

## PARASHAT NASO



### אור מנורת הברכה

## The Light of the Menorah of Blessing

### ■ The Priestly Blessing

G-d's blessing flows in abundance to the Nation of Israel day in and day out – inter alia, via the open hands and fingers of the Cohanim as they recite the Priestly Blessing. Hashem, source of all plenty and blessing, precisely structured the Birkat Cohanim formula in 15 words and 60 letters.

As we analyze its design, we see that the Priestly Blessing is comprised of three short passages of three, five, and seven words, respectively, for a total of 15 - the numerological value of the Divine Name that is spelled with the letters *yud* and *heh*. This structure is the same as that of the seven-branch Menorah in the Beit HaMikdash, expanding outward from the center to both sides. It begins with three branches in the middle, below which spread out two more, making five, and below them branch out still two more, for a total of seven.

This, too, is precisely the way in which the Priestly Blessing is structured – from the center outwards.



*May G-d bless you and watch over you* (3 Hebrew words)

*May Hashem shine His face upon you and show you favor* (5)

*May G-d raise His face towards you and place peace upon you* (7)

As can be seen most clearly in this depiction of the Priestly Blessing, the word פָּנָיו, *G-d's Face*, is accorded a prominent, central position. Furthermore, the phrase ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, *Hashem's face upon you*, stands out three times: horizontally in both the second and third blessings, and vertically in the central column.

Aside from the symmetry, what can we glean from the physical parallels between the Menorah and the Birkat Cohanim? This: The function of the former is to give off physical light, while the Priestly Blessing gives off inner, spiritual light. This light is expressed in the middle passage:

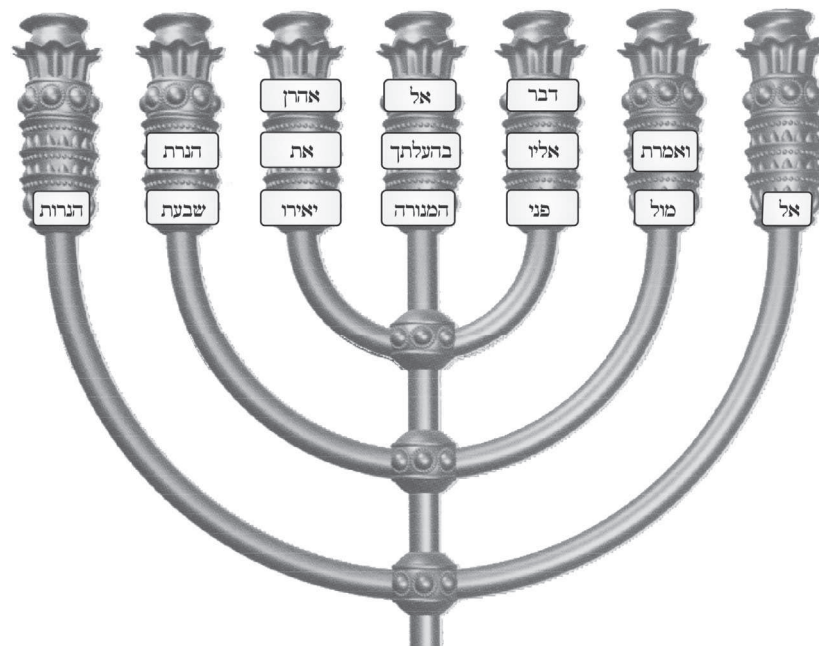
יָאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחַנֶּנּוּ.

*May G-d shine His countenance upon you  
and show you favor.* (Bamidbar 6,25)

The significance of this inner light is: Happiness, closeness, and loving acceptance. Similarly, it is incumbent upon each and every person to light the "Menorah" of his own face towards others, and show them joy, openness,

and warmth. In fact, the face is structured symmetrically somewhat like the Menorah: the ears are like the outer branches, the eyes and nostrils are parallel to the other branches going towards the center, and finally the central stem: the mouth. Just as the candelabrum's lamps shine towards the center (see Bamidbar 8,3, quoted below), so too, everything that a person feels via his senses – hearing, seeing, smelling – he expresses in his speech.

