

This week's Torah portion, Nasso, is a doozy. The longest parasha in Torah, it encompasses a census of the Israelite people, instructions for the priests on how handle a case when a husband suspects but cannot prove that his wife committed adultery, instructions for the *nazir*, the person who wants to take on vows of abstinence from intoxicating substances, and perhaps most famously, what is known as the priestly benediction, or *birkat shalom*, the blessing of peace. This is the only time in Torah when any person is instructed to bless any other person.

In Chapter 6 of the book of Numbers, verses 22-27, God instructs Moses to charge the priests, and his sons to bless the people of Israel with these words:

Yivarech'cha Hashem v'yish'merecha - May God bless you and keep you - *Ya'eir Hashem panav eilecha viyechuneka* - May God's presence shine on you and be gracious to you. *Yisa Hashem panav eilecha, v'yaseim l'cha Shalom*. May God's presence be lifted for you, and bring you peace.

These words are probably familiar to many. Not only have kohanim, the descendants of the priestly clan, continued to use these words to bless the community at services throughout the year, but many Jewish parents say these words of blessing to their children at the Friday night Shabbat table. You may have heard me say these words to our b'nei mitzvah students, or to the children at Tot Shabbat each month, or to the whole community on the High Holidays, when we gather together under tents made out of our own tallitot to bless each other.

These words have a potent resonance that have been handed down the ages. But what are we actually doing when we say them? What does it mean for one person to bless another?

The final verse of Chapter 6 in Numbers, attributed to God dictating these words of blessing for the priests, are: “Thus they shall link my name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.”

Of course, many commentators immediately note the theologically problematic implication of these words: How can God’s blessing be tied to human words? If the priests fail to say these words, does that mean that the people will *not* be blessed? This seems to be putting a great deal of agency into human hands, and many of our traditional commentators are uncomfortable with that.

Some commentaries avoid the discomfort, choosing instead to understand the priests’ words not as enacting blessing, but as invoking blessing; midrash Sifrei notes that the word, “and” rather than “so” is important: “How do we know that the priests should not say, The[people’s] blessings are dependent on us? The Torah states: “And I will bless them...” The implication being that God’s blessing is simultaneous with the priests, not a consequence of the priestly blessing.

This midrash, however, doesn’t answer the central question: if all blessing comes from God, why bother commanding the priests to bless at all? As the medieval midrash Tanchuma put it: “Said the house of Israel to the Holy one, Blessed Be: Master of the Universe, you order the priests to bless us? We need only *your* blessing. . .”

And yet, is it really so strange to imagine that humans might have a vital role in manifesting divine blessing? As Rabbi Hoshaya taught in Midrash Genesis Rabbah 11:6: Everything created during the six days of creation requires further work. For example, mustard seeds must be sweetened, legumes must be sweetened, wheat must be ground, and humanity must be improved.”

This is one of the prooftexts for the idea, often referenced in social justice circles, that humans are partners in the ongoing act of the creation of the world. Unless we want to live on a raw foods diet, the midrash tells us, we must cook to eat. We must make changes, out of our own agency, to the world as we find it, for better or for worse. Why should it be any different with the notion of invoking blessing?

How we utilize our speech has a great deal to do with what actions get taken. The Torah teaches that the world was created through speech, and we know that how we talk about any issue is vital to how we approach it in action. As I was thinking about this parashah, I was remembering the presentation that Jessica Campbell, of the Rural Organizing project, delivered here two weeks ago. She was describing ROP's efforts to support rural communities resisting the spread and recruitment efforts of various neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups. Two points she made seem particularly apropos to this *parasha*: one was that these groups would advertise that they were being warmly welcomed to these towns, that everyone wanted them there. This led those who opposed the groups to feel alienated, and as if they weren't sure whom they could trust. So one of the key things that ROP did was organize spaces where people could share their concern, and see that they were not alone. They could become powerful, but only after they spoke to each other and heard from each other.

Jessica Campbell also pointed out that the media hindered this effort, by portraying rural communities as evenly divided, even in cases where a vast majority visibly demonstrated their opposition to the neo-Nazi or white supremacist groups. The media could have helped those struggling to resist, just by accurately reporting their numbers, actions and sentiments, but instead chose

to pursue a more sensationalist story, and to play into stereotypes of rural citizens as ignorant and prone to intolerance.

And of course, we have seen this week the result of efforts of decades of a campaign of words: the spreading of doubt about legitimate climate research, of anti-science propaganda funded by energy companies. If words didn't have power, then the current administration could not have made the decision, published yesterday, to pull out of the Paris climate agreement. And how we talk about that decision will determine how we react to it, and how much harm it ultimately has.

It comes down to story: what stories do we tell, and how do we tell them? In our parashah, it might not have mattered how blessed the people were, in theory, if there had been no one to name it for them, bring it to their consciousness, and thus encourage them to live lives of blessing. The ancient priests were commanded to tell a story of blessing, and by doing so, I venture that the presence of God really was lifted up for the people, as the last line of the blessing states.

If we don't speak as if we are blessed, as if we are powerful, it becomes that much harder to live as if we are blessed, as if we are powerful. Though we are not so lucky as to all be told - as to all even be able to believe - that God is in our midst, blessing us, every time we gather - imagine how much encouragement we might feel. And we do have the same power as the ancient priests: the power to invoke blessing or curse, to use words that encourage or dishearten, to tell stories that help us empower ourselves and each other, or tear us and wear us down.

Nasso 5777

I encourage you to remember that the next time you're seething over something terrible you read on the internet.

And in the meantime: May God's presence be lifted for us, and give us wholeness and peace.