

## The Priestly Blessing

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### *Introduction*

In BeMidbar (Numbers) 6:22-27, the Lord commands the Aaronic Priests to bless the people by invoking His Name upon them. He further gives to the priests the beautiful and poetic words by which they would convey His blessing upon the congregation of Israel. Here, in this text, we have the happy opportunity to see what God Himself considers a “blessing,” how He defines it, and what it entails. We have been given the gift of thinking His thoughts after Him—tooling and re-tooling our minds to think the way He does.

It will be helpful if we approach our text by first considering what is and is not meant by “invoking the Name of God.” Secondly, we will look at the text itself, seeking to know how the words and phrases fit together and what they mean. Finally, we will seek to discover what relevance this ancient text has for us as believers in Yeshua today.

### *I. Invoking the Name: What it Does and Does Not Mean*

#### *What it Does Not Mean*

First, we should understand that God’s command to the priests that they invoke the Name upon the people had absolutely no connection to magic. The pagan nations which surrounded Israel believed that knowing the name of a god gave one power. By invoking the name of the god, the diety was obligated to perform or in some way act on behalf of the worshiper. In this way, man could control his gods by chanting their names. The God of Israel, however, forbade any such belief, for He gives the direct command not to “take the Name of the Lord in vain.” Indeed, the idea that one can control his god through whatever means is at the heart of idolatry. And to think that one could, in any measure, control the sovereign God of Israel by calling forth His Name is not only to use the Name in vain, but it is to enter into the circle of idolatry. Israel’s God is the All-controlling One, but is Himself uncontrolled by His creation.

Secondly, the blessing which came by invoking the Name upon the people did not somehow mystically attach itself to the actual pronunciation of the Name. This is made absolutely clear in our text for the simple reason that when the priests are commanded to invoke the Name upon the people, what follows is a prescribed blessing consisting of much more than the four-letter Name of God. If invoking the Name consisted merely of speaking or pronouncing the Name in the presence of the people, then there would have been no reason for Moses to give them the well-known benediction, consisting not merely of the four-letter Name, but of fifteen words which include the Name three times.

Thirdly, invoking the Name upon the people of Israel was not a short-cut method for a blessing which would normally come through obeying God and walking in His ways. The Priestly blessing was not the “fast food” in the spiritual diet of the believer. In our world of impatience, we have a tendency to want everything now—to think that we can find God’s blessings for our lives through a momentary experience or a weekend seminar. But, as we shall see below, the text itself makes it clear that this is not

what God intended when He gave the blessing in the first place. The beautiful benediction which God gives the priests to bless the people teaches us that we are blessed by knowing Him—understanding His character, trusting in His covenant promises, and finding our deepest friendship with Him as we walk in His ways.

### *What it Does Mean*

Invoking the Name of God means first and foremost to consider and accept what the Name reveals. The four-letter Name of God, יהוה, is shrouded in mystery, and many have attempted to understand its precise meaning. Notwithstanding all of the varied attempts to arrive at the correct pronunciation of the Name,<sup>1</sup> most scholars agree that the Name finds its basis in the Hebrew verb הָיָה, “to be.” Thus, far from having some kind of magical power, the Name reveals the One true God as the One Who Is, and as the source of all that is—the One from whom all things have their existence. What is more, this One from whom are all things, is also the One who orders and patterns the events of life and is therefore able to bring about all of His holy will. His covenant and the promises which attach to it are sure, for He orders all things in heaven and on the earth according to His own will (Daniel 4: 35). Thus, to invoke the Name of God upon the people is to remind them of who He is (His character), what He has done (His works), and what He promises to do (His covenant).<sup>2</sup> Such an invocation reminds and teaches that all blessings, in every realm of life, come from Him and from Him alone. To accept this truth requires faith, the conduit for God’s blessing.

Secondly, the very fact that God commands the priests to invoke His Name upon

<sup>1</sup>The Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Scriptures uses various vowel combinations with the four-letter Name, for various reasons. But always the vowels convey the word that is to be read (קרא, *kere*) in place of the word that is written (כתיב, *kativ*), so that the vowels do not give an indication of how the Name itself might be pronounced. Furthermore, the theophoric Names אֱל, *El* and יְה, *Yah* may not have direct connection lexicographically with the four-letter Name, which most authorities take to have been based upon one stem or another of the Hebrew verb הָיָה, *hayah*, “to be.”

