

## Naso: B'Ahava

- Nisson Shulman. How love of fellow man is taught. The nature of Birchat Hakohanim, and the reason the word "beahava" is added. How the laws of Birchat Kohanim teach this lesson. Why the Kohanim particularly were chosen. Why even a sinful Kohen is not freed from giving the beracha.

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In the Torah there is a commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself". Our sages declared, "Ze klal gadol baTorah" (Yerushalmi, Nedarim 9:4). In fact, when Hillel, the sage, was asked by a scoffing Roman to teach him the entire Torah while he stood on one foot, the sage chose this passage, paraphrased it, and added: "That is the whole Torah. The rest is commentary. But now you must go and learn the commentary" (Shabbat 31).

This commandment applies to all people who are our neighbors, who live in our land, or in whose land we live. But characteristically, our sages stress love of our fellow Jews in much the same way as a father would teach his children to love his own family as a necessary first step towards loving his fellow man.

And so our tradition abounds with moving passages about the love we must have for our people Israel, and equally abundant are the teachings to love all people, wherever they live, whoever they are.

So Rabbi Akiva declares: "How precious is man, since he is created in God's image" (Avoth 3:18).

So Hillel taught: "Be of Aaron's disciples loving peace, pursuing peace, loving all people and bringing them closer to Torah" (Avoth 1:12).

So Rabbi Eliezer used to say: "Let your neighbors honor be as dear to you as your own" (Avoth 2:15).

So Rabbi Hanina ben Dosa said: "That person who is beloved of others is also beloved of God".

And Rabbi Elazar the Modaian taught: "He who embarrasses his neighbor publicly has actually shed his blood and has no share in the world to come".

But no part of Judaism so clearly illustrates this teaching as does the "Nesiat kapayim", which we recited on Shavuoht and which is commanded in today's Torah reading.

The blessing itself teaches this. The familiar formula, "Asher kidshanu bemitzvotav vetzivanu levarech et amo Yisrael", would have been enough. Yet the Rabbis insisted on adding one additional very important word, "beahava". For without brotherly love, there is no blessing.

To understand this better, we must bear in mind that the Kohen is not actually the one who

blesses Israel. He just mouths the words. It is really the Almighty Himself who blesses our people. All the laws governing the “birchat kohanim” point to this.

It may only be recited in Hebrew. For to allow the Kohen to speak a language of his choice would make it appear that he himself is the author of the blessing. This is not true, for the blessing comes from God. Restricting it to Hebrew, the language of the Torah, emphasizes this.

The blessing may only be recited standing, because the Lord Himself is present since it is His blessing. And one must stand in the presence of the Almighty.

The blessing must be recited with the priest's hands pointed upwards, hence the name “Nesiat kapayim”. Because the hands pointed upwards emphasizes that it is the Lord who really blesses His people.

The Kohen cannot add one extra word to the blessing, but must recite the exact text as it appears in the Torah. The reason is the same. It is not his blessing, but the Lord's.

Nor can the priest recite the words from memory, even though almost everyone knows them by heart. He must listen to the Hazan who reads every word to the kohanim and they repeat the words after him for the same reason: the blessing does not come from the priests. They are only instruments of God.

The “Sim Shalom” prayer follows the priestly blessing. In it the whole congregation prays to God to fulfill His promise and bless us with the blessings the priests had just recited. It teaches what the priestly blessing implies: “Shalom, Torah, Beracha, Hayim”. It is a prayer in which the congregation acknowledges that it is God, not the priests who blesses us.

Furthermore: The Talmud warns us that we mustn't complain if the character of the priest who chants the blessing is imperfect. For God from whom the blessing comes is perfect! Maimonides expresses this thought as follows:

“We do not prevent such a man from reciting the blessing, but rather encourage him instead, because reciting this blessing is a commandment God gave the priests, and we must not say, even to a wicked Kohen, add another disobedience to your already blemished record and refrain from this mitzvah too. Do not wonder how a blessing from an unworthy man will help, for the effectiveness of the blessing does not depend on the priest, but rather on the Lord. Let the priests do as they are commanded, and the Lord in His compassion will bless Israel (Hilchot Tefila uNesiat Kapayim 15:6-7).”

If all this is so, why did God need the priests altogether? Why couldn't we have simply started with “Sim Shalom”, praying that God bless us directly, and hoping that we deserve His blessing? Why do we need the entire ceremony of the priestly blessing?

Apparently the priests are indeed, most necessary. Because God's blessing will be effective only if there is such love amongst our people that one group of Jews will desire blessing for the other: only when each of us will pray that our neighbor be blessed.

And that is why, of all the “berachot” in our tradition, this is the only one with that extra word, “beahava”, added to the formula. For the priests must emphasize that they are commanded to recite the blessing “beahava”, and that is the most important word of all. God will bless us when we seek blessing for each other.

Of all the groups within the people of Israel, why were the priests chosen for this role? Because they are descendants of Aaron, and Aaron was famous for his love of Israel. He was the “Ohev shalom verodeph shalom”. His love of fellow Jews has remained our ideal till this day. And he was loved in return, in just the same way. No person could remain angry with his or her neighbor for long in Aaron's presence! His personality and his whole life's force were devoted to making them find peace with each other. And so his descendants were chosen till this day for the role of expressing love through the priestly blessing where one group of Jews seeks blessing for other Jews.

Remember Bilaam in the desert? Our Rabbis asked: "What did he see that made him change his intended curses into blessings so that he could say, “Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov, mishkenotecha Yisrael?” They answered: "He saw peace and harmony and unity of purpose that pervaded Israel at that time”.

How powerless would the enemies of Israel be, even today, if we could only find that same peace and harmony. Instead, what do we find? How are we fulfilling this great ideal? With antagonism of left and of right? With Jews apathetic in the face of Israel's trouble, instead of seeking Israel's good with all their hearts and souls? With people in Israel divided as never before?

Even in synagogues we sometimes forget what love freely given means. We fail in small things; sometimes in the way we speak to each other: sometimes even in hospitality, which is a form of love and is the hallmark of our people. And part of our expression of love for our fellow Jews should be a more concerned reaching out to our brother and sister congregations so that our Jews should grow together and become a more potent force for good in the North American and world Jewish community.

We may start in small things, but small things lead to large ones. Each of us is responsible for expressing the love a Jew ought to feel for his neighbor in the spirit of the priestly blessing, “beahava”.

How wisely Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok HaKohen Kook, first Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of modern Israel, said: “The holy Temple was destroyed because of the sin of pointless hatred, “sinat hinam”. It shall be rebuilt only if we compensate with love, generously and freely given, even if for no cause, “ahavat hinam”.

It is unrealistic to expect human nature to change suddenly. It is unrealistic to expect internal peace to come to our people all at once. Yet we feel in our hearts that internal peace is a prerequisite for that great blessing of peace for which we pray on behalf of all Israel, and ultimately, for all people on the face of the earth.

So we must make a start, in little things and in large. A father training his children to love neighbors trains him first to love his own family. So let our synagogues be an example of love and kindness, not only for each other, but also for the stranger. So let us reach out to our fellow Jews in our community with softness, and good example, and with love.

Then the time will surely come when God's blessing will be fulfilled: "May God bless you and guard you. May God shine his countenance upon you and be gracious to you. May God lift His countenance to you, and bless you with peace".

And the blessing we recite afterwards will surely follow, so that upon us will flow "Tovah uberacha, hayim, hen vahesed verachamim", not only upon us, but upon all the people of Israel, "alenu veal kal amcha yisroel, venomar amen".