Naso - The Theatricality of the Priestly Blessing

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וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר:
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמוֹר לָהֶם.
יְבָרֶכְךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ.
יָאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחֻנֶּךָּ.
יִשָּׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם.
וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֵם.

God spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: Thus are you to bless the Children of Israel; say to them:
May God bless you and watch over you!
May God shine his face toward you and favor you!
May God lift up his face toward you and grant you shalom!
So are they to put my name upon the Children of Israel, that I myself may bless them. (Num 6:23-27)

As poetry, the Priestly Blessing is spellbinding. Its poetic power emerges from a progression in the number of words, consonants and syllables in the three verses:

Verse	Words	Consonants	Syllables[1]
1	3	15	13
2	5	20	15
3	7	25	17

And also, from the pairing and parallelism of verbs and phrases:

Bless you.	*And watch over you.*
Shine his face toward you.	*Favor you.*
Lift-up his face toward you.	*Grant you shalom.*

As listeners, we get aesthetic pleasure and spiritual joy just hearing these verses. The form enhances the content, engaging our intellects and imaginations and enabling us to enliven our souls with plausible interpretations such as these:

יְבָרֶכְךָ וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ.	*God ensures his blessing by watching over us.*
יָאֵר וִיחֻנֶּךָּ.	*God enhances the shining of his face toward us by being gracious to us.*
יִשָּׂא וְיָשֵׂם.	*God encapsulates the lifting of his face to us by granting us peace.*

But by focusing on the poetry of these blessings, we miss the particulars of how they were performed.

כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ-*Thus are you to bless* invites much rabbinic interpretation as to the performance of the Blessing, which Maimonides synthesizes and compresses into one compact halakha. He writes:

כָּךְ לָמְדוּ מִפִּי הַשְּׁמוּעָה מִמֹּשֶׁה רַבֵּנוּ עָלָיו הַשָּׁלוֹם:
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ - בַּעֲמִידָה.
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ - בִּנְשִׂיאַת כַּפַּיִם.
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ - בִּלְשׁוֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ.
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ - פָּנִים כְּנֶגֶד פָּנִים.
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ - בְּקוֹל רָם.
כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ - בְּשֵׁם הַמְפֹרָשׁ. הלכות תפילה וברכת כהנים יד:יא

This they learned from that which was heard from Moses our teacher may his repose be peace:
Thus shall you bless - while standing.
Thus shall you bless - with upraised hands.
Thus shall you bless - in the holy tongue.
Thus shall you bless - faces opposite faces.
Thus shall you bless - with exalted voice.
Thus shall you bless - with the ineffable Name.
Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer and Priestly Blessing 14:11

Whether or not Maimonides intended it, these words read like a found poem.[2] The repetition alone makes it look like a litany that we might find in a mahzor or better: something that could be set to music.[3] Regardless, the content of this halakha, amplified in its form as a found poem, conveys to us the profound theatricality of the Priestly Blessing. We can associate each of these halakhic requirements with things that an actor has to consider while performing.

1. *Standing* relates to Blocking, *the deliberate positioning and choreography of actors on the stage*. (New International Performing Arts Institute). Standing allows the actor the maximum ability to define space on the stage and project to the audience. It stands to reason that something as important as the Priestly Blessing be performed while standing. Standing demonstrates honor, solemnity, power, and focus. That ought to be self-evident, but the rabbis as always, felt the need to provide the textual proof that one must stand for this blessing. They cite a verse from Parashat Ki Tavo where the tribes are instructed to ***stand and bless people*** (Deut. 27:12): אֵלֶּה יַעַמְדוּ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת הָעָם-*these are (the tribes) that will stand and bless the people*. The rabbis reason: מָה לְהַלָּן בַּעֲמִידָה — אַף כָּאן בַּעֲמִידָה-*just as it was required to stand and bless the people there (in Deuteronomy, on Mount Gerizim), so it is required to stand and bless the people here (for the Priestly blessing).* (Sotah 38a)

[1] This number depends on how you syllabicate God's name. The name we use for God A-DO-NAI has 3 syllables. Scholars believe that the unpronounced name of God would have consisted of 2 syllables.

[2] ***Found poems take existing texts and refashion them, reorder them, and present them as poems. The literary equivalent of a collage, found poetry is often made from newspaper articles, street signs, graffiti, speeches, letters, or even other poems***. From poets.org.

[3] This is not as farfetched as it sounds. Kol Nidre after all, is a 'found poem' comprised of legal text composed to annul vows. It derives its liturgical power not from its content but from its cantorial setting. Our favorite American Jewish band, Safam, set the powerful talmudic teaching: אָמַר רַבִּי אֶלְעָזָר אָמַר רַבִּי חֲנִינָא: תַּלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים מַרְבִּים שָׁלוֹם בָּעוֹלָם-*Rabbi Elazar said that Rabbi Hanina said: Torah scholars increase peace in the world* (Berakhot 64a) to a beautiful melody. In 2004 The Israeli group Shotei Hanevua set another 'found poem' from the Zohar called Kol Galgal to an unbelievably haunting melody. It remains popular over 20 years later with dozens of covers and hundreds of thousands of listens on Spotify.

