

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Naso

Having lived in the South for most of my life, there are some phrases whose duality “I have come to “recognize.” People say one thing without regards for the consequences or intrinsic meaning for the words they choose. “Bless your little heart” is amongst the most common. Yes, one might think that this is a statement of compassion, but as mostly used, it simply means, “You poor pathetic thing.” Every time I hear this phrase I find my way back through the pages of the book of Job, as his wife confronts him, “Go ahead, bless God already, and die.” At that moment, her thoughts were certainly not for Job’s well being. Likewise when I hear, “Bless your little heart,” I know not to count on the speaker for meaning what they have just said and for help along the way. Of course then there is the “blessing” we get after sneezing. I have often wondered whether those who say “God bless you,” really think about us as being “blessed” at that moment or at a point after they heard us sneeze.

“Bless” is a word we throw around way too easily these days. It is a word of consecration; sanctification. To seek a blessing is to take one’s self out of the ordinary and seek special status in the divine cosmos. To ask God’s blessing – whatever one’s sense of divinity - is to seek special attention either for an act in which we are participating or for the hope or appreciation for some event in our lives. We find our tradition’s ultimate blessings in this week’s Torah portion.

“May God bless you and keep you. May God’s light shine for you. May you know God’s grace. May the blessing of God’s presence be with you and may peace descend on you.” This benediction is commonly called “The Priestly Benediction.” In practice, at a more traditional congregations, those who claim to have descended from the biblical priesthood (the Kohanim), will be called to the front of the sanctuary to recited this benediction. In most other Jewish congregations, the benediction is shared by all worshipers present. And, while we say these words each week, the question lingers, “What are these blessings that we seek for each other?” Light, grace, presence and peace are all charged words. They offer meaning for people across the theological spectrum, but regardless of theology, the goal is to bring all into some common focus.

Every time I watch a child smile, I see God’s light. Every new thought and every “first” in our lives are sources of inspiration. According to the first verses of Genesis, God pulls light from the darkness and creates enlightenment.

As I watch the dancers at a ballet recital and when I see nurses calm patients of trauma in triage, I see grace. Grace is the wake that we leave when we act with compassion and care. Grace confirms that love exists in this world.

The ministry of presence is rooted in empathy. Sometimes, just showing up; just being part of someone else’s experience, makes all the difference in the world. Being present means paying attention. Whatever one’s theology, God’s presence manifests in our showing up for each other.

Light, grace, and presence are the three most important ingredients to the blessing of peace. Peace is something that results from our efforts to involve ourselves meaningfully and compassionately in each other’s lives. Real peace does not descend magically from heaven. Peace is not the absence of open conflict. Peace does not equal quietude or the lack of hostilities. Rather, peace is the presence of justice in our world. Peace is equal justice for all people -- justice maintained at every stage of inter-human relationships. Peace is a by-product of a successful partnership between humanity and God. Peace is belief translated into action; the result of making heaven and earth touch.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote, "Our scientific power has outrun our spiritual power. We have guided missiles and misguided men." For the blessings we seek to come true, then we must return from our exile from each other and embrace each other with light, with grace, and with compassion. From each embrace we must feel endowed with the awesomeness of each others' presence. For it is in these moments, we are sanctified; embracing divinity. The blessings enumerated in this week's portion are symbolic of every blessing we seek. Each time we pray. Each time we embrace the beauty of nature. Each time we experience compassion, we experience each other's journey for blessings. "God's work" cannot be accomplished without us. God cannot do what we will not do. For these blessings to come true, we must bring them into each other's lives. In short, when you say, "God bless you," make sure that you mean it. Shabbat Shalom.