

Shmini - A Close Analysis of Aaron's Blessing: Palms Up to God or Palms Facing the People?
Rabbi Eliot Malomet April 6, 2024 27 Adar II 5784 Shabbat Hachodesh

Whenever we use something for the first time, we experience a spark of joy. Whether it is a piece of furniture, clothing, or technology; or taking ownership of a new home, moving in, and having a first meal, we feel something special at these moments. The same is true for communities. When we completed our building in late 2009, we marked our transition from a collective state of *temporariness* to a state of *permanence*, with a joyous ceremony. The dedication ceremony in our parasha marks the culminating moments of a full week of dedication exercises for the priests and the tabernacle. Aaron and his sons have been sequestered in the complex for seven days, to create a temporal boundary between their life before and their life after their inauguration as priests. The period of seven days symbolizes creation, and here, they are being *re-created*. The eighth day, **יום השמיני**, is the first day of their new status as priests. Like all ceremonies, this dedication ceremony proceeds with its own *Seder*-order. The whole menu of sacrificial offerings is brought to the altar, each one in its prescribed manner, as per the laws we saw earlier in the book. Having done their part, Aaron and the newly consecrated priests anxiously await God's presence to appear. It is a moment of awe and trepidation as well as joy and anticipation. In this tremulous moment, Aaron raises his hands to bless the people, as it is said:

וַיִּשָּׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרֶכֶם וַיֵּרָד מִעֲשֵׂת הַחַטָּאת וְהָעֹלָה וְהַשְּׁלָמִים.	And Aaron lifted his hands toward the people, and he blessed them; then he came down from making the hattat-offering, the olah-offering and the shalom-offering. (Lev. 9:22)
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Commentators are divided about, a) how Aaron lifted his hands, b) what Aaron said in the blessing. Pre-eminent Leviticus scholar Jacob Milgrom says (and Ramban, see below) that Aaron faced the people and **his hands, of course, were raised toward heaven**. This prayer posture was common in biblical Israel, as illustrated by these two verses from the Psalms:



שָׁמַע קוֹל תְּהַנוּנִי בְּשׁוֹעֵי אֲלֶיךָ בְּנִשְׂאֵי יָדַי תְּהִי כֹחִי: אֶל דְּבִיר קִדְשֶׁךָ.	Listen to my plea for mercy when I cry out to You, when I lift my hands toward Your inner sanctuary. Psalm 28:2
שָׂאוּ יְדֵיכֶם קִדְשׁ וּבְרַכּוּ אֶת ה' קַלְדֹּב:	Lift your hands toward the sanctuary and bless the LORD. Psalm 134:2

Others, like Rashi, argue that in this moment, Aaron was actually performing the familiar *May-God-bless-you-and-keep-you...* Priestly Blessing. Rashi's comment is based on a Talmudic source that equates the reference to that blessing in Numbers 6:22-27 with this blessing here in the

book of Leviticus. The following is the Talmudic argument from Sotah 38a: In the book of Numbers the Torah says:

כֹּה תְּבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: 'בְּרַכְךָ ה' וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ... — "כֹּה תְּבָרְכוּ" בְּנִשְׂאוֹת כַּפַּיִם.	... Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them: May the Lord bless you and keep you...	The Talmud then claims:
"כֹּה תְּבָרְכוּ" בְּנִשְׂאוֹת כַּפַּיִם.	"Thus you shall bless" in the book of Numbers means that they are to perform the blessing with lifted hands .	

