במדבר ד׳:כ״ד (כד) זַאת עֲבֹדַת מַשְׁפָּחָת הַגַּרְשֵׁנֵּי לְעֲבָד וּלְמַשֵׂא:

Numbers 4:24

(24) These are the duties of the Gershonite clans as to labor and porterage: There were three Levitical 'clans': the Gershonites, the Merarites, and the Kehatites. Each clan had a specific set of responsibilities for the transportation of the mishkan. The Gershonites carted the coverings, all of the skins and cloths that made the tent; the Merarites carted the beams and hardware, all of the clasps and attachments that held it together; the Kehatites had their obligations listed at the end of last week's parasha. They carried the holy objects like the ark, the table, the menorah and the altars. With each clan assigned to its respective area, the transportation of the mishkan could proceed without the need to re-assign roles every time the camp moved. Each clan was defined by its area of specialty and thereby contributed to the whole. No doubt, each clan took pride in its particular contribution of labor. The picture that emerges is one of teamwork and unity.

> במדבר ו׳:ו׳ (ו) כַּל־יִמֵי הַזִּירָוֹ לַה' עַל־גַפֵּשׁ מֵת לְאׁ יָבָא:

Numbers 6:6

(6) Throughout the term that he has set apart for the LORD, he shall not go in where there is a dead person. The Nazir is an individual who takes upon a vow of piety. Man or woman, this individual seized by zeal and religious fervor takes upon a set of restrictions including no consumption of any grape product, no cutting of hair and no contact with the dead. While not a Kohen, this individual has Kohen-like behaviors and lives in this pseudo-Kohen state until the completion of the term of the vow. It is fascinating that the Torah has this institution. It recognizes that a community consists of a range of individual valences towards the spiritual life. For some that life is a bothersome chore, and for others that life is the central focus, rendering all other aspects of life almost insignificant. We would argue that Judaism provides an outlet for the extreme zeal of the person inclined only to piety and exerts a constant pull on the individual who seeks detachment from anything religious.

The Torah, and rabbinic Judaism by extension, constructs a world in which everyday, "normal" piety is demonstrated by the observance of mitzvot and acts of *hesed*, a world punctuated by the rhythm of Shabbat and Festivals, and in which the relationship with God is mediated through the study of Torah and living as a sacred community; a world in which Israel is a vessel of God's name and a source of blessing to the world.

במדבר ו׳:כ״ג

כג) דַבֶּר אֶל־אַהָרֹן וְאָל־בָּגַיו לֵאמֶר כָּה תְבָרְכָוּ אֶת־בְּגֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אמור להַם: {ס}

Numbers 6:23

(23) Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them: We spent the entire book of Leviticus going through the functions of the Kohanim in great detail. They administered the sacrifices, tended to the people in their various states of disease and wellness, purity and impurity. They maintained the sacred center of the people and were the agents designated to secure God's presence in the midst of the community. And here they have a crucial role: they bless the people. They are the instrument through which God's blessing flows to the people. Today we experience this through the ritual of Birkat Kohanim or "duchaning", which is one of the strongest links remaining to Temple ritual. Thus shall you bless is more than just a set of statements; it is a prescription for a state of mind. A kohen needs to be in a state of joy and love to be a vessel of God's blessing.

> במדבר ו׳:כ״ד (כד) יִבָרֵכְדָ ה' וִיִשְׁמְרֵדָ: {ס}

Numbers 6:24

(24) The LORD bless you and protect you! What constitutes blessing? Rashi focuses here on material blessing. Rashi focuses here on material blessing. אַיָּתְבָּרְכוּ נְכָסֶיך *that your property be blessed.* In other words, acquiring property and wealth is understood as a fundamental element in well-being. People don't need much and property can become a burden but a life of poverty and destitution is not desirable. As we learn elsewhere, wealth is being happy with what you have. Midrash adds that you should be "protected from the evil inclination," which is to say that a person constantly making

choices, and that the *yetzer hara*, can be overwhelming. Learning how to exert control over one's evil inclination is the secret to a life of blessing. But we do not need to interpret this blessing too much. As we have witnessed over the last two weeks of rocket fire from Gaza, having protection is not something to be taken for granted. As tragic as the casualties were from the over 4,000 rockets fired, the fact that so many were spared from death either by Iron Dome, the preparedness of shelters, and by getting to safety in the nick of time, in itself should give one pause. We take our physical security from enemies and the elements for granted. We are history's outliers; we don't understand how blessed we are. במדבר ו׳:כ״ה

