

Not Yet a Nation of Priests...But Striving to be the Children of Abraham

Our Torah Portion famously includes the Priestly Blessing.

After discussing certain factors, limitations, and circumstances that would prevent a kohen (priest) from participating in offering this blessing, the Rambam comments:

Mishneh Torah, Prayer and the Priestly Blessing, 15:6-7

6. *A priest who does not have any of the factors which hinder the recitation of the priestly blessings mentioned above should recite the priestly blessing, even though he is not a wise man or careful in his observance of the mitzvot. [...]*

7. *Do not wonder: "What good will come from the blessing of this simple person?" for the reception of the blessings is not dependent on the priests, but on the Holy One, blessed be He, as [Numbers 6:27] states: "And they shall set My name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them." The priests perform the mitzvah with which they were commanded, and God, in His mercies, will bless Israel as He desires.*

Allow me to build on this teaching of the Rambam and extend its meaning to our time.

In the face of the plight and protest of People of Color in this country and in the face of heightened racial tensions, deep divides, social unrest and political uncertainty, many of us might feel overwhelmed by what may seem like our inability to make any impact in this country. Like the Rambam's case of the simple and unlearned Priest we may wonder as well, "What good will come from anything we do?"

Rambam's answer regarding this simple Priest is instructive: Perform your duty and leave the rest to God.

In other words, the moral question posed to each of us is one of action or inaction. The issue of whether or not these actions will yield any results is ultimately in the hands of God. Let us never use God, or what cannot be knowable to us, as an excuse for our own passivity and inaction.

We are also living at a time, due to the Coronavirus, in which we as Jews are currently unable to recite the Priestly Blessing as a community. What, if anything, can take the place of this blessing?

In Genesis 12, God says to Abraham:

בראשית פרשת לך לך פרק יב

א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְקֹוֹק אֶל אַבְרָם לֵךְ לְךָ מֵאֶרֶץ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְּךָ וּמִבְּיַת אָבִיךָ אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲרָאָךְ:
ב) וְאֶעֱשֶׂךָ לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל וְאֶבְרַכְךָ וְאֶגְדָּלְהָ שְׁמֶךָ וְהָיָה בְּרָכָה:

Genesis 12:1-2

1 And the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.

2 And I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, and I will aggrandize your name, and [you shall] be a blessing.

More than granting God's blessing, we are called to be a blessing. וְהָיָה בְּרָכָה

Later on, we learn more about what is being asked of Abraham.

God “singled Abraham out” so that Abraham would instruct his descendants “to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is just and right” –

כִּי יִדְעֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יֵצִיחַ אֶת בְּנָיו וְאֶת בְּיָתוֹ אַחֲרָיו וְשָׁמְרוּ דְרָךְ יְהוָה לַעֲשׂוֹת צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט

Each and every time we confront the world with צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט deeds that are just and righteous, each and every time we reject “the callousness of indifference and the prudence of impartiality,” indeed, each and every time we call our faith into account by assuming personal responsibility for the world that surrounds us, we walk in the path of Abraham and we are being a blessing (see R. Abraham Joshua Heschel, “The Prophets,” pp. xxii and xxvi).

In the absence of reciting the Priestly Blessing, we must still be a blessing.

While we currently cannot be a Nation of Priests, we can still strive to be the children of Abraham. And please God, through the merits of our actions, may we become worthy again of being blessed.