

What makes the priestly blessing so perfect? Structurally it is a cadence of 3, 5, and 7 words made up of 13,

יְבָרַכְךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ: יָאֵר ה' אֲפָנִיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִחַנֶּנֶךָ: יִשָּׂא ה' אֲפָנִיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשְׂמֹךְ לְךָ שָׁלוֹם:	<i>May God bless you and guard you.</i> <i>May God shine his face upon you and be gracious to you.</i> <i>May God lift up his face upon you and grant you peace.</i>
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15, and 17 syllables. That gives it a nice rhythm. The word-pairs, בְּרַךְ-שָׁמַר, יָאֵר-יָחַן, יִשָּׂא-יִשְׂמֹךְ (*bless-guard, shine-grace, lift-grant*) create a series of tensions and resolutions, which, as we have seen on numerous other occasions where we have examined word-pairs, creates an internal commentary as soon as they are spoken. *Blessing* is echoed by *guarding* or protection. *Shining God's light* is paralleled by *God's grace*. The *lifting up of God's face* is completed by the *granting of peace*. The poetry of the blessing gives it simplicity and power. It is memorable and memorize-able. It is compressed with meaning and loaded with possibility. It conveys something beyond itself and, with the threefold invocation of God's name, it enables the person receiving it to feel, in almost a physical or visceral way, that God's name is actually being *placed* upon him or her. And it gives rise to endless interpretations. Including the following from the Tannaitic midrash Sifrei Bemidbar:

רַבִּי יִצְחָק אוֹמֵר: וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ - מִזַּעַר תְּרַע... דְּבַר אַחֵר: וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ - שְׁלֵא יִשְׁלְטוּ אַחֵרִים עָלֶיךָ... מִן הַמַּזִּיקִים... דְּבַר אַחֵר: וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ - יִשְׁמֹר לְךָ בְרִית אֲבוֹתֶיךָ... יִשְׁמֹר לְךָ אֵת הַקָּץ... דְּבַר אַחֵר: וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ - יִשְׁמֹר אֵת נַפְשְׁךָ בְּשַׁעַת הַמִּיתָה... יִשְׁמֹר רַגְלֶיךָ מִגֵּיהֶנָם... דְּבַר אַחֵר: וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ - יִשְׁמְרֶךָ בְּעוֹלָם הַבָּא... סַפְרֵי בַמִּדְבָר מ:א	R. Yitzhak said: May he guard you - from the evil inclination... May he guard you - so that no one else rules over you.. May he guard you - from the demons... May he guard you - may he preserve the covenant of your fathers for you... May he guard you - may he guard you at the end... May he guard you - may he guard your feet from hell. May he guard you - may he guard you in the world to come... Sifrei Bemidbar 40:1
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From what do we want to be guarded? This seems like a superfluous question. Wouldn't we want to be protected from everything?

After all, almost everything that can harm us. But at any given time in a person's life, there might be a specific thing that causes us to worry more than others. For example, someone in a state of financial crisis worries about money while someone in a health emergency worries about survival. A student writing an exam has different worries from a parent about to give birth. In other words,



invoke God as שׁוֹמֵר-protector. For the sake of brevity and space, I have omitted the citation of all the prooftexts, but each one of the items in R. Yitzhak's list has a biblical text associated with it. For example, when he says, *May he guard you so that no one else rules over you* he cites verses from Psalm 121, which is all about God as guardian, and if you read that psalm carefully, you will note that one of the things that is being invoked there is the sense of dread that one gets in being crushed by an external force. *The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.*



ה' שְׁמֹרֶךָ God is your guardian (Psalm 121) ה' צִלְּךָ עַל-יְמִינֶךָ God is the shade upon your right	sense of dread that one gets in being crushed by an external force. <i>The sun will not smite you by day, nor the moon by night.</i>
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there is no shortage of things to worry about. So what is R. Yitzhak doing here? He is trying to answer the *what does וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ mean* from the cues already located in a number of biblical texts that

R. Yitzhak obviously is aware that his list is not exhaustive. But he prompts us to think about all the things we dread. This is similar to what Leonard Cohen does in his poem/song *Who by Fire*. We recognize Cohen's nod to the *U-Netaneh Tokef* which invokes a list of all the ways the divine decree can be meted out on a person:

*Leonard Cohen: And who by fire, who by water
 Who in the sunshine, who in the night time
 Who by high ordeal, who by common trial
 Who in your merry merry month of may
 Who by very slow decay
 And who shall I say is calling?
 And who in her lonely slip, who by barbiturate
 Who in these realms of love, who by something blunt
 Who by avalanche, who by powder
 Who for his greed, who for his hunger
 And who shall I say is calling?
 And who by brave assent, who by accident
 Who in solitude, who in this mirror
 Who by his lady's command, who by his own hand
 Who in mortal chains, who in power
 And who shall I say is calling?*

**U-Netaneh Tokef: ...Who will live and who will die;
 who will die after a long life and who before his time;
 who by water and who by fire
 who by sword and who by beast
 who by famine and who by thirst
 who by upheaval and who by plague
 who by strangling and who by stoning.
 Who will rest and who will wander
 who will live in harmony and who will be harried
 who will enjoy tranquility and who will suffer
 who will be impoverished and who will be enriched
 who will be degraded and who will be exalted.**

It wouldn't take us very long to come up with our very own list of things from which we would want divine protection. To wit: A.I., Anxiety, Betrayal, Criticism, Dementia, Ennui, Falsehood, Gossip, Harm, Identity theft, Jealousy, Kitsch, Loneliness, Malevolence, Natural disasters, Oblivion, Pettiness, Quicksand, Reputation damage, Shaming, Terror, Uselessness, Vacuousness, Worry, Xenophobia, Yuckiness, Zealots etc. You get the point.

