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Beit Midrash Zichron Dov

Parshat Naso

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Rashi's Approach

Idan Rakovsky

When studying Torah commentaries, it's important to pay attention not only to the content of each interpretation but also to try to trace the interpretive motivation that stands behind the commentator. I want to give an example of this from *Birkat Kohanim*, which appears in our parshah.

Birkat Kohanim is one of the most famous texts in the Torah, and also one of the oldest biblical texts found in the archaeological world (the Ketef Hinnom scrolls which are dated to 600 BCE!). In addition, the passage is recited every day as part of the morning prayer, and with the special *Birkat Kohanim* recited in the Diaspora on holidays, and in Israel and some other communities daily. Despite its textual and historical importance, the interpretation of the blessing is subject to deep disagreements among commentators, some of which stem from the structure of the blessing, which is composed of three different parts in their essence and content, but not in their form:

May Hashem bless you and protect you. May Hashem deal kindly and graciously with you. May Hashem bestow favor upon you and grant you peace. (Bamidbar 6:4-26)

In this article, I would like to focus on Rashi's commentary on *Birkat Kohanim* and demonstrate how he applies his interpretive approach. Rashi is known as a commentator who focuses primarily on the plain meaning of the Scriptures, and with an interpretive

approach that explains each word, combination of words, or verse on its own, usually without a comprehensive look at the context of the passage. Rashi defines his approach in his comments to Bereishit 3:8 - "I'm here to explain *peshuto shel mikra*, the plain meaning of the text... **each statement in its place.**"

In our current Torah portion, Rashi indeed applies this interpretive approach of explaining each of the three parts of the *Birkat Kohanim* on its own:

- Regarding the first part of the blessing, "May Hashem bless you and protect you," Rashi offers an explanation that "May Hashem bless" means that your property should increase, while "and protect you" completes the blessing by requesting the protection of the blessed property from robbers so that it may not be taken away.
- Regarding the second part of the blessing, "May Hashem deal kindly and graciously with you," Rashi explains that "May He deal kindly" means that He will show you a smiling countenance. According to this explanation, the second part of the blessing is focused on the relationship between Hashem and man, while the first part is not essential to the second part and is instead focused on economic prosperity.
- In the third part of the blessing, "May Hashem bestow favor upon you and grant you peace," Rashi explains that this expresses a prayer that Hashem should suppress His anger. The third blessing is entirely directed towards Hashem, and refers to the manner in

which Hashem will control His anger towards His creations.

If so, Rashi does not see a connection between each of the three parts of the *Birkat Kohanim*, and in fact, according to him, it is more correct to refer to this passage as "*Birchot Kohanim*" (in the plural) rather than "*Birkat Kohanim*" (in the singular).

We could suggest that even though Rashi explains each blessing separately – each statement in its place – it is still possible to identify a thread that runs through his explanations of all three blessings. Taking a "macro" view of his commentary, one can discern a progression. The first blessing forms the basis, addressing the physical needs of the individual. On top of it is built the structure of the relationship between the individual and Hashem. And at the top of the pyramid lies the blessing regarding Hashem's ways in the world.

(For future exploration, I recommend the reader to compare this Rashi's commentary to the one of Rabbi Yosef Bechor Shor. For a recording of a detailed shiur on this matter, click [here](#).)

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Summary

This chapter continues where the previous one left off, but shifts focus to addressing the Jewish people - specifically the wicked among them, those who “bear the name of Israel... and invoke the name of Hashem, though not sincerely.” (48:1)

Yeshayahu reminds these people of previous prophecies that were delivered and fulfilled. He notes how stubborn (“iron-necked”) the people are and goes on to clarify that it was specifically for this reason that Hashem foretold events so far beforehand. As a result of that, the people could not say that their idols caused it. (2-5) Yeshayahu then delivers new news that the people could not have heard before, and therefore they could not respond by saying “I already know that!” (6-7)

The prediction begins with an acknowledgement that although the people are rebellious, Hashem controls His anger and decides not to destroy the people. Instead, He wants to refine the people with a “furnace of affliction” to maintain the Jewish people as His people, while also teaching them not to continue to defile His Name. (8-11)

Hashem explains that He acts for His

own purposes, as the First and Last in creation who formed the Heavens and the Earth. Hashem informs the Jewish people that they can trust in Him when He speaks to them. He does so, after all, for their own benefit. (12-17)

If Divine commandments are heeded, then prosperity will flow like a river and they will triumph like waves in the sea. Their offspring will be as numerous as grains of sand and their names will never be forgotten. (18-19)

The people are then told to go out from Babylon and announce to the ends of the Earth: “Hashem has redeemed [the people of] Jacob, His servant! They have known no thirst despite being led through parched land, Hashem made water flow for them from the rock... There is no safety for the wicked.” (20-22)

Insight

A core message of this chapter is that although the Jewish people are often undeserving of Hashem’s love and care, He still stands by our side and helps us to achieve greater heights.