Support for this way of looking at the Priestly Blessing can be deduced from the sentences describing the lighting of the Menorah by Aharon HaCohen. The Blessing appears in Parashat Naso, followed closely afterwards by Parashat Behaalot'cha, which begins with the lighting of the Menorah in another 3-5-7 structure (Bamidbar 8,2):



*Speak to Aaron* (3 Hebrew words)

*and say to him: "When you light the lamps, (5)*

*toward the face of the Menorah the seven lamps shall cast their light."* (7)

Aharon and his sons, and all future generations of their descendants, are commanded both to light the Menorah in the Sanctuary and to perpetuate the Divine light in their blessing to Israel. The next verse in this passage describes how Aharon lights the Menorah:

וַיַּעַשׂ כִּן אֱהָרֹן אֶל מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְּנוֹרָה הָעֵלְיָה נִרְתִּיחָה בְּאֶשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֶת מֹשֶׁה.

*Aharon did so, lighting its lamps towards the middle lamp,  
as G-d had commanded Moshe. (8,3)*

This verse comprises 14 words – the numerological value of *yad*, meaning “hand” (and its 14 finger-joints). This is an allusion to Aharon’s hand that lights the Menorah. In a previous article<sup>1</sup> we showed that the 15-word verse depicting the placement of the Mishkan (in the center of the Camp of Israel) is flanked on either side by 14 verses describing the Camps of Reuven and Yehuda and 14 verses describing the Camps of Ephraim and Dan. We also saw how this expresses that which Israel sang at the Red Sea, “*The sanctuary of G-d that Your hands have founded*” (Sh’mot 15,17) – i.e., two hands (14 each) on either side of the Sanctuary.

### ■ Complementary Opposition

The Priestly Blessing is structured in the form of three pairs of complementary sides that stand opposite each other, as follows:

1. The first pair is: *May G-d bless you and watch over you*. “Blessing” and “protection” are the two sides, mutually necessary for each other. A blessing without protection and maintenance actually becomes a curse, as we read in the verses of *tokhecha* (rebukes and punishments), “*You will bring much seed out to the field, but the locusts will devour [the crop] and you will bring little back*” (D’varim 28,38). The blessing pushes forward, and is “reined in” by the protection.

This can be likened to one who studies very much but does not take the time to make sure to remember what he has learned. The sum total of his efforts is merely wasted time, like one who writes text on his computer but does not press “save.”

2. The second pair - *May Hashem shine His face upon you and show you favor* – is that of “finding favor” and “a shining countenance,” where the former stands opposite the latter and complements it. We cannot long show joy towards one whose response is negative. “Finding favor” is that which reflects back and allows the “shining countenance” to continue. We seek to find favor in G-d’s eyes so that He will continue to show us His shining countenance.

1. “*The Number of Names*,” Parashat Bamidbar

3. And finally, *May G-d raise His face towards you and place peace upon you* – Hashem will be willing to atone for Israel's sins and forgive them if among ourselves there is peace. Forgiveness cancels out our bad deeds, and “makes things right” – but peace goes one better, as it is reconciliation even without justification. Peace is the necessary complementary side of forgiveness and atonement.

### ■ Without Opposition

The Talmudic Sages teach us (Niddah 31a) that three partners cooperate in the creation of a person: His father, his mother, and G-d. His parents give him his physical body, and Hashem grants him his soul, as well as his ambitions to grow and develop.

Three also hover around the Priestly Blessing: Moshe, Aharon and Hashem. Moshe teaches the nation Torah and its commandments, Aharon the Priest guides them in living a life of peace, brotherhood and friendship, and G-d blesses the Nation with eternal existence. They each appear in the verses that introduce the Priestly Blessing. The first partner, Hashem, begins by turning to the second partner:

וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר.

*G-d spoke to Moshe, saying:* (Bamidbar 6,22)

G-d tells Moshe to turn to the third partner, Aharon:

דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר -

*Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying -*

Finally, the third partner, Aharon, is to bless Israel:

כֹּה תְבַרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֲמֹר לָהֶם.

*So shall you bless Israel, say to them:*

Each of the three partners has a unique function in the framework of the Priestly Blessing. The **first blessing** is that of “eternal life,” and it is in G-d's purview:

יְבָרֶכֶה ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶה.

*May Hashem bless you and watch over you.* (verse 24)

Only the eternal G-d can grant eternity. We saw above both the contrast and the mutual necessity of the two aspects herein. But behind the scenes we can see how there is no contrast at all; rather, the protection is actually

enwrapped within the blessing. We can understand this *brachah* thusly: “May G-d bless you, Israel, with natural and infinite growth, which will more than make up for your diminution caused by enemies and natural causes.” This is a Divine promise that Israel will never become extinct, despite our enemies’ evil designs against us. The blessing itself contains within it the concept of preservation: “May Hashem bless you and **thereby** watch over you.”