In its first biblical explanation (Exodus 3:14), the Name which Moses is to bring back to the people is somehow connected to the first-person imperfect form of the verb “to be” (אֶהְיֶה), “I will be.” Whether the connection is etymological or merely based on assonance cannot be determined. Some speculate that outside of the context of personal conversation between Moses and God (in which the first and second persons, “I” and “you” are used), the Name became יהוה, again connected in some way to the third person imperfect of הָיָה, יהיה, “He will be,” though whether the qal or hifil stem is the underlying form is not agreed upon. For those who insist upon an etymological connection to היה, the use of the medial *vav* in יהוה raises the question whether or not it functions as a *matris lectionis* and would, in this case, be interchangeable with *yod* (as in the 3rd feminine pronoun, spelled both הִיא and הִיא) or as a consonant requiring its own vowel. R. Laird Harris [“The Pronunciation of the Tetragram” in *The Law and the Prophets*, John H. Skilton, ed. (Pres & Reformed Pub, 1974), 215-224] thinks it is time to abandon the etymological approach, and just explain the connection of יהוה to היה as assonance.

Moreover, the attempts (both ancient and modern) to derive the vowels which must have originally attached to the four consonants of the Name, while interesting and (in some cases) innovative, lack any solid historical verification and must be left to the realm of speculation. If verifiable data is the sure foundation for truth, we must admit that we do not know, for sure, exactly how the four-letter Name of God was pronounced in ancient times.

For Rabbinic discussion on the pronunciation of the four-letter Name as well as the history of its use, cf. Rambam, *Guide to the Perplexed*, Book 1, chapters 61-64; *Sifre* on Numbers 6:23; b.*Sota* 38a-39b; b. *Menachot* 109b; b. *Kiddushin* 71a; b. *Avodah Zara* 40b; b. *Nida* 49b; b. *Berchot* 16b; Midrash Rab Gen. 68:49.

<sup>2</sup>Note the exact same components in the declaration of the Name to Moses, Exodus 34:6-7.

the people in order that He might bless them teaches us that God's blessings, while bound up in the one-to-one relationship He has with each believer (note that every "you" in the blessing is singular, not plural<sup>3</sup>), also have a basis in the larger, corporate nature of God's family. He could have given this exercise to each family, or even to the individual within the family, but He did not. He gave it to the Aaronic Priests, the chosen group of servants who represented the people to God as their intercessor, but in this instance sought God's blessings upon the people. "Why," we might ask, "does God employ the priests to convey the blessing rather than blessing the people directly?"

The obvious answer is that God's blessings come through the mediatorial work of His chosen Priests, each one foreshadowing the final and ultimate priest, Yeshua. All the promises of God are "yes" (established) and "amen" (confirmed) in Yeshua (2 Corinthians 1:20). But there may be a further point to note here as well, that God's blessings come to those who walk by faith, and faith is best demonstrated in one's willingness to submit to God's ways. Such submission to God's is often tested when called upon to submit to His appointed authorities. In this case, Priests, themselves sinners, are God's appointed "blessers"—those privileged to bless the people through obeying God's command to pronounce the Blessing. But only as the people recognized God's appointment of the priests would they be in a position to receive His blessing.

## *II. The Text Itself: What Does it Mean?*

The Blessing which was given to the Aaronic Priests by which they were to invoke God's name upon the people is found in three lines, each line made up of a pair of verbs connected by the Hebrew letter *vav* (translated "and") in which the Divine Name always stands second in the line.

The Lord bless you and keep you  
The Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you  
The Lord lift up His face upon you and give you peace.

