

## Naso – 5783

**Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Zichrono Le'Bracha, Former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, who died at the age of 72 in 2020. This is an abridged version.**

At 176 verses, Naso is the longest of the *parshiot*. Yet one of its most moving passages, and the one that has had the greatest impact over the course of history, is very short indeed and is known by almost every Jew, namely the priestly blessings:

The Lord said to Moses:

“Tell Aaron and his sons, ‘Thus shall you bless the Israelites. Say to them “May the Lord bless you and protect you; May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you; May the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace.”’ Let them set My name on the Israelites, and I will bless them.”

[Num. 6:23–27](#)

This is among the oldest of all prayer texts. It was used by the priests in the Temple. It is said today by the Kohanim in the reader’s repetition of the Amidah, in Israel every day, in most of the Diaspora only on festivals. It is used by parents as they bless their children on Friday night. It is often said to the bride and groom under the *chupah*. It is the simplest and most beautiful of all blessings.

What gives the priestly blessings their power is their simplicity and beauty. They have a strong rhythmic structure. The lines contain three, five, and seven words respectively. In each, the second word is “the Lord”. In all three verses the first part refers to an activity on the part of God – “bless”, “make His face shine”, and “turn His face toward”. The second part describes the effect of the blessing on us, giving us protection, grace, and peace.

They also travel inward, as it were. The first verse, “May the Lord bless you and protect you” refers, as the commentators note, to material blessings: sustenance, physical health, and so on. The second, “May the Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you” refers to moral blessing. *Chen*, grace, is what we show to other people and they to us. It is interpersonal. Here we are asking God to give some of His grace to us and others so that we can live together without the strife and envy that can so easily poison relationships.

The third is the most inward of all. There is a lovely story about a crowd of people who have gathered on a hill by the sea to watch a great ship pass by. A young child

is waving vigorously. One of the men in the crowd asks him why. He says, “I am waving so the captain of the ship can see me and wave back.” “But” said the man, “the ship is far away, and there is a crowd of us here. What makes you think that the captain can see you?” “Because” said the boy, “the captain of the ship is my father. He will be looking for me among the crowd.”

That is roughly what we mean when we say, “May the Lord turn His face toward you”. There are almost ten billion people now living on this earth. What makes any of us more than a face in the crowd, a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the seashore? The fact that we are God’s children. He is our parent. He turns His face toward us. He cares.

The name we call Hashem – the name used in the priestly blessings, and in almost all the priestly texts – is God as He relates to us as individuals, each with our unique configuration of hopes and fears, gifts, and possibilities. Hashem is the aspect of God that allows us to use the word “You”. He is the God who speaks to us and who listens when we speak to Him. How this happens, we do not know, but that it happens is central to Jewish faith.

That we call God ‘Hashem’ is the transcendental confirmation of our significance in the scheme of things. We matter as individuals because God cares for us as a parent for a child. That, incidentally, is one reason why the priestly blessings are all in the singular, to emphasise that God blesses us not only collectively but also individually. One life, said the Sages, is like a universe.[\[1\]](#)

Hence the meaning of the last of the priestly blessings. The knowledge that God turns His face toward us – that we are not just an indiscernible face in a crowd, but that God relates to us in our uniqueness and singularity – is the most profound and ultimate source of peace. Competition, strife, lawlessness, and violence come from the psychological need to prove that *we matter*. We do things to prove that I am more powerful, or richer, or more successful than you. I can make you fear. I can bend you to my will. I can turn you into my victim, my subject, my slave. All of these things testify not to faith, but to a profound failure of faith.

Faith means that I believe that God cares about me. I am here because He wanted me to be. The soul He gave me is pure. Even though I am like the child on the hill watching the ship pass by, I know that God is looking for me, waving to me as I wave to Him. That is the most profound inner source of peace. We do not need to prove ourselves in order to receive a blessing from God. All we need to know is that His face is turned toward us. When we are at peace with ourselves, we can begin to make peace with the world.

So the blessings become longer and deeper: from the external blessing of material most inward of them all, the peace of mind that comes when we feel that God sees us, hears us, holds us in His everlasting arms.

As I look around this sanctuary, I am pretty sure there are not many who will remember what it was like in here during the High Holy Days. This community was blessed from its earliest days by a wealth of Kohanim. Among the founding families were the Katzmans who were three brothers and a first cousin and the Caplans who were four brothers, all Kohanim and all had more than a few sons. Duchanin, as it used to be called was when the Kohanim blessed everyone else. I often wonder where they all stood in those early years. I also remember when we ceased to include that ritual in our services. There was tremendous symbolism in the recreation of the priestly blessings as dictated in today's Parsha. However, we don't need the actual recreation to ponder the significance of the sentiments it embodies and how we ought to respond personally. May we always feel the love and favour the words were and still are meant to transmit to our each of us individually. Shabbat Shalom.