2. *Raising hands* is about Gesture or Movement. In the Priestly Blessing the raising of hands is a grand gesture designed to signify the central act of the blessing, that is, ***the placement of God's name on the people.*** We can read the verse above quite literally: the priests are to say the exact words of the blessing and then they are to - quite physically - ***place*** God's name on the people in the way they configure their hands as letters. The blessing functions quite figuratively as a periodic imprinting of God's name, such that the person being blessed is re-validated with God's name on every occasion.[4] Again, the rabbis prove the requirement of raising hands by citing a text, Lev. 9:22, where Aaron raises his hands to bless the people. ***Just as there,*** *Aaron blessed the nation* ***with lifted hands, so too here,*** *the Priestly Benediction is recited* ***with lifted hands*** (Sotah 38a).

3. *In the Holy Tongue* relates to Script. While the script of the blessing is only 15 words long, it is packed with meaning. It has to be performed in the original Hebrew, unlike other important Jewish liturgical texts like the Shema, which according to the Rabbis could be recited in any language.[5] The power of the blessing relies on the poetics of original language. The other implication of having a specific script is that there is no room for improvisation. The person reciting the blessing was not allowed to go off-script and add anything.

4. *Face to face* relates to interaction with the Audience. The priest must ***face*** the people that he is blessing. Similarly, the people must ***face*** the priest.[6] The deeper meaning of this posture is obvious: the blessing is a manifestation of a relationship, and, as French Jewish philosopher Emanuel Levinas teaches us, there is nothing more relational than a face. The face he says, ***speaks to me and thereby invites me to a relation. It is a summons to responsibility. The word of God is located in the face***. Indeed, if the word of God is located there, might not the name of God be located there as well?

5. *Voice:* the ultimate instrument of expression. In performance of any kind, (other than mime of course!) there is probably nothing more important than the voice. For the Priestly Blessing we are being told here that the blessing should be recited **בְּקוֹל רָם-*in an exalted voice,*** but what exactly does that mean? There are actually two opinions, one based on the volume of the sound and the other based on the volume of emotional intensity. The first stresses that the Blessing should be loud enough for everyone to hear. The second stresses that it should be as loud as the conversation between two people, which conveys a sense that the Blessing is more an expression of intimacy than performance. Maimonides codifies the first opinion: volume of sound. That makes total sense, after all, what is the point of staging the Blessing if you can't hear it? But we should point out that another major codifier of Jewish law, Jacob ben Asher, offers what we could call the ***Goldilocks*** opinion. **לֹא גָדוֹל וְלֹא קָטָן אֶלָּא בֵּינוֹנִי-*not a big voice, and not a little voice, but a voice that is somewhere in between (a voice that is just right!)*** (Tur Orah Hayyim 128:1).

6. The Ineffable Name relates to the transcendence of the experience. How is this a theatrical element? Very simple: theater, when experienced fully, transports both the actor and the audience to an experience of emotional depth, spiritual joy, and deep connection. God is present in that moment, and that is why the ritual called for the use of the Ineffable Name of God, which could only be pronounced in the Temple and nowhere else. Evidently, the **שֵׁם הַמְפֹרָשׁ-*shem hameforash***, the Ineffable Name, was no longer pronounced after the death of Shimon Ha-Tzaddik, one of the last members of the Great Assembly, prior to the Tannaitic era (~300 BCE) and well before the destruction (70 CE). Today, when we perform the Priestly Blessing in shul, we use Ado-nai, which is not the ***shem hameforash***, but simply a substitution for the ***shem hameforash.***

There are plenty of theatrical elements to the Priestly Blessing. At its core it is about the relationship between God and the people. Blocking, Gesture, Script, Audience, Voice, and Transcendence are all components of the experience. We ought not forget that there is one more component. When the Kohanim gather on the bima to bless us, they recite a special blessing. ***Blessed are You, God, King of the Universe, who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron to bless his people Israel, בְּאַהֲבָה-with love.*** The ultimate theatrical element. **Shabbat Shalom!**

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[4] An amusing analogy would be customer loyalty punch cards. At some cafés you get a punch card for every cup of coffee you buy. When you max out the card, you get a free cup. The deeper purpose of the card is customer acquisition and retention. The act of punching the card has a symbolic power of validating you as a customer and making you feel honored. Placing God's name on us may not entitle us to a free cup of coffee, but it does validate us and make us feel honored. It also bestows upon us the added responsibility of bearing God's name in public.

[5] Berakhot 13a: *The source upon which the Rabbis base their opinion is,* ***as it is stated: "Hear, Israel"*** (Deuteronomy 6:4), *which they understand to mean that Shema must be understood. Therefore, one may recite Shema* ***in any language that you*** *can* ***hear*** *and understand -* ***— "שְׁמַע" בְּכָל לָשׁוֹן שֶׁאַתָּה שׁוֹמֵעַ.*** Regarding the Priestly Blessing however, it was more important to hear it in the original rather than understand it fully. The blessing would lose its semblance of authenticity if it were recited in translation. Theoretically, one should pray in one's own language, but we pray in Hebrew to signify our quest for authenticity, even if we may not always understand what we are saying.

[6] Many people turn away during Birkat Kohanim out of fear that they will "see" God's name or that they will be distracted by any disfigurement on the priests' hands. Or superstition. Or because that is what they have been taught to do.