Be Silent and Focus on Being Blessed

Parashat Shemini

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Parashat Shemini takes place on the eighth day of the inauguration service of the Tent of Meeting. On that day, Aaron and his sons were consecrated as Kohanim and from that moment on, only they became eligible to perform service in the Tabernacle. Towards the very end of this ritual of inauguration, we learn that "Aaron raised his hands towards the people and blessed them" (Leviticus 9:22).

According to our tradition, Aaron offered the Priestly Blessing at that very instant, despite the fact that the actual words of this cherished blessing are only mentioned explicitly later on in the book of Numbers (6:24). Following rabbinic midrash in Torat Kohanim 10:22, Rashi makes this explicit: "With the blessing of the kohanim: May the Lord bless you…May the Lord make His face shine…May the Lord lift His face…" (Rashi, Leviticus 9:22). In fact, this verse serves as the only source for the practice of Kohanim raising their hands during the recitation of the Priestly Blessing:

How is the Priestly Benediction recited? [...] In the country, the priests lift their hands so they are aligned with their shoulders during the benediction. And in the Temple they lift them above their heads, except for the High Priest, who does not lift his hands above the frontplate. Rabbi Yehuda says: Even the High Priest lifts his hands above the frontplate, as it is stated: "And Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people and blessed them" (Leviticus 9:22).

(BT Sotah 37b-38a)

In his code of law, *Aruch Hashulchan*, R. Yechiel Michel haLevi Epstein (1829-1908) insists that no additional verses or blessings could be recited by the congregation during the recitation of the Priestly Blessing. He writes: "Does a servant not listen intently while he is being blessed?!" Despite having a strong position opposing these deviant or innovative folk-practices, R. Epstein explains that a special dispensation was made for individuals who experienced a bad dream. Only in cases where a concern for danger exists (actual or psychological), is a member of the community permitted to recite an additional prayer for the nullification of such dreams. Still, the *Aruch Hashulchan's* concluding words on this matter are most instructive:

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It is best to remain silent and to focus on receiving the blessings in their abundance. And since the Halakha was decided in this way [i.e. forbidding additions] why would anyone recite any of these?

(Aruch Hashulchan, Orach Chayim, 128:39)

The *Aruch Hashulchan*'s insistence that we learn to accept the Priestly Blessing with the humility of a servant is an important lesson that resonates with me.

First, it puts the breaks on the natural human need to reciprocate, to respond, and to inadvertently level the playing field. In life, it is important to learn to acknowledge our interdependence, and sometimes, to also strive to fully accept our reliance on others. How much more so with God! There is no reciprocation when it comes to God's blessing, only reliance and acceptance.

In addition, experiencing the blessing quietly invites us to think of ourselves as the object of blessing, or quite literally, to think of ourselves as being blessed. In this way, humility is elevated towards gratitude and joy.

These feelings are well captured by Israel's spontaneous response to Aaron's blessings: "…all the people saw, sang praises, and fell upon their faces" (Leviticus 9:24). Here we find dual expressions of both joy and humility. That in itself is a blessing!