(כה) יָאֵר ה' ו פָּגָיו אֵלֶיךּ וִיחֻגֶּרָ: {ס}

Numbers 6:25

(25) The LORD deal kindly and graciously with you! Rashi: יַרָאָה לָךָ פַּנִים שׂוֹחֵקוֹת, פַּנִים צָהְבּוֹת:

May He show thee a friendly (more lit., smiling) countenance — a beaming countenance. Ponder this: Your face is a "reflection" of God's "face." In other words, the face you present to the world is a manifestation of the way you perceive God's face. The blessing here is a blessing of joy and grace. When's God's "face" is joyful and "beaming" to you, you will present a beaming and joyful face to others. That's a blessing!

במדבר ו׳:כ״ו

{כו) יִשָּׂא ה' ו פָּנֶיוֹ אֵלֶידְ וְיָעֵׂם לְדָ שֶׁלְוֹם: {ס} ב-2.6 מי

Numbers 6:26

(26) The LORD bestow His favor (lit. face) upon you and grant you peace! Once again the "face" of God is the main feature of the blessing. We interpret this metaphorically, meaning God's presence. Later on in the Torah, "hiding of the face" is a metaphor for God's abandonment. The worst thing a person could experience is God's abandonment; the best, God's presence. May God shine His face upon you, is the penultimate blessing, the blessing of God's presence. May God grant you peace, is the ultimate blessing. Recall the philosopher Emanuel Levinas (1905-1995) who meditated deeply on the significance of "the face." To Levinas the human face is a summons to the ultimate ethical responsibility, "Thou shalt not kill." God's "face" is the ultimate representation of ethical responsibility. May God *lift us His face* is another way of stating, May you be guided by a constant desire to live up to your

ethical responsibilities.

במדבר ו׳:כ״ז

(כז) וְשָׁמָוּ אֶת־שְׁמָי עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַאָּגָי אֲבָרְכַם: {ס} Numbers 6:27

(27) Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them. Perhaps the configuration of the hands during the Birkat Kohanim is a form of spelling out the letters of God's name. God's name, spoken, written, or configured by symbolic manual orthography, has great power. The priestly blessing is the symbolic placement of the divine name upon the people. Carrying God's name provides protection and elicits tremendous responsibility to live a moral life. But recall that the "placing of hands" has tremendous symbolic meaning. We saw that in Leviticus. It signified ownership and was the legal instrumentality to identify individuals. Thus, the symbolic placement of hands on the people while reciting this blessing not only constitutes a recognizable gesture of love but also ought to be understood as act of acquisition; the Kohanim serve as God's agents and the priestly blessing is the formula for acquisition. In Jerusalem, it is the custom to perform the Birkat Kohanim daily. God's acquisition of Israel renews itself daily in the center of God's world.

במדבר ז׳:י״א

(יא) וַיָּאֹמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָשִּׂיא אָחָד ליום נָשִׂיא אָחָד ליום (יא) וַיָּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה נָשִׂיא אָחָד נַיָּום יַקריבוּ אַת־קַרְבָּנָם לַחַנַבַּת הַמִזְבֵּח: {ס}

Numbers 7:11

(11) the LORD said to Moses: Let them present their offerings for the dedication of the altar, one chieftain each day. Thus begins the longest section of the Torah, the recitation of the tribal gifts. The Torah could have saved scribes throughout the centuries a lot of parchment by condensing this passage. But there is a deeper message in spelling out each tribal gift separately. 1. It's important to thank each individual separately. 2. It's important to recognize that while all the gifts are identical, each giver is different. "They didn't bring their gifts to imitate each other; they each brought their gifts out of their own will." (Simcha Bunam of Peshischa) Each gift was the same but each individual, either through comportment, demeanor, personality, or idiosyncrasy, brings out a different aspect of the gift, and thus brings a totally different, individuated gift. Shabbat Shalom!