

The Priestly blessing - with Love and Unity



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The Torah commands the priests "thus bless the children of Israel and speak to them ..."
The blessing of the priests that has accompanied the people of Israel since the days of the Torah, is one of the most ancient prayers in the world. How exciting is the fact that in the early 1980s the oldest inscription of a passage from the Torah was found in Jerusalem - with the blessing of the priests.

The Shulchan Aruch rules that the priests bless - "whom we sanctified by his commandments and commanded to bless his people of Israel with love". I do not know any other mitzvah that we are commanded to do specifically with love. According to the Zohar, a Priest (Cohen) who hates someone in the congregation, or that a member of the congregation hates him should not bless the people of Israel. This emphasis on love fits the priests, the sons of Aaron, who was "a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace...".

This week we celebrated Shavuot, the Festival of the Giving of the Torah. Shavuot is mainly characterized by its publicity, in that it has no private mitzvah (such as matzah, shofar or sukkah), but only a public mitzvah of sacrifices. It is also the only holiday, and in fact the only occasion, where the public sacrifice is *Shlamim* (usually a private sacrifice). The understanding is that Torah does not belong to any individual, and the giving of the Torah depends precisely on the existence of a Public, of an entire and united people. This is how Rashi interprets on the basis of the Midrash - the phrase "And Israel rested against the mountain" (shemot 19) which is said in the singular from (as opposed to the rest of the verse which is in the plural) - "as one man with one heart". In the Midrash it is emphasized more, that G-d saw that the people of Israel are in unity, and therefore he gives Torah.

This is also how the expression in the *Passover Haggadah* can be explained - "If we were brought before Mount Sinai and did not give us the Torah *Dayenu*" But why is that any good – one would think that coming to Mount Sinai was for the sake of receiving the Torah? It can be explained that coming to Mount Sinai, this unique encampment - in wonderful unity, is what created the possibility of giving Torah, and is in itself a special level, which deserves to be thanked for separately!

The location of the mentioning of the *Birkat Cohanim* (Priestly blessing) before the inauguration of the altar with the Nesi'im's sacrifices and gifts, requires an explanation. Indeed, Rashi quotes the words of Chazal - "Why was the Menorah affair brought after the offerings of the Nesi'im?" The Midrash answers that when Aharon saw the inauguration of the altar with the offering of the Nesi'im, he was despondent that he was not among them, neither him nor another representative of his tribe. G-d told him 'Yours is greater than theirs for you light the candles (of the Menorah)'. In Midrash Rabbah (Chapter 15) it is stated that G-d appeased Aaron "with candles and the blessing of the priests" - because these two commandments exist forever, even after the destruction of the Temple.

It can be said that Aaron was disappointed when he saw the Nesi'im all bringing their sacrifices and bringing gifts. The sacrifice and the gifts of the Nesi'im was a move that expressed great unity among the people of Israel. On the one hand each tribe had a uniqueness, a private sacrifice of the tribe, but on the other hand there was a combination and unity of the whole people. Aharon feared that his tribe was not part of

this general Israeli unity! That is why God appeases him precisely with candles and the blessing of the priests.

The candles express unity in several forms, in the fact that the *Menorah* was made "of one piece," and that the seven candles illuminate "in front of the face of the Menorah." And as for the blessing of the priests, we have already mentioned that the blessing occurs only when there is love and unity within the people.

The more we understand that the Torah is not private, that our uniqueness as a people is while we are united, the more we will be able to accept the Torah, and in any case meet all the challenges we face! Let's grow with love!

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