

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Naso)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Take a drive up the south side of the Golan Heights, and you will see one of the most incredible vistas in Israel. The road, which first winds along the Jordanian and then Syrian borders, is fenced in by a double security fence, wired for sound, and broken only by the occasional cement wall stuck sporadically into the fence as cover against the Syrian sniper fire that used to endanger the Israeli troops on patrol.

As the road winds up the side of the Golan cliffs, the panoramic view deep into Syria is overshadowed by the Russian made Syrian Bunkers that bear silent testimony to the near suicidal challenge that faced the Israeli troops who made their way up the mountain under murderous fire in 1967, breaking the stranglehold Syrian guns held over the Israeli towns and villages below.

Up on top of the Heights, as one drives across the open plains, one notices the occasional odd collection of trees that seem to grow in clusters above most of the Syrian positions that controlled the Heights.

Like every rock and bush in Israel, these trees are no accident, they are part of one of the most incredible stories in modern Israeli history, and bear witness to the fact that one man, in the right place, at the right time, can make all the difference.

In the early Sixties, after fifteen years of war and threatened aggression, the young State of Israel was still struggling for its right to exist. Surrounded on all sides by vast Arab armies dedicated to her destruction, Israel understood very well the dangers before her, and the world watched and waited to see whether Israel would survive what seemed to be insurmountable odds.

Israel has never really depended on military might or even technological advantages; her survival has always been the responsibility born on the shoulders of a few dedicated individuals, willing to go above and beyond the call of duty. Eli Cohen was one such man.

Desperate for information on Syrian troop build-ups, Israel needed intelligence on the military strength and array of forces being moved in to the Golan Heights. In military doctrine, a battlefield has a classic depth, measured from the forward most fighting units, to the command posts in the rear, and most often dictated by the range of the enemy's artillery guns. The classic and still operational depth of battlefields in the Middle East is approximately twenty-five miles. Today, since the Israeli-held Heights are approximately ten miles deep, the battlefield includes the entire Kinneret Lake and the city of Tiberias

across the bay. In the 1960's, before the Golan was held by Israel, this included many of the towns, such as Rosh Pinna further inland.

So Israel trained and dispatched Eli Cohen to be a deep cover spy whose job was to infiltrate the Syrian high command and report on the fortifications and troop movements of the Syrians on the other side of the Israeli border.

Masquerading as a successful businessman, Eli succeeded beyond Israel's wildest dreams, cultivating the higher-ups in the Syrian Defense establishment to the point that he was being touted as the next Syrian Minister of Defense.

The reports he managed to send back to Israel were invaluable and proved to be the critical difference in the 1967 Six-Day War.

One fateful night, the Syrians received a complaint from one of the foreign embassies in Damascus that someone was jamming their radio frequency, preventing them from sending cables. It seems Eli Cohen had been using this embassy's radio frequency at a time early in the morning he thought no one would notice. But an embassy staffer trying to send an urgent cable uncovered the problem just as the Syrians, who had already begun to suspect that someone was leaking military secrets, were patrolling his neighborhood with a radio detection truck.

Zeroing in on the source of the unauthorized transmissions, Syrian soldiers burst into his apartment, catching Eli Cohen in the midst of a transmission, with no way or time to hide his equipment or deny the charges.

Tried for treason by a military tribunal in a lightning six-hour military trial with no defense counsel (after forty-eight hours of horrific torture,) Cohen was sentenced to death for treason, and, despite pleas for clemency from all over the world (including the Pope and the Queen of England) was hanged in the main square in Damascus while his wife could do nothing but watch on television less than 300 miles away. His bones, buried with the bones of a dog, still lie in an unmarked grave in the Damascus Jewish cemetery.

One of the most poignant memorials to Eli Cohen is the trees planted as a result of what seemed at the time like an innocent suggestion.

On one of his many tours of the Syrian front lines, noticing the many Syrian soldiers sweltering under the heat of the sun, he suggested the Syrians plant fast growing trees over all the fortified positions, to both shelter the Syrians from Israeli air-cover, as well as cause the Syrian soldiers to naturally remain at their positions, which became the coolest place to be in the summer....

He then informed the Israelis of this decision, so that in 1967, Israeli warplanes simply bombed all the tree clusters, taking out most of the Syrian positions on the Heights before a single shot was fired.

In 1967 many Israelis, viewing the Syrian troop buildup (and the diatribe on all the Arab airwaves calling for the destruction of Israel and declaring their intent to push the Jews into the sea) with alarm, were praying for a miracle. And one man, all alone and far from home, gave it to them in the guise of trees, which today sway silently in the wind on the Golan Heights.

Why does it seem so often, when we need a little bit of blessing from G-d, that we always have to do it on our own?

This week's portion, *Naso*, contains one of the most oft-repeated blessings in the entire Torah: the *Birchat Kohanim*, or priestly blessing.

Every Friday night, in hundreds of thousands of Jewish homes across the world, just before we recite the *Kiddush* over wine, families pause to bless their children with this three thousand year old blessing. There is no moment in my week that is more special to me than this one, as each of our children, one at a time, approaches with bowed head to receive their blessing. There is a beautiful Chassidic custom to mention each child by name prior to the blessing, and take a moment to appreciate all that this child is, all that they have meant to you, and all the hopes and dreams that fill any parent when taking such a moment to pause and consider the wonder and the miracle that is the blessing of each child.

In truth, while it is true that we bless our children, we are really taking a moment to appreciate how much our children bless us, simply by being.

All of which leaves us to wonder what this blessing is really all about. Why is this the particular blessing we bestow on our children?

This is particularly curious given the context within which this blessing is given in the Torah.

“And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons saying: So shall you bless the children of Israel, saying to them:

May Hashem (G-d) bless you & safeguard you.