Explanation: The Talmud is saying that the word **כֹּה** means **thusly** not just **thus**; **כֹּה** means **do it this way; perform the blessing thusly**. In Numbers, Moses was not only giving Aaron and his sons the *sacred script* of the blessing, he was showing them the *sacred posture* of the blessing. He was not only telling them what **to say**, he was showing them what **to do**. **This is how you bless the people. You stand before them, with palms facing them, configured in this way and you recite these words. כֹּה-Thusly.** While this seems obvious to us, because we are so familiar with the ritual, we have to remember, that it wouldn't have been obvious to Aaron. When the instructions for the Priestly Blessing were given, he wouldn't have known what to say or how to do it! This fact, that no-one would have known how to do it, leads the rabbis to ask a very logical question:

אֲתָה אוֹמֵר בְּנִשְׂאוֹת כַּפַּיִם, אוֹ אֵינוּ אֵלָא שְׁלֵא בְּנִשְׂאוֹת כַּפַּיִם?	Do you say that the priests must recite the benediction with lifted hands, or do you say that perhaps they should recite it without lifted hands?
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In other words, they are asking: **how do you perform the blessing?** The Talmud continues:

נֶאֱמַר כָּאן "כֹּה תְּבָרְכוּ" אַתָּה אוֹמֵר כֹּה תְּבָרְכוּ	It is stated here (in Numbers), "Thus you shall bless," ie. do it thusly.	But wait! In Numbers it doesn't explicitly tell us exactly how to do it. We are told how to do it in
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Leviticus, that is, **if we presume** that when Aaron blessed the people at the dedication, he was using the Priestly Blessing.

וְנֶאֱמַר לְהֵלֵךְ "וַיִּשָּׂא אֶהָרֶן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרֶכֶם".	and it says there (in Leviticus, in parashat Shmini, with regard to the dedication of the Tabernacle): "And Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them."	And this brings the Talmud to the following conclusion:
מִה לְהֵלֵךְ בְּנִשְׂאוֹת כַּפַּיִם — אֵף כָּאן בְּנִשְׂאוֹת כַּפַּיִם.	Just as there (in Leviticus), Aaron blessed the nation with lifted hands, so too, here (in the Book of Numbers, the Priestly Benediction is recited) with lifted hands.	 Palms facing towards the people, configured with God's name, ש.

To summarize:

Leviticus: When the Torah describes how Aaron blessed the people at the tabernacle dedication it is explicit that Aaron raised his hands. 	Numbers: When the Torah instructs Aaron as to how to do the Priestly Blessing: it is does not explicitly say that Aaron raised his hands.
Leviticus: It is not explicit about what Aaron says.	Numbers: It is explicit about what Aaron says.
The Talmud's interpretive conclusion: In both instances, Aaron must have recited the Priestly Blessing with hands raised and palms facing the people.	

Analysis: Whether we say that Aaron's palms are turned *up to heaven*, or that they are turned *towards the people*, he stands facing the people in either posture. So then, what's the debate about? **Proposition:** When Aaron's hands are turned *up to heaven*, **he channels the prayers of the people to God**. He *lifts*, as it were, their prayers up to God. But when his hands are turned *towards the people*, **he channels God's blessings from God to the people**. He *places*, as it were, God's blessings (and God's name) on the people. **Analogy:** When parents bless their children on Friday night, or when the Kohanim bless the congregation during the Birkat Kohanim, they are symbolically acting as a channel for God's blessings. They are *placing* the blessings on their subjects. They are bringing God's blessings *down*, as opposed to lifting the prayers *up*. **Question:** In Leviticus, is Aaron placing God's blessing on the people, or is he lifting the people's prayer up to God? Some, like Rashi, think that he is bringing God's blessing *down* to the people; others, like Ramban, (see below) and Milgrom think he is lifting the people's prayer *up* to God. On the one hand, it's very compelling to think that Aaron is placing God's blessing on the people in this moment. But I find the argument that he is channeling the people's prayer to God more persuasive. **The Argument for Palms Turned Up:** There is a lot at stake in the moment of dedication, and therefore there is a lot of awe, anxiety, and instability in this moment. As anyone who has ever planned a bris, or a Bar/Bat Mitzvah or a wedding knows, the overriding sentiment of these moments is - *Please God, let everything be okay now; let this ceremony happen without any major mishaps or malfunctions*. Ceremonies are about imposing order over chaos; they take what is inherently unstable, (the agitated infant, the nervous adolescent, the anxious unwed couple for example) and overlay it with a veneer of stability. In less than three weeks we will experience this order and chaos as the Seder is about to begin. We will set a beautiful table after a day of tumultuous preparation and cooking. Guests will arrive, but some might be late. Everyone will need to be seated at a crowded table. There is noise and jostling. **God forbid that you sit someone in the wrong place! God**

