

Parashah One Hundred and Four

Numbers 6:22–7:89; Jeremiah 31:21–34; 1Corinthians 6:18–20

notes by Tim Hegg

... *I Then Will Bless Them*

Our text includes the famous and well known “Aaronic Benediction,” the blessing prescribed in the Torah by which the sons of Aaron were to bless the people of Israel. The specifics of when and how often the blessing was to be invoked is not given, but tradition has it that the priests blessed the people daily, at least during the Second Temple era, and that the blessing was in connection with the daily sacrifice (cf. Ibn Ezra), connecting it to the last verse of the previous *parashah* and the following context, i.e., the consecration of the altar by the tribes.

The structure of the blessing is carefully developed: the first line has three words, the next five, and the third seven, giving a kind of crescendo throughout. The Divine Name is the second word of each line. The first and last clause of the poem are both seven syllables in length and form a kind of *inclusio* or envelope for the whole. Thus, “Adonai bless you” (first clause) is paralleled by “grant you peace” (last clause), reminiscent of the last line of Psalm 29, “Adonai will bless His people with peace.”

The poem consists of three lines, with each line composed of two clauses. I would suggest that each line contains synonymous or complimentary elements, the first general and the second more specific. Thus, the blessing could be understood this way:

Adonai bless you, that is, keep you;
Adonai shine His face upon you, that is, be gracious to you;
Adonai lift up His face upon you, that is, give you peace.

As we seek to understand the meaning of this text, the first and most obvious point is that the blessing which comes upon the people is from God, not the priests. The priests only act as the intermediaries through whom the blessing of the Almighty comes upon the people. And the blessing does not come through the mere reciting of words, nor through a religious ceremony. The words which the priest recites rather reveal the heart of the Father to bless His children. The blessing consists, then, in the knowledge of God and in the realization that He smiles upon His children. The blessing comes from anticipating the hand of God in one’s daily life. Thus, the conclusion of the exhortation to the priests is: “I (Adonai) then will bless them.”

This fact, that the blessing consists in one’s personal fellowship with the Almighty, is an important point to emphasize. It is far too easy to fall into the trap of thinking that a leader or teacher has some special connection to HaShem, and that in this privileged position the teacher or leader also has the ability to secure blessings for individuals. But nothing is farther from the truth. While God uses those who are willing to serve Him as ministers of His blessing, the blessing is from Him, and all who serve Him are merely “unworthy servants” (cf. Lk 17:10).

A second point to be made comes from the overall structure of the *parashah*: this Aaronic blessing is sandwiched between the laws of the Nazirite Vow and the dedication of the altar. The significance of such a placement is clear: the blessing of the priests upon the people is vitally connected with the whole sacrificial system and the service of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). Our God, Who dwells in perfect holiness (Hab 1:13; cf. Ps 5:4; 2Chr 19:7) has secured a way for us to be His dwelling place. It is not something we have done, but a task He has completed. He has made us clean, and built us into a dwelling for His own glory. And the means He has used is the only means sufficient to satisfy His holy nature: the payment of sin by the Innocent One. One simply cannot escape the strong emphasis put upon sacrifices in the Tabernacle and Temple. The number of animals sacrificed at the dedication of the altar is enormous (252 animals in all). What is more, the altar receives a greater dedication than any other sacred object in the Tabernacle. The lesson is clear: God’s infinite justice would be satisfied, not by the good deeds of the people, but by payment for sin—the innocent dies that the guilty might live. God would be able to bless His people with His presence only when their sin had been atoned for, that is, wiped clean. And we know that these sacrifices foreshadowed and pointed toward the final and ultimate sacrifice of the Messiah.

It is for this reason Paul can write (2Cor 1:20) that the promises of God (that is, His blessings) are “yes and amen” (= established and confirmed) in Yeshua. If anyone longs for the blessing which comes by having God’s Name upon them, they must receive from His hand the sacrifice He offers, even the death of His own beloved Son.

The *haftarah* (Jer 31:21ff) passage emphasizes this same reality, namely, that God’s blessing comes upon His people as a result of His having forgiven them of their sins and their iniquities (v. 34), for the Torah teaches that apart from the shedding of blood there is no atonement for sins (Lev 17:11, cf. Heb 9:22). Thus, the blessing of God evoked upon the people through the priest, a blessing described as “placing the Name upon them” (note the use of **שׁוּם**, *sim* “to place or put” used twice in this text) stresses God’s active role as the One Who dwells in the midst of His people.

