

Torah Thoughts Naso

5778:

Parshat Naso is the source for *birkat kohanim*, the priestly blessing. It is mentioned here in the Torah as the words the very first priests used to bless the people, making it one of the oldest continuously used benedictions in Judaism. We know it was used later in the Temple period on a daily basis, and has been invoked in life cycle events such as weddings, baby namings, b'nei mitzvah and so on for centuries.

The structure of the blessing is elegant: It is composed of three lines of 3, 5 and 7 words, each of which position God's name as the second word. In English its literal translation is: "May the Lord bless you and protect you; May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious to you; May the Lord's face turn toward you and grant you peace." Could there be any short blessing that says so much in so few words? Moving from hopes for God's protection and grace, it concludes with the wish for God's peace, couching its blessings in terms of God gazing at us, as would a caring and benevolent parent.

A strange thing happens when I invoke these words. Even if I am joking around immediately before or after, when uttering the blessing itself both I and the recipient of the blessing feel its full force. Rabbis are not specially endowed with magical powers; we are merely the officiants designated to publicly recite God's blessings. But as much as any moment in my work, the moments when I invoke *birkat kohanim* make me deeply aware of the responsibility and authority of that role, one that I then attempt to live up to in the days between saying it publicly. That sense is not limited to rabbis. We must each feel ourselves to be the channels through which goodness and blessing flow into the lives of others, and thus live out our destiny as a nation of priests.

Shabbat shalom.