May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you.

May Hashem lift His countenance to you & establish peace for you.

And let them place my name upon the children of Israel and I shall bless them.”

(Bamidbar 6:22-27)

What is the nature of this blessing? And why are the *Kohanim* (the priests) commanded to give this blessing to the Jewish people? Why doesn't G-d just bless us Himself, especially since at the end of this section (v. 27) G-d indeed says it is He who will ultimately bless the Jewish people? Why do we need the *Kohanim* as a vehicle?

Rabbi Yishmael in the Talmud (*Hullin* 49a) suggests that the end of the section wherein G-d says it is *He* who does the blessing, actually refers to the fact that G-d blesses the

Priests, (who then bless the Jewish people). But elsewhere in Jewish tradition we find that indeed it is the *Kohanim* who bless the Jewish people, and that they are simply invoking G-d's blessing upon the people.

So what's the game? If indeed all blessings come from G-d, why are we receiving the blessing by way of the Kohanim?

The **Abarbanel** suggests that there are different kinds of blessing. Sometimes G-d blesses us (as in the case of Abraham in Bereishit 24, when Hashem blessed Abraham with everything), and sometimes we bless G-d (as in the case of King David in I Chronicles 29, when David blesses G-d.) Abarbanel understands us blessing G-d as an act of praise, or appreciation. But perhaps it is deeper than that.

Maybe this blessing is not just about the blessing we receive, but indeed the relationship we have with the concept of Kohanim. Perhaps the fact that G-d wants the Kohanim to offer a specific blessing (which is really G-d blessing us,) is not to portray the fact that the Priests are blessing us, but rather precisely the opposite.

Perhaps the entire point here is for us to realize that the fact that the Kohanim cannot offer their own blessings but must invoke G-d's, shows that the Kohanim are indeed not the source of blessing, but merely tools of G-d, who created and continues to bless all of us, each in our own way, every day.

On one level, given the fact that a people that had just left behind the caste system of Egypt, where priests were not just vehicles for blessing, but actually often the repository for the blessings of the gods, it was certainly important for the Jewish people, right at the outset of their journey as a nation, to realize that the only true source of blessing in this world is G-d.

But of course it goes much deeper than that. How often do we get so caught up in our own pursuit of the things we perceive to be the 'blessings' in our lives, that we come to think, even subconsciously sometimes, that we are really at least a part of the source of those blessings.

We think that if we are blessed with much wealth, it is because we have earned it. And if we are blessed with wisdom, we give ourselves credit for having acquired it. But in truth, a deeper consideration of all the blessings we have in our lives would cause us to realize that we have done little to earn them. Good health, wealth, family, talent; all of the things that we are born with, often in the form of raw potential, are gifts we are given, but which we certainly have not earned. Why do some of us merit the wisdom to achieve, and still others athletic ability or musical talent? If a person is fortunate enough to have met and married at a relatively young age, and is additionally blessed with healthy children, can he or she really say they can ever have done enough to have merited these blessings more than someone else who is not yet so fortunate?

The opportunity to reflect on these blessings is actually the chance to recognize that they are gifts, which represent less what we are given, and more the challenge of being sure we know what to do with them.

And nowhere is this more apparent than in the contemplation of the marvelously wondrous blessing of children. No one can truly imagine that he or she has somehow deserved or earned on his or her own the gift of healthy children. Rather, children carry with them the enormous responsibility of being partners to some greater purpose, some majestic plan for making the world a better place. A child, more than anything else in this world, represents raw potential. And our challenge is how we allow ourselves to be a part of transforming that potential into something that makes a difference in the world.

And this fits with the nature of what blessing is all about. **Rav Soleveitchik** suggests that blessing is not merely about appreciation; it is about increasing something. When G-d blesses Abraham with great wealth, he is increasing his wealth.

And most importantly, when we bless G-d, what we are doing is attempting to increase the presence, or more accurately, our awareness of G-d in the world. And again, nowhere does one become more aware, if one merely takes the moment to contemplate it, of the presence of G-d in the world, than when holding one's children.

Ultimately, the opportunity to bless one's children is the silent prayer that each and every one of our children, and indeed each and every one of us, becomes a vehicle for increasing the presence of G-d in the world.

I can think of no moment in my life where I was more aware of this than the early morning when our eldest daughter, Ma'ayan (*shetichyeh*) was born. One moment you are a young couple, and there are only two of you in the room. And the next moment there are three of you. And for me, that was absolutely the most powerful and transcendent experience of G-d I have ever had.

And of course, this is why we offer this blessing on Friday night, at the beginning of Shabbat, which is a day that is all about appreciating who we are and all the things in this world we need not to take for granted.

Someone once asked me what a person is supposed to think about while the parents at the Shabbat table are blessing their children, especially someone without children of their own. Perhaps the message is that we all have our 'children'; the things born into our lives of which we are in awe, and which invest us with purpose and, if we will but see them for what they really are, with joy.

And when we look at our leaders especially the Kohanim, the priests and teachers in our lives, we know we have found true teachers when we realize we are a little bit in awe of them, and when we recognize they are a gift in our lives, meant to be accessed and tapped into, in order to make the world a better place. And the teachers (Kohanim) themselves also must constantly remember that in all that they do, they are ultimately vehicles to a

higher purpose, and the responsibility of transforming that potential into reality is what true leadership is all about.

In these challenging times, may we, who are described in the Torah as a *Mamlechet Kohanim, a Kingdom of Priests*, be blessed to recognize the gifts we have been given, and achieve the purpose for which they have been given to us: and maybe, in so doing, we will at long last become partners in creating a world of peace and harmony, as it was always meant to be.

Shabbat Shalom,

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