The listing of the tribes and the offerings each brought for the dedication of the altar is pure repetition. One might naturally ask “why?” Why didn’t Moses simply conserve space and write the listing once, and then simply state that each tribe brought these items as their dedication offering? The answer is to be found in the narrative structure of the Aaronic benediction sandwiched between the descriptions of sacrifices—each tribe brought the same offering because each tribe was equally in need of the atoning work the altar prefigured. No tribe was better or worse than the other—all were sinners in need of God’s atoning work. This concept coincides with the fact that though the Aaronic benediction is surely a communal thing (note that the introductory line envisions all of Israel), the poem itself is cast in the singular. True, it is a blessing for all of Israel, but it is all of Israel viewed as a community of individuals. One individual does not “ride on the shoulders” of another. Each must have his or her blessing directly from HaShem and not through someone else. This emphasizes a most important precept: HaShem’s blessing comes through a one-to-one relationship, not through generational or familial ties.

What then may we derive as to the meaning of the various parts of the poem? The first clause has “Adonai bless you and keep you.” The Sages interpret this as material blessing, since if it were solely spiritual blessing (they reason) there would be no need of “keeping” or “guarding it” on HaShem’s part. The point is that as HaShem blesses His people with material blessings, He also will guard them from those who would otherwise rob them of their gifts. Others note that the guarding may not be of the material blessings themselves but of one’s soul in relationship to the material blessings. It is easy to allow the material blessings which God gives us to become stumbling blocks and idols in our lives. God’s blessing of material goods in this life also comes with His guarding our hearts so that we use our wealth for His glory first and foremost. Perhaps the blessing and guarding could just as well be understood to mean that we are blessed with an understanding that material goods are fleeting: they may go as quickly as they came. On the other hand, we have come to understand that spiritual wealth is eternal. The guarding would then be the strength to maintain this perspective in the midst of affluence.

The second line has “Adonai make His face to shine upon (toward) you and be gracious to you”. In the context of the Ancient Near East, a king granted favor (**חֲנּוּן**, *chanan*) to his subjects by allowing them an audience with him. Having audience with the King was to see the light of his face, whereas to “hide his face” was idiomatic for denying a subject access. As we apply this to HaShem, it reminds us again that His desire is to have communion with His children. Even as He walked with Adam and Chavah in the cool of the day and communed with them, so His desire is to offer an “open door” policy to all who are His. By “shining His face” (**יָאֵר**, *ya’ar*) He “enlightens us,” i.e., it is in His presence that we come to know and understand who He is, and what His will is for us. He gives to us His own teaching—thoughts from His own heart made ready for His children. “In Your light we see light” (Ps 36:9). Surely this is grace, for we do not have anything within ourselves by which we could demand an audience with Him. If we are privileged to come into His presence it is because He has invited us and made a way for us to come.

The third phrase is “Adonai lift up His face toward you and give you shalom.” The idiom “lift up one’s face” means to “smile,” just as “to have one’s face drop” means to frown or show sorrow (Jer 3:12; cf. Gen 4:5-6; Job 29:24). Furthermore, to “give peace” may mean to “give friendship” (cf. Judges 4:17, cf. **בְּרִיתִי**, *b’riti shalom*, “My covenant of peace” in Nu 25:12 and **בְּרִית שְׁלוֹמִי**, *b’rit sh’lomi*, “covenant of My peace” in Is 54:10). Thus, “may Adonai smile upon you and grant you His friendship” must be the general sense of the final line. Abraham was called a “friend of God” (Is 41:8) as was Moses (Ex 33:11). But God does not limit His friendship to a select few. The blessing which the priests are commanded to give is for all

the people—each one receives the blessing. But it should be noted that each one receives the blessing only as he or she is connected to the covenant people. The blessing is upon the “children of Israel” (בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, *b’nei Israel*), the people whom the priests represent before HaShem.