Mazel Tov to Faith Rosh on your special birthday!
With love, from all your friends!

forbid that something might spill! God forbid that something is not cooked enough! And in **order** to impose **order** over this moment of chaotic instability, we chant the **order** of the evening: **Kadesh, Urhatz...** (And if we locate ourselves within the larger story of the Jewish people at this very moment, as we experience uncertainty and concern for the safety of Israel and the Jewish people throughout the world, we have a lot of instability upon which we need to impose a sense of **order**). Therefore, Aaron is **not** offering joyful Priestly Blessings of peace here; rather he is probably saying something similar to what Solomon said when he dedicated the Temple. This is Ramban's comment:

וַיִּתְּכֶן לומר כי אהרן פָּרַשׁ כַּפָּיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם וּבִרְכָה אֶת הָעָם כְּאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה שְׁלֹמֹה הַמֶּלֶךְ (מ"א ח:כב) וַיַּעֲמֵד שְׁלֹמֹה לִפְנֵי מִזְבֵּחַ ה' וַיִּפְרֹשׁ כַּפָּיִם הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיִּשָּׁם נְאֻמָּה (ח:נה) וַיַּעֲמֵד וַיִּבְרַךְ אֶת כָּל קְהַל יִשְׂרָאֵל קוֹל גְּדוֹל לְאָמֵר...	It is plausible to say that Aaron raised his palms to the heavens and blessed the people (here in Leviticus) just as Solomon did (in I Kings), as it is said, And Solomon stood before the altar of God and spread his palms to the heavens, and there it says further on, he stood and he blessed the entire congregation of Israel in a big voice, saying... (I Kings 8:22, 55)
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The content of Solomon's blessing is *May God be with us*, which, if you read between the lines, reveals his fear and anxiety that God may *not in fact*, be with him. Solomon, like Aaron at the tabernacle, had a lot to worry about as the Temple was being inaugurated. *Will God be with us? Will God reveal His presence to us?* Ramban argues further:

בְּרִכַּה זוֹ שִׁבְרֵךְ אֶהְרֹן אֶת הָעָם מֵעֲצָמוֹ סְתוּמָה הִיא וְלֹא פָּרַשׁ לָנוּ הַכְּתוּב מָה הִיא	The blessing that Aaron offers to the people of his own accord is unknown, and the text does not elaborate for us what it was that he said...
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So, according to Ramban, we'll never know what Aaron said here. Therefore, why should we conclude, like Rashi, that he recited the Priestly Blessing? On the other hand, why can't we imagine what he *would have* said? We know what Solomon said in his blessing. Why wouldn't Aaron have said something similar in his blessing? Thus, at the dedication, Aaron recited an undisclosed prayer to God *with his palms turned up*, **not** the Priestly Blessing; later on, sometime during the 40 years in the desert, he will learn the way to bless the people in the book of Numbers. That is when, instead of turning *his palms up towards heaven*, he will turn *his palms toward the people* and place God's name upon them, as per the instructions there:

וַיִּשְׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָנֹכִי אֲבָרְכֵם. בַּמּוֹת וּבַחַיִּים	And they shall place My name upon the children of Israel, and I (God) will bless them. (Num. 6:27)	שְׁבֵת שְׁלוֹמֵם!
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We have marked over 180 days of captivity for the hostages. 6 tortuous months for them and their families. May God watch over them and may they be freed now!