Our first question is whether or not the Blessing contains six actions or three. Does God (1) bless and (2) keep, (3) make His face shine and (4) be gracious, (5) life up His face and (6) give peace, or should we understand the text to be three actions, each described by a pair of words: (1) bless by keeping, (2) make His face shine as an outpouring of His gracious nature, and (3) lift up His face by which His peace would be known?<sup>4</sup>

Our answer will hinge on the interpretation of the connecting *vav* ("and") in each line. This single Hebrew letter often indicates the simple conjunction "and," but it can also be understood in a continuative sense, meaning "that is," making the second clause of a two-clause line function as further explanation or amplification of the initial clause.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>The singular pronoun can be used to denote the corporate identity, but I would suggest that when the singular is used in texts where God is addressing Israel, there is always some emphasis upon the one-to-one relationship with Him. Note the use of the singular "you" in the initial giving of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4ff) which is changed to the plural "you" (in the majority of the lines) in the reiteration of the Shema (Deuteronomy 11:13ff).

<sup>4</sup>See the comments of Milgrom, *Numbers* in *The JPS Torah Commentary* (JPS, 1990), 51.

<sup>5</sup>See the remarks of Walke and O'Conner, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Eisenbrauns, 1990), 652-53, in which this use of the *vav* is called expegetical; Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline*,

It seems to me that this second option for the use of the *vav* (“and”) fits the context best,<sup>6</sup> for in each case the first member of the pair is general, while the second member is specific or resultative. For instance, in the first line, “bless you” is broad in scope, while “keep you” narrows it to a specific realm. Likewise, in the second clause “make His face shine” is more clearly defined by “be gracious.” Finally, the opening of the third clause with the general “lift up His face” is defined more precisely by the phrase “give you peace.” Thus, I would offer the following expanded paraphrase:

The Lord bless you, that is, may He keep you;  
The Lord make His face shine upon you, that is, may He demonstrate His grace to you;  
The Lord lift up His face upon you, that is, may He give you true peace.

The structure of the Blessing is clear from the Hebrew text. Each line increases by two words (3, 5, 7), and by five letters (15, 20, 25). The effect is one of crescendo as the Blessing ends with שלום, “peace,” its high-point.

The question of the larger context is a difficult one: why would the priestly blessing follow the laws of the Nazarite? While some commentators think there is no clear connection,<sup>7</sup> I would suggest that the reason the two are found together is bound up in the fact that Nazarite exemplifies the desire for pure and intimate relationship with God. Entirely separate from death and that which symbolically resembles the shedding of blood (juice from the vine), the Nazarite is given over entirely to God, the God Who is life itself and the source of all life. Indeed, the Nazarite attains the level of priestly sanctity, at least by all appearances,<sup>8</sup> as one who draws near to the very Presence of God. Thus, the Priestly Blessing, which evokes the Name of the living God upon the people, follows the Nazarites laws naturally, for the ultimate blessing which God bestows upon His people is to dwell with them as both the Giver and Sustainer of life.

### *The First Blessing: Bless, that is, Keep*

The verb for “bless” is בָּרַךְ, *barach*, and is a broad term related to the noun בְּרֵךְ, *berech*, “knee” and thus can mean (particularly in the piel stem) “to adore on bended knee,” “to bless someone or something.” It is common to hear this word (in the passive form) at the beginning of nearly every Hebrew blessing, and rightly so, for God, the Creator of heaven and earth, deserves such adoration. But to have the tables turned—to have God bless mortal man—this is surely an outpouring of His grace, for no person can ever say he deserves Divine blessing. Yet God blesses His children with posterity (Genesis 28:3; Deuteronomy 1:11), with material wealth (Genesis 24:35), with land (Genesis 35:12; 48:3), with health and victory (Deuteronomy 7:12-16), with children, (Psalm 127:3), and

2nd ed. (Univ of Toronto, 1976), 70-71, calling this use pleonistic or explicative.

<sup>6</sup>It is also clear that the Masoretes intended the blessing to be read as three lines of two, not six clauses, for they mark the end of each line as one of the *setumot* (marked with a ס in the Hebrew text).

<sup>7</sup>Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 51, simply states that “a satisfactory explanation of the occurrence of the Priestly Benediction in its present setting [that is, following the laws of the Nazarite] has yet to be found.”

