until we have occasion to experience those qualities firsthand. *Chazal* here perhaps urge us not to wait to appreciate the value and worth of other people. Each and every person has special qualities and makes a special contribution. Therefore, each and every person deserves our *matanot*, our kindness and goodwill, which we ought not arrogantly withhold from them thinking that they have not done enough to earn it.

Wednesday

Among the *halakhot* relevant to *birkat kohanim* – the special blessing with which the *kohanim* bless the rest of the nation – is the requirement that the *kohanim* lift their hands and face the people while declaring this blessing (*Shulchan Arukh* O.C. 128).

[Rav Asher Weiss](http://www.torahbase.org/%D7%95%D7%90%D7%A0%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%9B%D7%9D/) notes that there is also another context when we find this position – raised arms and faces turned towards one another. The Torah in Sefer Shemot (25:20) commands that the *keruvim* (“cherubs”) atop the ark in the *Mishkan* were to be fashioned with their wings stretched upwards, as though they hovered over the ark, and to face one another. It is possible, then, that the *kohanim*’s position when administering the *birkat kohanim* is meant to resemble the position of the *keruvim* that stood atop the *aron*.

If so, then we must address the question as to the significance of this position. What is the symbolic meaning of outstretched, raised arms and faces turned directly towards one another?

Rav Weiss cites in this context the explanation offered by *Keli Yakar*, commenting on the position of the *keruvim* (Shemot 25:10). *Keli Yakar* comments that the wings, which point heavenward, symbolize devotion to God, whereas the *keruvim*’s faces positioned towards one another represent peace and fraternal love. The *keruvim* looked at each other to express the ideal of care, concern and affection for other people, of creating a meaningful bond and relationship with our fellow. The *keruvim* were engraved in this fashion, and stood atop the ark in the innermost sanctum of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, to instruct that *kedusha* requires both elements: we must lift our “wings” heavenward, striving to build a meaningful relationship with God and committing ourselves unconditionally to observe all His commands, while at the same time facing our fellowman and living peacefully, harmoniously and compassionately with other people.

The *kohanim* assume this same position when blessing *Am Yisrael* in order to teach us that blessing requires our unwavering commitment to both fundamental areas of Torah life – our relationship to God, and our relationship to each other. *Birkat kohanim*, then, is not only a blessing, but also a challenge and calling, charging us to reinforce our commitment to the Almighty and our commitment to each other as a precondition for our becoming worthy of God’s beneficence.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Naso of God’s command to *Benei Yisrael* at Sinai that the *temei’im*, people who are ritually impure, be sent out of the camp (5:2). This command applied to those who were impure due to certain bodily emission, a *tzara’at* skin infection, or direct contact with a human corpse. The Torah tells that *Benei Yisrael* complied with God’s command, and it then reiterates, “*kein asu Benei Yisrael*” – “so did the Israelites do” (5:4). To explain this seemingly redundant phrase, the *Sifrei* comments that it refers to the *temei’im* themselves. They did not resist or delay departing from the camp, but rather left promptly in fulfillment of God’s command.

` Much of the first several chapters of Sefer Bamidbar deals with the assignment of particular roles and positions. We read in this section of the arrangement of the Israelite camp, with each tribe assigned to a particular location, and of the special status given to the *Leviyim* and the specific jobs assigned to each Levite family. The Torah emphasizes several times throughout this section that no one was permitted to usurp another’s role. The *Leviyim* were to ensure that other members of the nation would not approach the *Mishkan*, the various groups of *Leviyim* were warned not to perform a task assigned to a different group, and the *kohanim* were instructed to assign each group of Levites to its particular job so that everybody knew precisely the task he was to perform.