The dedication of the altar is not only with sacrifices (both animal and grain), but also with anointing oil (Num 7:1, cf. Lev 8:10-11). This anointing occurred on the 1st day of the First Month (Nisan), thus beginning the year with a Tabernacle service as the central focus. The anointing with oil cannot be mistaken as a parallel to the anointing given to the priest, the king, and the prophet. The altar, the place where the innocent would substitute for the guilty—the place where the just wrath of God consumes the life of the sinner—all of it is a foreshadow of Golgatha, where the anointed one, *Mashiach*, would give His life in order to ransom many. Here is where the blessing of God would be realized; here is where His friendship would be secured. Here, and no other place.

One more thing we should not overlook: the manner in which our *parashah* ends. “Now when Moses went into the tent of meeting to speak with Him, he heard the voice speaking to him from above the mercy seat that was on the ark of the testimony, from between the two cherubim, so He spoke to him” (7:89). Our God is One who reveals His will, who makes Himself known. Moses’ intentions were to speak to Him, but when he enters, God is already engaged in conversation. He is enthroned upon the cherubim (Ex 25:22; 1Sam 4:4; 2Sam 6:2; 2Kings 19:15; 1Chr 13:6; Ps 80:1; 99:1; Is 37:16), for the cherubim are a symbol of His guarded holiness. Yet He communes with Moses, and through Moses, to the people He has chosen as His unique treasure (*am segulah*). Here is the picture of propitiation, the very place where man and God meet. And where is this place? The mercy seat—the place where atonement is made, where the blood of the sacrifice is placed.

Here the war has ceased; here the conflict has ended. Man, estranged from his Maker by his own rebellion, is returned to friendship with the Almighty. Here mankind finds his way to fulfil his created purpose. Here is contentment, fulfilment, joy, and consolation. Here is the place of shalom. In a world marked by strife and woe, by sin and its inevitable death, there is a place of quiet repose—a place of shalom. And where is this place? It is found in a man named Yeshua, the promised Messiah of the prophets, our LORD, our Master, our Savior, our Redeemer. The whole story is about Him.

The choice of Jeremiah 31 by the Sages for the *haftarah* highlights the fact that from their perspective, the shalom spoken of in the Aaronic benediction comes upon the nation of Israel when the prophet’s promise of a New Covenant is fulfilled. Equally significant, then, is the fact that Yeshua referred to the New Covenant as being accomplished in His own death:

And in the same way He took the cup after they had eaten, saying, “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.” (Luke 22:20, cf. Matt 26:28; Mk 14:24)

By saying that His own death “is the new covenant,” Yeshua meant that the New Covenant would be realized or brought to fruition by His sacrificial death upon the cross. The idea of the cup being “poured out” connects to the fact that for every sin offering undertaken in the Temple, the blood was poured out upon the altar. Thus, the “cup which is poured out” symbolically envisioned the death that Yeshua would undergo as a sacrifice, not merely as death by natural causes or even at the hands of enemies. The parallels in Matthew and Mark make this even more apparent:

... for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins. (Matt 26:28)

And He said to them, “This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.” (Mark 14:24)

From the very beginning of the emerging Christian Church in the 2nd Century CE, the “New Covenant” was interpreted by leading Church Fathers to substantiate a doctrine of replacement theology, sometimes called “supersessionism.” This doctrine held that God had forsaken Israel and had chosen the Christian Church to replace them. The teaching was cast in the terms of “old covenant” versus “New Covenant,” with the general thrust being that the “New Covenant” established by Yeshua replaced or abolished the “old cov-

enant.” Put in simple terms, Israel was related to God through the old covenant, while the Christian Church was related to Him via the New Covenant. Since the New replaced the old, it seemed obvious to the Church Fathers that Israel had been replaced by the Church.