<sup>8</sup>Note the article in this issue of BZ by T. Lancaster on the Nazarite, where he shows a number of reasons why the Nazarite was viewed as though he were a priest. Rambam taught that the Nazarite attains the sanctity of the Cohen HaGadol (Guide to the Perplexed, 2:600-601 of the Univ. of Chicago Press edition, Shlomo Pines, ed. I am indebted to Jeffrey Feinberg for this reference.)

with strength and peace (Psalm 29:11), just to name a few. But the greatest blessing He bestows upon His own is His very presence as Shield and Savior (Deuteronomy 33:29).

Thus, in the Priestly Benediction, the blessing of God is summed up in His keeping power: “Adonai bless you, that is, keep you.” Once again, the word translated “keep” is a very common Hebrew term (שמר, *shamar*) meaning “to guard,” “to protect,” “to be in charge of.” From our standpoint we are admonished to “keep His covenant” (Exodus 19:5) by “loving” Him and “keeping” His commandments (Exodus 20:6). We “keep” His commandments by doing them (Exodus 24:7) and by guarding or protecting them so that they can be done. Yet in our own strength we are unable to “keep” ourselves from the inevitable evil of this fallen world. All the strength we can muster, whether of man (symbolized by the “thigh”) or beast (symbolized by the “horse”)<sup>9</sup>, we stand in great need of being guarded from the impending dangers, both physical and non-physical, which we will inevitably face as God’s children. Surely our lives, both in this world and in the world to come, are in the secure hands of our God. This is blessing indeed!

### *The Second Blessing: God’s Shining Face*

In contrast to the first blessing which utilized common terms, the second blessing is shrouded in idiomatic language. What does it mean to have one’s face “shine?” The Hebrew verb is אור (same consonants for the Hebrew word “light”) which means “to shed light, illuminate” or “become light.” The meaning of the phrase can best be understood by its opposite, “to hide one’s face.” Note, for instance, the language of the curses in the giving of the covenant:

Deuteronomy 31:17-18 “Then My anger will be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them and hide My face from them, and they shall be consumed, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them; so that they will say in that day, ‘Is it not because our God is not among us that these evils have come upon us?’ “But I will surely hide My face in that day because of all the evil which they will do, for they will turn to other gods.

Note, for example, the same phrase used by the Psalmist:

Psalm 27:9 Do not hide Your face from me, Do not turn Your servant away in anger; You have been my help; Do not abandon me nor forsake me, O God of my salvation!

Here we see that “hiding the face” is associated with anger, punishment, and abandonment. “Hiding one’s face” is to remove one’s presence, while “illuminating one’s face” is to engage in opened-faced companionship. Thus, the result is His blessed presence on the one hand, and the withdrawal of His presence on the other.

In fact, the many times that our English Tanakh speaks of the “presence of God,” what usually lies behind the English word “presence” is the Hebrew word פנה,<sup>10</sup> *penah*, “face.” For example, the bread of the Tabernacle and Temple is literally the “bread of the face” (Exodus 25:30ff), translated “bread of the presence.” In the Eden story when Adam and Chavah hid themselves from the “presence” of the Lord, the Hebrew text

<sup>9</sup>Psalm 147:10.

<sup>10</sup>The Hebrew word פנה is only found in the plural in the Tanakh, thus פניה, perhaps indicating the two sides of the face.

has the word “face”—they hid themselves from the Lord’s face. The Psalmist speaks of the salvation of the Lord’s presence, that is, His “face” (Psalm 45:5 [Hebrew 45:6]). And Isaiah speaks of the Angel of the Lord as the Angel of His presence, but literally the Hebrew has “the Angel of His face” (Isaiah 63:9). Thus, to “illumine His face upon you” means “to make His very presence known,” to dwell with you as a friend, to engage in genuine companionship. If “hiding one’s face” is the Hebrew way to say “abandon, forsake” and “be angry with,” then “to illumine one’s face” is “to dwell with,” “to engage in friendship with,” “to be at peace with.”

