

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parshat Nasso

There is a widespread custom for parents to bless their children when they come home from synagogue on Friday night. The blessing for a boy starts, “May G-d make you like Ephraim and Menashe” and the blessing for a girl starts, “May G-d make you like Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah.” The reference to Ephraim and Menashe comes from the words Jacob said to them before he died (Genesis 48:20), indicating they would be the prototypical Jews worthy of emulation, and the female equivalents are the Matriarchs. The first part of the blessing focuses on these famous Jewish role models.

The blessing continues for both boys and girls with three verses from our Torah portion which constitute the blessing the *Kohanim* (priests) gave the Jewish people in the Temple. Every parent, even a non-Kohen, may bless their children using these verses. What is the deeper meaning of this universal blessing? Surely there are infinite possibilities of blessings one could give to his children, so why say this one?

A closer look at the three-tiered blessing of the Kohanim shows it encompasses all the blessings a parent would want for his children. The first verse (Numbers 6:24) says, “May G-d bless you and guard you.” Rashi explains the “blessing” here refers to one’s possessions increasing, and the “protection” refers to guaranteeing robbers will not come to steal one’s possessions. In short, the first blessing asks both for financial prosperity and for protection so one will not lose those material gains.

The second verse states, “May Hashem light up His Face to you and give you grace.” What is meant by the metaphor of Hashem lighting up His Face? *Onkelos* (2nd Century) says it means, “May Hashem shine His Divine Presence towards you.” *Akeidah* (15 Century) similarly explains the expression “May He light up His Presence with us” in Psalms 67 refers to spiritual blessing. We also find a similar expression in the final section of the daily standing prayer, in which we say “for with the light of Your Face You gave us the Torah of life,” indicating that when G-d gave us the Torah, it was as if He shone His Face at us. We need blessings to succeed in our religious endeavors, such as understanding the Torah as best as possible and having the ability to do the *mitzvot* properly. Succeeding spiritually and living lives permeated with an awareness of G-d’s Presence requires special blessing and does not come automatically.

But why is spiritual success described by the metaphor of the light coming from a person’s face, and why does this generate “grace”? Every person, on some level, seeks recognition and appreciation from the people with whom they interact. Whether it is from family, friends, or even co-workers, people want to receive approval from the people with whom they live. Very often people will spend hours to find a specific article of clothing, simply because they hope to gain the attention and approval of others by



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wearing this particular clothing combination. They do not care about the high quality fabric as an end in and of itself, but rather as a means to winning the favor and grace of the other person. When someone flashes a smile or a happy face indicating approval to another person, the person on the receiving end rejoices because he has received something more precious than material possessions. The face of a person is the key to his soul, and seeing the person's face light up means one is seeing another person's spiritual side and his inner self connecting to you. Only humans can smile and pour forth their feelings through their facial expressions, because only humans are endowed with a Godly soul. The Torah, which tells us the spiritual dimensions of the world and the ways people can touch into the metaphysical aspects of creation, came metaphorically through the light of G-d's Face because it is telling us all about the spiritual side of the world.

The third verse says, "May Hashem lift up His Face to you and give you peace." *Tosafot*, in his comments to the Talmud (*Niddah* 70b), explains lifting of the Face metaphorically refers to G-d going beyond the letter of the law, not punishing according to the measure of strict justice. In order to receive blessings from Hashem, we must rely on Him to act mercifully towards us and not mete out strict justice which could negate the blessings He wants to give us. Then we can have "shalom," the harmony of a life balanced with material and spiritual blessings.

When a parent blesses their child on Friday night, they wish for physical blessings, spiritual blessings, and the harmony of this balanced wholesome life. This blessing, given in the privacy of one's home, echoes the blessing that the *Kohanim* gave the entire nation in the Temple. One does not have to be of priestly descent in order to pray for this wonderful combination of gifts from Above.

Shabbat Shalom!

