

## A Muse: Naso

“And God Spoke to Moses saying. Speak to Aaron and his sons saying: So shall you bless the children of Israel, saying to them: May God bless you and safeguard you. May God illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May God lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you. Let them place My name upon the Children of Israel and I shall bless them”. (Numbers 6: 22-27)

Notable in this week’s portion is the priestly blessing, bracketed however, by verses 22 and 27 which are contradictory. In verse 22 God instructs Moses to tell Aaron and his sons to bless the Israelites. However verse 27 indicates that the blessings origination point is God and not the priests. So are these blessing the domain of the priests or God?

Finding resolution to this quandary is in exploring the nature and intent of these blessings. The Abarbanel understands the first blessing as a reference to the physical dimension. Fundamentally, and as a prerequisite to all else, is man’s need to be protected from physical harm. This the Abarbanel infers from the usage of the word Lishmor, which means to watch or guard, usually in a physical sense. The second blessing references the spiritual side of man; seeking to come out of the dark into the light resulting in God illuminating His presence. The third blessing is that God shall not show his anger with the Israelites, and that there should be peace. The assumption is that the condition for peace is that there is acceptance by God of his people, absence of anger and only under those conditions can there be peace.

The Abarbanel suggests that in this third blessing there is another layer: While God can tolerate man’s non compliance with God, He has difficulty tolerating man’s non compliance with man. Thus, as a prerequisite for peace man has to be in harmony with man. The Abarbanel sites the discussion in the Babylonian Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 17b) regarding the convert who came before Rabban Gamliel and asked why at times the text states that God “shows favor” and at other times the text states that “God doesn’t show” favor (Deuteronomy 10:17). R’ Yossi Hacoen explains with the following parable: Someone borrows money from a friend and takes an oath on the life of the king that he will repay the debt. When he defaults on payment he asks the King for his pardon. The

king responds by saying, “don’t worry about how I feel and how I’ve been insulted-I hold no grudges, but try and seek forgiveness from him who you’ve defaulted on”. The laws governing the relationship between man and God are powerful but dexterous which guarantees God’s “yisa panim”. The laws governing man’s relationship with man is different and once man violates the trust of man, the “yisa panim” of God is tested. Man cannot receive God’s blessings without first being at peace with his fellow man.

Rabbi Ashlich, a 16<sup>th</sup> century French Scholar agrees with the Abarbanel with some emendations, the most important being that the second blessing is a requisite for the third. “May God illuminate His countenance” refers to man being open to receive the spiritual gifts as well as appreciate the need for maintaining and improving the social fabric of society. What is revealed is a series of blessings that graduate from the fundamental physical to the spiritual and only then to the sublime state of peace. Note also that in a literary sense the blessings graduate from the shortest verse to the longest verse for the third blessing. Having said this, the contradiction earlier cited still remains, buttressed by the Tanchuma (Numbers 6, 22) which states that it is God and not the priests who will bless the Israelites.

Rabbi Ashlich maintains that the task of the priest wasn’t to bless or pray for blessings. His role was to prepare the Israelites so that they could become the receptors of the blessings. According to Ashlich it is man’s obligation to prepare themselves and their society. God’s blessings can only be present in a benevolent society, a society open and receptive to receiving God’s blessings. In the words of Rabbi Isaac Aroma the author of the Akedat Yitzchak, as long as the ground isn’t tilled and sown properly, the dew and rain will have little or no benefit.

Peace, to be achieved must have the proper foundation as Rabbi Aroma points out. It isn’t a condition, but a value we all have to seek and which can’t be achieved through miracles, but via natural ways. The more we work at it by resisting and renouncing that which is anathema to man’s welfare the sooner we will be able to receive the peace we so

desire. The question we must ask ourselves however is how do we know what is anathema to man!