Thus, the “shining of God’s face,” that is, His presence, brings help in the time of trouble (Psalm 22:24[25]), secures our salvation (Psalm 31:16[17]), brings restoration (Psalm 80:3[4], etc.), is the source of joy in one’s life (Psalm 89:15[16]), and instructs in Torah (Psalm 119:135). In short, to live in the “light of God’s face,” that is, in His presence, is to live out the very purpose for which we were created, to commune with God in the context of an abundant life. It is this idea which Paul has in mind when he writes:

For God, who said, “Light shall shine out of darkness,” is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Messiah.<sup>11</sup>

It was this same idea, of God’s presence among His people, that the Sages had in mind as they speak of God’s face in the final prayer of the Eighteen Benedictions (Shemonei Esrei).

... Bless us, our Father, all of us as one, with the light of Your countenance, for with the light of Your countenance You gave us, Adonai our God, the Torah of life and a love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life, and peace. . . .

The second member of this blessing is “and be gracious to you.” God illumines His face, that is, causes His presence to dwell with us as a matter of His pure and undeserved grace. “Be gracious” translates the Hebrew verb חָנַן, “to show favor,” “be gracious towards.” Here we learn a two-fold truth: first, that God’s presence is not something anyone can demand, and secondly, that He exercises His sovereign right to make His presence known to whom He chooses.<sup>12</sup> In fact, in the context of this great Priestly Benediction, it becomes clear that God, making His presence known to mortal man, displays the zenith of His grace. That the eternal, sovereign Almighty, infinite in purity and holiness, should dwell with finite mortals who are sinners is, to our finite minds, beyond the realm of possibility. What is more, that He should even desire such an arrangement baffles the mind. But not only has He desired to dwell with man, He has secured the way for such friendship through His Messiah Yeshua. He who is “enthroned above the cherubim” (Psalm 80:1; 99:1) willingly “looks toward” the one with a contrite heart, who trembles at His word (Isaiah 66:2). By His infinite grace our Creator has revealed Himself as Immanuel, “God with us,” for we see the Shekinah shining in the face of Yeshua HaMashiach.<sup>13</sup> “In Your light, we see light.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup>2 Corinthians 4:6.

<sup>12</sup>Note Yeshua’s words in Matt. 11:25— “At that time Yeshua answered and said, “I praise You, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You did hide these things from the wise and intelligent and did reveal them to babes.”

<sup>13</sup>2 Corinthians 4:6.

### *The Third Blessing: God's Lifted Countenance which Brings Peace*

The third and final blessing of the Aaronic Benediction is "The Lord lift up His face upon you and give you peace." Like the second blessing which employed the idiom "shine His face," this blessing uses idiomatic language in the phrase "lift up His face."

Found most often in the context of a petitioner coming with a request, the "lifting of the face" normally applies to the one asking, not the one granting the request (e.g., Genesis 19:21). The petitioner's face is said to be lifted, for instance, when the King grants the request (1 Samuel 25:35; 2 Kings 3:14; cf. Job 42:8, 9). In the Priestly Blessing, however, it is the King's face that is lifted. How is this turnabout to be explained? The answer comes by comparing the meaning of the opposite phrase, "to have one's face fall." Note the Lord's word to Cain:

"Then the LORD said to Cain, 'Why are you angry? And why has your countenance [face] fallen?'" (Genesis 4:6)

Similarly, consider God's promise to Jeremiah:

"Go, and proclaim these words toward the north and say, 'Return, faithless Israel,' declares the LORD; 'I will not look upon you in anger. [Literally, 'I will not cause my face to fall against you.'] For I am gracious,' declares the LORD; 'I will not be angry forever.'" (Jeremiah 3:12)

In these examples the Hebrew uses the idiom of a "fallen face" to describe a "frown in the context of anger." Thus, "lifting one's face" would describe a "smile and the disposition of favor." To "lift one's face upon someone else," then, is simply the ancient Hebrew idiom for "smiling at someone." A petitioner smiles when his request is granted.

We now can understand the meaning of the third blessing: "The Lord smile upon you, that is, grant you peace." What this blessing contains is the simple yet profound truth that God smiles upon His children. Even though some earthly fathers may hide their faces from their children, and even approach them with "fallen faces," our heavenly Abba is pleased with us—He smiles as we come into His presence. Here is peace which passes understanding—peace which can endure, peace which offers and nourishes friendship.