Let us now analyze the **second blessing**, which Moshe Rabbeinu was privileged to receive. It expresses shining countenance, happiness and appeasement. Moshe was granted this wonderful gift in the form of Divine radiance upon his face, as the Torah tells us: “*The Children of Israel would see Moshe’s face, that the skin of Moshe’s face had become radiant*” (Sh’mot 34,35). This is the man chosen to guide Israel in the fulfillment of the Torah and its commandments, so that they will be constantly bonded to Hashem in ties of joy and love. Accordingly, we explain the second blessing as follows:

יָאֵר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וִיחַנֶּנּוּ.

*May G-d shine His countenance upon you and show you favor.* (verse 25)

Again, the first part encompasses the second: The revelation of G-d’s shining countenance contains within it general favor and grace.

The **third blessing**, that of peace, is Aharon HaCohen’s blessing. Aharon was famous for being a pursuer and lover of peace, and one who loved Jews everywhere and brought them close to Torah. “His” blessing is:

יֵשׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיָשֵׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.

*May Hashem raise His face towards you,  
and place peace upon you.* (verse 26)

According to the outline we have seen in the previous blessings, here, too, the first part should include within it the second part, as follows:

Hashem will turn to you and ask that you bear His Name upon you, by walking in the way of goodness and integrity. That is, if everyone takes upon himself to fulfill his unique G-dly mission, jealousy and resentment disappear; no one has reason to compete with anyone else, and true peace reigns. Only when two people vie for the same “spot” is there jealousy and the like. Every manager and director, whether he runs a business, an institution, or even his own family, has to know that each of his underlings must be given a clear job definition; trouble results when two people have

the same assignment. Clear delineation of each mission and responsibility for it – this is the recipe for peace.

The Torah's account of the Priestly Blessing closes with this verse:

וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם.

*They will place My Name upon the Children of Israel,  
and I will bless them.* (verse 27)

This sums up the blessings: The Cohanim will guide the nation in “wearing” G-d’s Holy Name upon them, and this will pave the way for their reception of the Divine blessing. Moshe, too, blessed Israel in this manner after the 40 years in the desert:

וְרָאוּ כָּל עַמֵּי הָאָרֶץ כִּי שֵׁם ה' נִקְרָא עָלֶיךָ וְיִרְאוּ מִמֶּךָ.

*All the nations will see that G-d's Name is called upon you,  
and they will fear you.* (D'varim 28,10 )

This is also the contents of the Divine promise to Israel immediately after the Ten Commandments were given:

... בְּכָל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אֶזְכֹּר אֶת שְׁמִי, אָבוֹא אֵלֶיךָ וּבֵרַכְתִּיךָ.

*... Every place My name is mentioned,  
I will come and bless you.* (Sh'mot 20,21)

That is, “Wherever in the world is found a worthy and just basis for the mention of My name, I will come there and grant you My blessing. Similarly, whoever walks in G-d’s path and is worthy of bearing My name, I will come to him and bless him.”

## ■ Raising G-d’s Face to Israel

The Talmud (B'rachot 20b) poses a question regarding the Priestly Blessing, and offers an answer:

Rav Avira taught: ... The ministering angels said to Hashem: “Master of the Universe, Your Torah states that You “*will never bear Your face [i.e., show special favor to one party] or take bribes*” (D'varim 10, 17). But in the Priestly Blessing we read, “*May Hashem raise His face to you*” - You show special favor to Israel!”

Hashem answered: “And should I not show them special favor? I instructed them to recite a blessing for food when they eat their fill (D'varim 8,10) – yet they recite the Blessing After Meals even when they eat only an olive’s worth or an egg’s worth!”



The angels' question is not clear. Where did they see an example of Divine favoritism to Israel? What made them think that the words "*May Hashem raise His face to you*" mean that G-d shows them special favor? If this were the intention, the verse should have said: "*May Hashem raise your face to Him*," and not "*May Hashem raise His face to you*." We know this because when a judge shows preference to one litigant over another, he does not turn his own face to that party. He rather causes the preferred party to raise his own face; the judge "raises" the man's face – as is written, לֹא תִשָּׂא פָנֶי דָל, "*Do not raise the face of the poor man.*" (Vayikra 19,15)

Furthermore, the Torah itself explains what it means to "raise one's face." When the angel came to destroy S'dom and Amorah, Avraham's nephew Lot asked if he could be allowed to flee to the small city of Tzo'ar. The angel assented:

הִנֵּה נִשְׂאתִי פָנֶיךָ גַם לְדִבַּר הַזֶּה ...

