

CURRENT TALMUD PASSAGE

Posted April 11, 2002 by Rabbi Judy Abrams. Please refer to Maqom's home page for information about previous passages.

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Exciting Developments in Long-Term, Intensive Talmud Study at Maqom!

About one year ago, I offered those who study Talmud with Maqom the option of working with me on a one-on-one basis to do research and create articles about rabbinic literature that would be posted [here](#) at Maqom. With this article, that project is bearing its first fruit. I hope you enjoy reading Rabbi Louis Rieser's research and the papers that have yet to come.

--Rabbi Judith Z. Abrams, Ph.D.

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THE PRIESTLY BENDICTION: THE POWER OF THE WORD

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There is probably no more powerful prayer, one so universally recognized and sought, no prayer so poetically constructed as the priestly benediction (Numbers 6:24-26). It is constructed of 3,5 and 7 words in each respective verse. There are 15, 20 and 25 letters in the verses. When arranged as a pyramid, the center words contain the heart of the blessing itself: Adonai panav elecha.

Y'varech'cha **Adonai** v'yishm'recha
Ya'eir Adonai **panav** eleicha vi'huneka
Yisa Adonai panav **elecha** v'yaseim l'cha shalom

The midrash gives us a rich array of alternatives from which to pick when understanding the meaning of these words:

"May the Lord bless you" with riches "and guard you" from robbers... "[May God] bless you" with sons "and guard you" with daughters, for the latter need protection. May God "bless you" with wealth "and guard you" that you may perform good deeds with it...R. Natan expounds: May He "bless you" as regards your possessions "and guard you" as regards your persons... "And guard you", i.e., that others will have no dominion over you... "and guard you", i.e., from the armful demons who surround you.

"And keep you" is that He will keep with you the covenant made with your ancestors... "And keep you" means, He will keep your soul in the hour of death... "And keep you" He will keep your foot from Gehenna... Thus Israel is both blessed and guarded. (Numbers Rabbah 11:5)

"The Lord make His face to shine upon you"; may He give you brightness of eyes... may He regard you with a bright countenance and not with an indignant one. "To shine" with the light of Torah; it implies: May He enlighten your eyes and heart in the Torah and give you sons who will be scholars.

"And be gracious unto you." We now know that they are blessed and protected and that the Shechinah is among them. How do we know that in addition they are to be favored with knowledge and

understanding? Because Scripture states, "and be gracious unto you." This accords with the prayer in which we say: "You graciously give me knowledge and teach mortal understanding." Another exposition of the expression, "And be gracious unto you" is: May He grant you knowledge so that you may be gracious to one another and compassionate to one another.... "And be gracious to you" means that God will graciously grant you children.... "And be gracious unto you" implies that He will graciously grant you your desires.... "And be gracious unto you": May He rear up prophets from you.... And be gracious unto you": May He impart His grace unto you wherever you go.... "Be gracious unto you" in your study of Torah... And be gracious unto you": by granting you gifts that you have not earned.... And be gracious unto you": by liberating you from subjection to foreign kingdoms.... "And be gracious unto you": by redeeming you. (Numbers Rabbah 11:6)

"The Lord lift up His countenance upon You, etc." may He remove his anger from you... "And give you peace", that is, peace when you come in, peace when you go out, peace with all men.... R. Shimon bar Halafta said: Great is peace, for no vessel can retain blessing so effectively as peace.... "And give you peace." This is to tell you that the blessings in themselves are of no avail unless peace goes with them. Great is peace, for the seal of the whole Prayer is peace and the seal of the priestly benediction is peace. (Numbers Rabbah 11:7)

Numbers Rabbah is a late work. People often think that the books of Midrash Rabbah are all from the same time period because they are all in the same collection. However, Genesis and Leviticus Rabbah are the earliest sources on the Torah in this midrash collection while Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy Rabbah only reached closure some 200-300 years later.

The last passage talks about "sealing" the Prayer (i.e., the Amidah, the Shemoneh Esrei) with peace. There is a tendency in Jewish liturgy for parts of the service to end either with a mention of the Exodus or with a plea for peace.

This prayer is one for which we have good records going back 3000 years. An amulet was found at the Temple Mount dating from 1000 B.C.E. which has the priestly benediction written on it just as it is today.

Discussion Questions:

1. The sages obviously loved this prayer and gave it a wide range of meanings. Which of the interpretations of Numbers Rabbah do you like best? Which do you like least? If you were writing a midrash on the priestly benediction what would you say the words mean?
2. The sages were ambivalent about this benediction. Indeed, so much so that the Priestly Blessing is not translated because it contains the phrase "May He lift up His countenance upon you". This verb can be interpreted to imply that God "plays favorites" for Israel, and so it is not translated in order to avoid giving this impression to those who do not understand Hebrew, i.e. non-Jews. (B. Megillah 25a) Does God favor Israel? What does it mean to be the chosen people?
3. In some liturgies, one says a prayer during the priestly benediction that they may be given an interpretation of their dreams. Why do you think such a prayer is placed with the priestly benediction?
4. Have you ever seen the priestly benediction done in an Orthodox setting? The kohanim take off their shoes, cover themselves with a tallit and repeat each word as the cantor "feeds" it to them. The effect is quite filled with awe and just a bit spooky. Leonard Nimoy says that he came up with the hand gesture on Star Trek for "Live long and prosper!" from the way the priests hold their hands during the benediction. So the priestly system lives on even though the Temple is dust these two thousand years. Do we need priests? If so, how and if not, why not?