Thus, shalom in this context is far more than the cessation of hostility. It carries with it the primary sense of "complete," "whole," or "lacking nothing."<sup>15</sup> What is more, coupled together with the smile of God, shalom here takes on the sense of "friendship," the same meaning it has in the combination "covenant of peace" (=covenant of friendship, Numbers 25:12; Isaiah 54:10). Nothing is more fulfilling than friendship with God. Abraham was known as the "friend of God" (2 Chronicles 20:7; James 2:23), for through faith in God and what He had promised, Abraham obeyed God and walked in His presence. He had learned that there is no greater peace than knowing that God smiles upon your life and actions. Moreover, a genuine friendship with the Creator

<sup>14</sup>Psalm 36:9. The difference between God's "presence" and what theologians have coined as His "omnipresence" is that the latter defines Him as infinite in time and space, while the former speaks of unhindered communion. See the comments in Tim Hegg, "The Holies of Holies" *BZ*, 64(June, 2000), 27.

<sup>15</sup>Shalom (שָׁלוֹם) is based upon the verb שלַם, *shalam*, meaning "be finished, completed."

fulfills life in such a way so that one is able to give to others. Herein lies the pattern for successful relationships: satiated with the wealth of God’s friendship, I have plenty to give to others.

*Being Blessed: The Present-Day Application*

In ancient times the High Priest would pronounce the Benediction of Numbers 6:24 over the people at the morning and evening offerings. They would ascend a platform called the *dukhan* and pronounce the blessing with their hands uplifted.<sup>16</sup> During the Second Temple period, the Priestly Blessing was pronounced outside of the Temple in the synagogues, though “Adonai” was substituted for the Sacred Name.<sup>17</sup> After the destruction of the Temple, those with priestly lineage continued the practice of pronouncing the Blessing in the synagogues, and it was incorporated into the final benediction of the *Shemonei Esrei* (Eighteen Benedictions). While customs differ from place to place, in Eretz Israel it is traditional to recite the blessing at the Morning and Musaf services every Shabbat, and in Jerusalem, every day.

As believers in Messiah Yeshua, we know that our High Priest “ever lives to make intercession for us” (Hebrews 7:25). We may therefore believe that, like the High Priests of old, He regularly pronounces the Priestly Benediction upon His people. In fact, if the prayer recorded in John 17 is indicative of Yeshua’s current intercession for us (and I think it is), then we may note the interesting parallels between the Aaronic Benediction and this prayer:

Petitions of John 17

- |   |  |                                      |
|---|--|--------------------------------------|
| 1. Glorify Your Son, v. 1               |  |                                      |
| 2. Keep them in Your Name, v. 11        |  | Bless and Keep                       |
| 3. Keep them from the Evil One, v. 15   |  |                                      |
| 4. Sanctify them in the truth, v. 17    |  |                                      |
| 5. That they may all be one, v. 21      |  | Make known Your presence and grace   |
| 6. That they be with Me, v. 24          |  |                                      |
| 7. That your love may be in them, v. 26 |  | Show Your smile and grant friendship |

As the petitions of Yeshua’s intercession become a reality in His people, surely His first request will be realized—the Son will be glorified!

*Conclusion*

The context of the Priestly Blessing concludes with Numbers 6:27, “So they shall invoke [literally “place”] My name on the sons of Israel, and I then will bless them.” The blessing may be summed up as the honor of carrying the Name of God, that is, living in a way that speaks forth the attributes contained in the Name. God is willing to bless us by keeping and guarding us, by making His presence known to us as a constant demonstration of His grace, and by smiling upon us as we enjoy His friendship. The next time you hear the Priestly Blessing solemnly pronounced upon you, may it have

<sup>16</sup>m.*Middot* 2:6; m.*Tamid* 5:1; 7:2; m.*Sota* 7:6; b.*Megillah* 18a.

<sup>17</sup>b. *Sota* 40b.



renewed significance for your walk with the Almighty!