

MAY GOD BLESS YOU AND KEEP YOU?

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May God bless you and keep you.

May God light His mien for you and be gracious to you.

May God lift His mien to you and give you peace.

What does it mean when a prayer leader makes the Birkat Kohanim, the priestly blessing? (Numbers 6:24-26)

We dismiss the possibility that the leader has the power to bring “blessings” or that we receive blessings because the leader is petitioning God. The idea that blessings come without our action leaves us feeling religiously and spiritually incompetent.

But blessings may also be understood as opportunities—God’s *openings* to “miraculous” possibilities—to which we may respond or not. Then the three benedictions are not entreaties to God but questions to the congregation. May God bless *you* and keep *you*? Are we willing to use the openings that the Creator has made for us?

First, are we willing to use the Creator’s openings to achieve material well-being? Material needs may be satisfied by *un-godly* means—greed, gossip, deception, lies, exploitation, injustice, and much worse. But will we use God’s openings to fulfill those needs through kindness and respect which, if not always producing more goods per se, result in more satisfaction with what we have?

Second, will we see the wonder of God’s creation by using the Torah’s blueprint to its design and workings? In effect, will we allow ourselves to see that the possibilities for humankind are much greater than their present realization?

Third, will we overcome our *yetzer hara* and use God’s openings to make peace with one another? Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744) teaches that *shalom* is “. . . the reverse of every kind of separation and fragmentation.” One of God’s names is *shalom* because the *Holy One* “ties together worlds [and] keeps them united. . . .” Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) teaches that, “Peace is more like the silver thread that joins two people or two entities, combining them into a unified whole.”

Without unity, separateness leads to decay and disintegration.

But how are we to become united? When we asked that question at a Torah study session, one person answered, “We have to listen to one another, to hear one another’s everyday pain and hope.” But it’s harder to *talk* about our pain and hope than to *listen* to that of a relative, friend, or neighbor, because we struggle for control, the appearance of seamless mastery. As one Jewish advice columnist put it to a correspondent whose friend was having marital problems but wouldn’t talk about them: “. . . *Kvetching* [complaining] is OK, but anything beyond that we keep private.” Without extended family or close neighbors, we’ve become rugged individualists.

Hillel said, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” But we have become geographically dispersed and denominationally disparate. Community has been succeeded by personal careerism and disdain for both giving and receiving communal support.

Yet *tzibbur* (community) is the very thing that is “completed” in the Torah’s blessing of peace. And as Akeidat Yitzchak teaches, “The holiness of God depends on the community. ונקדשתי בתוך בני ישראל. (Leviticus 22:32), I will be sanctified within the community of Israel.”

How shall we answer the questions of the Birkat Kohanim?

If we use God’s openings for peace, reaching out to family and community, we shall be blessed with relief from private anxieties and depression, we shall be blessed with personal enlightenment and liberation, and we shall be blessed with a community in which both Am Yisrael (the Jewish people) and God are sanctified by one another’s deeds.

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