*Behold, I have raised your face – shown you favor –  
also regarding this...* (B'reshit 19,21)

We see that the angel "raises Lot's face" when showing him a kindness! Why, then, do the angels understand "*May Hashem raise His face towards you*" in the Priestly Blessing as meaning that Hashem will show Israel special favor? The Tosafot commentary (to Niddah 70b) also raises this question. How are we to understand "*May Hashem raise His face towards you*"?

To understand the Torah's intention here, we must see if we can find a similar phrase elsewhere in the Bible. In fact, there is only one such verse describing someone raising his own face towards someone else. It is found in the Book of Samuel II, in the account of the long war between the forces of Sha'ul, led by his chief of staff Avner ben Ner, and those of David, led by Yoav ben Tzruiyah. At one point, Yoav's brother Asael chases after Avner, who turns his head back towards Asael and calls out:

... סוּר לְךָ מֵאַחֲרַי. לָמָּה אֶכְפֹּה אַרְצָה, וְאֵיךְ אֶשָּׂא פָנַי אֶל יוֹאָב אָחִיךָ?

*"Go away behind me; why should I smite you  
to the ground? How would I be able to raise my face  
to Yoav your brother?"* (Shmuel II 2,22)

Avner is saying that if he kills Asael, he will never again be able to "raise his face to Yoav" – that is, to turn to Yoav with any kind of request. Accordingly, the third blessing in Birkat Cohanim means: *May Hashem turn His face towards you and ask something of you...*



If so, we must now ask: What does Hashem request of us? The answer is provided by the above-quoted closing verse of the Priestly Blessing: ***“They will place My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I will bless them.”*** G-d requests that Israel bear His Name upon them! This is accomplished when Israel walks in His ways and fulfills His statutes and mitzvot. And the task of the Cohanim, all year long, is to teach the nation Hashem’s Torah and to guide them in how to bear G-d’s Name. As we read in the prophecies of Yechezkel:

וְאֵת עַמִּי יוֹרוּ בֵּין קֹדֶשׁ לְחָל, וּבֵין טָמֵא לְטָהוֹר יוֹדְעִים.

*They [the Priests] will teach My nation to distinguish between sacred and profane, and between impure and pure.* (Yechezkel 44,23)

The conclusion of the Priestly Blessing is thus not only a general summation saying that Israel *will be blessed* by G-d. It is rather mainly a directive that they *be taught* to bear G-d’s Name in the world, i.e., to follow His Torah and mitzvot. This is the essence of Hashem’s request of Bnei Yisrael in the third of the Priestly Blessings:

יֵשׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִשֶּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.

*May Hashem raise/turn His face towards you and ask of you something and place peace upon you.*

With this insight, we can now understand why the angels assumed that G-d was showing special favor to Israel. What was really bothering them was that they saw that G-d made a request of Israel only after He gave them His promise – unlike in other cases, when He first laid down His demands, and gave His promise afterwards. That is, whenever Hashem makes a “deal” with mortals, they must generally first fulfill their half of the bargain before He is to fulfill His side. For instance, He told Adam’s son Kayin (B’reshit 4,6-7): ***“Why are you angry? ... If you do well, you will be forgiven, but if not, then...”*** Kayin must first improve, and only then will G-d forgive him and accept his offering.

Another example is found in the Prophet Yeshayahu’s words to Israel: ***“If you are willing and obey, you will eat the best of the land. But if you refuse and rebel, you will devoured by the sword”*** (Yeshayahu 1,19-20). Again, the ball is in Israel’s court: If they obey, they will be rewarded. These are but two of many examples of this common pattern.

Here, however, in the Priestly Blessing, the angels rightly ask: Why do You, G-d, grant them two blessings, and make demands of them only in the third

blessing, namely, to walk in Your way and bear Your Name upon them? Is this not preferential treatment to Israel as opposed to the other nations? Does this not contradict that which the Torah states, that You “*will not raise [Your] face and will not take a bribe*”?

To this, the above Gemara tells us that Hashem answers as follows: “On the contrary, I am dealing with them very fairly – exactly as they relate to Me. They bless Me after eating even before they are obligated to do so! My commandment was that they should recite a blessing when they are satiated – but they have taken upon themselves to do so even if they have eaten only a *k'zayit* (28 grams) or a *k'beitzah* (57 grams)! Therefore, I, too, bless them [in the Priestly Blessings] before I am ‘obligated’ to do so, that is, before they have fulfilled their obligations.”

Truly, the Priestly Blessing is worthy of the sons of Aharon HaCohen – Torah teachers and priests who increase peace in the world.

