The Blessing of the Kohanim

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Bircat Cohanim, the blessing of the Priests, is found in this week’s Parasha, Naso. This three verses text contains the words with which God instructs the Cohanim to blessing the congregation of Israel. It is worth clarifying that although the Cohanim are the ones who “recite” this prayer, it is the Creator, and not the Cohanim, who grants us these blessings.

We will now examine its content.

The first pasuq says

“May HaShem (= God) bless you and protect you.”

BLESS YOU: This means: May HaShem grant me all the material blessings I need: a house, food, clothing, money, etc. Of course, the fact that God blesses me does not mean that I don’t have to work to make it happen. God’s blessing does not replace human effort. The farmer works the land and sows the seeds. And when God grants His blessing, the farmer reaps the fruits. The Divine blessing, therefore, implies a kind of association between man, who must strive and work, and God who blesses that effort with succes.

AND PROTECT YOU: We need Divine assistance in order to enjoy His blessings. How? We ask God to protect us from disease, accidents, tragedies. In this case, we also have the obligation to take the first step and become a “deserving” recipient of this blessing: if we ask HaShem to watch our health, we have to do everything in our power to stay healthy. We must avoid taking unnecessary risks and not exposing ourselves to accidents, misfortunes.

Furthermore, Divine protection comes to complement Divine blessing. In a way, we are asking God to protect us from His material blessing. Firstly, because when all my material needs are met, my character can be negatively affected. I can fall into ostentation, arrogance, ungratefulness, and forgetfulness of God.

We ask HaShem to generously grant us what we need and at the same time to protect us from the adverse effects of material abundance.

“May HaShem enlighten you with His presence and grace you.”

ENLIGHTEN YOU: Now it is not about material but more spiritual blessings. How does God enlighten us? Granting us wisdom to understand His Tora. We must dedicate time and effort to study Tora. And the Almighty will bless us by illuminating our intelligence. By opening our eyes so that we understand His Tora and absorb its values. But wisdom is not enough …

AND GRACE YOU:

When a person has too much wisdom, sometimes he or she might lack social skills or “emotional intelligence”. An individual may be wise but not sensitive or empathetic enough. The smartest kid in the class isn’t always the most popular. In this blessing we ask HaShem to “grace us ”, that is, to inspire us to be loved by others, to find grace in the eyes of others.

“May HaShem direct His presence towards you and grant you peace.”

DIRECT HIS PRESENCE: This means “May God favor you,” may He grant you a special, particular attention. The greatest punishment for the Jewish people is to be “abandoned” by God. In fact the Tora affirms that if the Jewish people abandon the Tora, God will withdraw His special protection and we will be exposed to our numerous enemies. When the Tora describes this

state of abandonment, a consequence of our abandonment of God, it calls it hester panim, “the hiding of God’s Face from us”.

Our blessing, on the other hand, speaks of the ideal situation: when God *directs* His Face (His Presence, His Protection, His blessing) towards us, watching us closely. This is a privilege that we must earn. The closer we get to God, the closer He will get to us.

AND GRANT YOU PEACE: The best way to understand this expression is to think about the State of Israel. If Medinat Israel were a corrupt, marginal third world country the world would probably leave us alone. But Israel is under permanent Divine protection (or Intervention). Israel miraculously survives the constant attack of her tireless enemies. Israel won all the wars waged against her. Israel grows and thrives. This is surely thanks to the Jews who live in Israel, who fight to protect Israel and make it a prosperous country. But human effort is not enough. Israel is privileged to have Divine assistance. The “eyes of God” permanently watch our beloved land and its inhabitants. However, when the Creator grants us the privilege of His blessings, our enemies cannot tolerate it. And they will do everything in their power to prevent us from living in happiness, peace and prosperity.

We ask HaShem to favor us with His blessings but we also ask Him to save us from those who envy us and try to destroy us. So we may enjoy God’s blessings in peace. This is the ideal to which we aspire, as individuals and as a nation.