יאר ה' פניו אליך – יתן לך מאור עינים. רבי נתן אומר: זה מאור השכינה... דבר אחר: יאר זה מאור התורה... ויחונך – במשאלותיך... דבר אחר: יתן חנך בעיני הבריות... דבר אחר: ויחונך בדעת ובבינה ובהשכל ובמוסר ובחכמה... דבר אחר: ויחונך – יחנך בתלמוד תורה... דבר אחר: ויחונך – במתנת חנם...	May God shine his face upon you - He will give you light of the eyes. R. Nathan says: This refers to the light of the Shechinah, Another thing: May God shine - This refers to the light of Torah, and be gracious to you: in (the granting of) your requests, Another thing: Let him grant you grace in the eyes of all people, Another thing: and be gracious to you with understanding, insight, mussar, and wisdom. Another thing: and be gracious to you: in Torah study, Another thing: and be gracious to you: with gifts of grace,
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This text, also from Sifrei Bemidbar, attempts to explain what **God's light** is, and also does for the second

line of the priestly blessing, what R. Yitzhak did for the first, namely, it explores different ways that God shows **grace** or favor to human beings, through various biblical prooftexts (omitted here). **God's Light =The Light of the Eyes**. There may be several ways to interpret **the light of the eyes**. It may mean something quite literal, as in, simply, May God give you good eyesight. Not a bad blessing, especially for those of us who have trouble with our vision. But it could very well be interpreted as *being lit up* in the way that someone who experiences joy, radiates that joy from his or her eyes. We can all tell when someone is happy or depressed simply by looking at their eyes. Elie Wiesel used to remark often about being able to discern human suffering by looking at a person's eyes, especially those of children. Sometimes eyes are *dark*. And sometimes, they radiate light. What a blessing it is to be the kind of person who radiates from their eyes, and how wonderful it is to be around such a person! The glow is infectious. When **the light of your eyes shines** from your face it has the effect of literally lighting up an entire room. **The Many Ways of God's Graciousness**. When God **grants us our requests**, we feel fulfilment and gratitude, but we also feel buoyant, joyful, and a sense that we have been touched by something we cannot describe. We feel mystery and a sense of transcendence. That's one aspect of **grace**. Experiencing **grace in the eyes of all people** is another great blessing of life. Throughout the course of a day, in the various interactions we have with others, we all know what a

difference it makes if the person we are interacting with is kind to us. Consciously or subconsciously, we choose cashiers, tellers, post-office clerks, service people, employees and even companions because of something as simple as a smile. And we all get an unpleasant feeling when someone is not **gracious** to us. To be able to find grace in the eyes of all people, is one of life's great blessings. Of course, being endowed with **understanding, insight, mussar, (the proper way of interacting with others) and wisdom** is a great blessing. We all want that, and we all want to be around people who have those qualities. What does it mean to want God to be **gracious to us in Torah study**? It could mean that we want to find joy in Torah study and not frustration, a sense of wonder and wisdom, not a sense of alienation. There is, in this blessing, a veiled reference to the negative unintended consequences of Torah study: it can lead to arrogance and condescension. when it is not mediated by God's graciousness, it can lead to zealous and extreme behaviors and also, rather than bring people together, it can cause divisions. The blessing of **graciousness** through Torah study is demonstrated when Torah re-creates us as kinder, wiser, deeper, and more joyful human beings because of it. **May God be gracious to us with gifts of grace** or, as we would say, **with random acts of kindness**. **חנם** in modern Hebrew means **free**, as in **free of charge** - May you receive this kind of **grace**. Grace you don't have to pay for by sacrifice or any other way. And what a wonderful, wonderful blessing that would be.

וישם לך שלום בכניסתך שלום וביציאתך שלום עם כל אדם. רבי חנינא סגן הכהנים אומר: וישם לך שלום - בביתך. רבי נתן אומר: זה שלום מלכות בית דוד... דבר אחר: זה שלום תורה, "ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה' יברך את עמו בשלום."	And grant you peace: peace in your coming in and peace in your going out and peace with all humanity. R. Chanina, the adjutant high-priest says: "and grant you peace" — in your house. R. Nathan says: This is the peace of the Davidic kingdom, Another thing: This is the peace of Torah, of which it is written (Psalms 29:11) God gives strength (Torah) to his people; God blesses his people with peace.
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The last line of the blessing is the ultimate blessing, the blessing of **peace**. Here again, Sifrei Bemidbar tries to identify different aspects of **peace** as reflected in biblical verses. **Peace in your comings and goings** reflects the desire that we have throughout the journey of our lives. **Peace in the home**, there is probably nothing more important for a person's well-being than peace in your immediate surroundings. **Peace of the Davidic Kingdom** may in fact be a reference to **political peace** (a blessing of course) or a future messianic **peace** against which all of our present reality is measured. And of course, **peace of Torah** which is the ultimate **peace** of God's presence in the world. AMEN!

This parasha sheet is sponsored by Joanne Rosenberg and David Siegman to commemorate the yahrzeit of David's mother, Sarah Malina Siegman, z'l.
SHABBAT SHALOM!