You ought, therefore, to understand. Moreover, I also ask you this, as one who is one of you and who in a special way loves all of you more than my own soul: be on your guard now, and do not be like certain people; that is, do not continue to pile up your sins while claiming that your covenant is irrevocably yours, because in fact those people lost it completely in the following way, when Moses had just received it. For the Scripture says: “And Moses was on the mountain fasting for forty days and forty nights, and he received the covenant from the Lord, stone tablets inscribed by the finger of the hand of the Lord.” But by turning to idols they lost it. For thus says the Lord: “Moses, Moses, go down quickly, because your people, whom you led out of Egypt, have broken the law.” And Moses understood and hurled the two tablets from his hands, and their covenant was broken in pieces, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed in our heart, in hope inspired by faith in him. (*Epistle of Barnabas* 4:6–8)

Interestingly, while the Christian Church speaks often about the “New Covenant,” one is hard pressed to find a clear description or definition of what the “New Covenant” is in Christian writings. Among the laity, the “New Covenant” is often defined as the “New Testament,” that is, the Scriptures given to us by the Apostles (Matthew – Revelation), with the “old covenant” being equated with the Old Testament (Genesis – Malachi). But such a definition runs aground when the same people hold that the “old covenant” has been abolished, for they readily confess that the “Old Testament” is still the “word of God” for them, so it has not been abolished. “Indeed,” one might ask, “if the old covenant (which equals the Old Testament) has been abolished, why do you still retain it in your Bible?” Marcion (denounced as a heretic by the Church in the 2nd Cent. CE), acting on the obvious conclusions of replacement theology, proposed a canon of Scripture that contained only the Gospel of Luke and the Pauline Epistles (and even these were edited) as authoritative Scripture. While his proposal was met with stern rebuke by the Church councils which recognized the entire 66 books as the biblical canon, one could see how Marcion was seeking to be consistent with the prevailing replacement theology of the 2nd Century Church. If the New Covenant had replaced the Old Covenant, why was there any need to retain the Old Testament as authoritative? If Christians were required only to obey what was found in the New Testament, why burden the people with the Old Testament?

All of this highlights the fact that even in our day, few Christians can define what they mean by “Old Covenant” and “New Covenant” even though these terms dominate Christian theology. But even a cursory look at our *haftarah* highlights a number of very important facts that seem to have been lost in the developed theology of Christianity and its definition of the New Covenant.

First, it should be noted that Jer 31:31 is the only time in the entire Tanach in which the phrase בְּרִית חֲדָשָׁה (*b’rit chadashah*) is found. In the Apostolic Scriptures, “new covenant” (*kainh; diaqhvk, kaine diatheke*) is found in Luke 22:20; 1Cor 11:25; 2Cor 3:6; Heb 8:8 (quote from Jer 31:31); 9:15; 12:24. Clearly, the references in the Apostolic Scriptures are based upon Jer 31:31, so it is imperative that one first understand the original context of Jeremiah in order to understand the meaning of “New Covenant” as used by Yeshua and His Apostles.

While a more complete exegesis of Jer 31:31–34 is beyond the scope of these notes, a few important points can be made:

1. The essential element in the “new covenant” is that God writes the Torah upon the heart of all who are members of the “new covenant.”
2. The new covenant promised by Jeremiah is made by God with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (v. 31).
3. In v. 33, however, the covenant is made only with the house of Israel. The obvious explanation for this difference is that the covenant is made at a time when Israel is once again united as a single nation. This means it is made at a time in history (note “days are coming” in v. 31; “after those days,” v. 33) when the dispersed of Israel are united as a single nation. Obviously, that has not yet taken place in its fullness.

4. The new covenant differs from the Sinai covenant not in content but in application (vv. 32–33). Whereas Israel broke the Sinai covenant through their disobedience, in the new covenant, the Torah (same content as the Sinai covenant) will be written upon the heart and thus not only received but obeyed.
5. This obedience to God will be manifest not in a few or a remnant, but in the whole nation. What has been true of the believing remnant of Israel throughout the generations will be true of the whole nation, “from the least to the greatest” (v. 34). All will “know” God, meaning all will have a close, personal relationship with Him.
6. It is through the new covenant that the Sinai covenant is fulfilled: “I will be their God and they will be My people,” v. 33 (cf. Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12).
7. The new covenant is based upon the fact that God forgives the sins of Israel and remembers their transgressions no longer (v. 34). Since forgiveness of sins is ultimately found only in the payment made by Yeshua, this means that the new covenant comes to its fulness when Israel as a nation confesses Yeshua to be the true Messiah and Savior of sinners.
8. Those who have put their faith in Yeshua participate in the fulfillment of the new covenant in the same way that the first fruits of the harvest anticipate and participate in the full ingathering.