Here, in this brief account of the *temei’im*, we find a command assigning certain groups of people to the least honorable position of all – to leave the camp and live away from everyone else. *Chazal* draw our attention to the fact that this group did not protest or resist, but accepted the “role” they were given without complaint. The lesson being conveyed is that we must all try to happily accept, and even embrace, whichever role we are given at any stage of life, even if it comes without honor and prestige. All of us, in one way or another, and at one point or another, has been “sent away” due to some status of “*tum’a*.” We have all been denied positions or marks of distinction that we desired and strove for due to some deficiency, often one for which we cannot be blamed, as in the case of most instances of ritual impurity. *Chazal* here teach us that just as the different groups of *Leviyim* were to accept their specific roles in transporting the *Mishkan*, similarly, the *temei’im* accepted their “role” to temporarily leave the camp and dwell away from the rest of the nation. We, too, must be prepared to accept whatever positions and jobs are cast upon us at any given time, even when it might seem dishonorable and ungratifying, appreciating the privilege we have to serve the Almighty and to make a contribution to *Am Yisrael* and the world, a privilege that does not depend on any sort of honor or prestige.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Naso addresses the case of a thief who repents and now wishes to return what he stole to the victim. Under certain conditions, he is required to add a one-fifth penalty onto the value of what he stole, and also bring a special atonement sacrifice. The Torah here adds that if the victim had died, and left no inheritors to whom the money can be returned, the thief must pay the money, with the 20% penalty, to the *kohen* serving at that time in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. *Chazal*, as Rashi (5:8) cites, explain that the Torah refers here to a convert, who halakhically loses his familial relationships upon converting. Unless a convert bears children subsequent to his conversion, he does not have any halakhic relatives, and thus he has no inheritors. In such a case, the thief must give the money to the *kohen*.

In formulating this command, the Torah writes that if the victim has no inheritors, “*ha-asham ha-mushav le-Hashem la-kohein*” – “the ‘guilt money’ that is returned to the Lord is given to the *kohen*.” As Seforno explains, the money is, fundamentally, owed to God Himself, because He is the “master,” so-to-speak, of the victim. If the victim is dead and left no inheritors, then the money is legally owed to the victim’s master, just as anything owed to a servant de facto belongs to his master. But since it is, of course, impossible to actually give money to God, the Torah requires giving the money to God’s “representative,” the *kohen* serving in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

This law of *gezel ha-geir* – returning money or property stolen from a convert who died without inheritors – conveys an important message regarding the way we are to view and treat all other members of the nation. If a convert died without leaving any halakhic inheritors, then, most likely, he converted at an advanced age, when he was no longer producing children. The case of *gezel ha-geir*, then, involves theft from an older person with no family to support, and who has likely not had a chance to work his way into the fabric of the community. One who steals from such an individual, even if he subsequently regrets the crime, may not immediately experience serious pangs of conscience, or feel a need to correct his misdeed, as the consequences of the theft seem minimal. The Torah, however, teaches that even a person without any family or close friends is a beloved servant of God, and this is true even of somebody who joined *Am Yisrael* late in life. Causing harm to anybody constitutes a direct affront to God Himself, who loves and cherishes all His servants, and thus even if the victim is no longer alive and leaves behind no family members, the perpetrator must make amends to the Almighty, as it were.

This understanding of *gezel ha-geir* brings to mind the story told later in Sefer Bamidbar (12:1-16) of Miriam’s punishment for speaking disparagingly of her brother, Moshe. After telling of Miriam’s inappropriate remarks, the Torah mentions that Moshe was an exceedingly humble person (12:3), and several commentators explained that this point was made to emphasize that Moshe experienced no harm as a result of Miriam’s comments. In his humility, he was not bothered at all by people’s insults. Nevertheless, Miriam was severely punished, because, as God said to her and Aharon, “Why were you not afraid to speak against My servant, Moshe?” (12:8). Even if they were confident that their offensive remarks would cause no harm at all to Moshe, such speech was nevertheless forbidden, as he was God’s servant. Disrespecting Moshe is akin to disrespecting God, and thus Miriam and Aharon were reprimanded despite the fact that the words they spoke had no effect on Moshe.

The law of *gezel ha-geir* teaches us that the same is true not only of Moshe Rabbeinu, but of every member of the nation, including those in the outermost social circles. Every Jew deserves respect if for no other reason than his or her status as the Almighty’s beloved servant. Even if the person suffers no harm, or even if the victim has passed on and nobody is left who suffers the consequence of the offense, nevertheless, “*ha-asham ha-mushav le-Hashem*” – we must seek atonement from the Master, to whose cherished servant we have caused harm.

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