This has been true since the biblical era. The Zohar (Raya Mehemna, Parshat Emor) notes that saving the Jew-

ish people from Egypt was primarily a Divine act of *chesed*, rather than on the people’s own merit. To be blunt, not all of the Jewish people were deserving of freedom at that time, but Hashem chose to offer salvation to the entire group, making no distinction between those who were ready to be saved and those who were not.

However, the giving of the Torah could not be the same type of compassionate act, due to the incredible demands of observance. If the Jewish people were going to accept the Torah, they needed to truly understand and accept what they were getting themselves into, on an individual basis. The period between Passover and Shavuot provided the Jewish people with time for introspection and growth so that they could make themselves into the type of people who were worthy of being representatives of a Divine mission. Coming out of Shavuot and now moving back towards the Yamim Noraim, we find ourselves in a similar situation.

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Siddur Insights: By G-d, Through the Kohanim

Is it possible for the Divine presence to rest upon mere mortals? From this week’s parshah, we see the answer in the affirmative. Bamidbar 6:22-27 contains what we know as *Birkat Kohanim*, the priestly blessing. The blessing itself spans three verses, each verse containing its own unique focus, as will be discussed below.

When and Where

In the times of the Beit HaMikdash, *Birkat Kohanim* was recited by the Kohanim daily. (Mishnah Tamid 7:2) Nowadays, the story is a bit more complicated. As many diasporic Ashkenazic Jews know, Ashkenazim outside of Israel only have Kohanim recite their blessing on Yom Tov. This is codified by the Rama in Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 128:44. In these communities, the blessing is still recited daily, but not by the Kohanim; the chazan recites it liturgically as part of his repetition of the Amidah.

The Sephardic community, by and large, has Kohanim ascend to recite the blessing daily. This is also the case throughout most communities in the Land of Israel. [See Beit Yosef Orach Chaim 128 where he speaks approvingly of the communities in Israel and Egypt who recite it daily.]

The Blessings Themselves

Rabbi Shimon Schwab (Sefer Iyun Tefillah, pages 402-403) explains that each individual stanza of the blessing focuses on a different aspect of our lives.

- The first verse, “May G-d bless you and protect you” (translation here and below adapted from Koren Sacks Siddur) spans three words and focuses on our physical lives: our need for sustenance and shelter.

- The second verse, “May G-d make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you,” spans five words and focuses on the spiritual: excelling in Torah study and being favourably accepted by others.
- The last verse, “May G-d turn His face toward you, and grant you peace,” spans seven words and is about our relationship with G-d Himself: that we should feel individualized attention and care directly from G-d.

It is also worth noting that just as the content of each blessing grows in grandeur, so too its length. The more sublime the blessing, the longer it is.

A Lesson

Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 378) asks a very simple question. If G-d wants us to be blessed, why not simply bless us directly? Why not cut out the middle man and drop the whole formula?

He answers that all blessing flows to us through our acts of preparation. It is not as though G-d chooses to dole out blessing at particular times. Rather, blessing constantly flows from G-d, and it is up to us to make ourselves prepared and willing to accept His blessing. According to Sefer HaChinuch, when we listen to *Birkat Kohanim*, whether from Kohanim themselves or through the chazan, we do not passively receive. Instead, we actively turn ourselves into vessels capable of receiving G-d’s gifts. Only when we do so, do we fully reap the benefits He provides.

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Biography

Rabbi Shalom HaLevi Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Rabbi Yachya haLevi was the Chief Rabbi of San'a, Yemen, and the de facto spiritual leader of Yemenite Jewry, in the first decades of the twentieth century. In a time of great turmoil, he successfully led with Torah and diplomacy. The firstborn son of Rabbi Yachya and Saada haLevi was Shalom Isaac haLevi. Born on 21 Cheshvan 5751 (November 4, 1890), he was recognized in his youth for his clear and quick grasp of issues, and his powerful memory. Young Shalom was groomed for leadership, but in accordance with Yemenite custom he chose to work at a trade (dyed wool) even as he grew as a rabbi.

In 1922, Rabbi Shalom became ill with a kidney disorder. Local doctors were not able to help, and Rabbi Shalom moved to the port of Aden, to be treated by British doctors in the hospital there. However, Aden was also the transit hub for Jews who were leaving Yemen for then-Palestine, and Rabbi Shalom determined that he would join them. In the summer of 1923, Rabbi Shalom moved to Jerusalem. His kidney ailment persisted, though; it is said that he was finally healed with water given to him by an elderly lady who observed his prayers at the Kotel. [It is also reported that a doctor who viewed his radiology film during a 1973 hospitalization declared that his kidneys had failed decades earlier, and that his survival was miraculous.]

Rabbi Shalom was selected as Rabbi of the Yemenite community in Tel Aviv-Yafo in 1925, and he served in that capacity until 1961, when he returned to Jerusalem. He also served on the Rabbinical Council of Israel's Chief Rabbinate from 1956 until his passing in 1973. Rabbi Shalom was a firm supporter of the State; he was the first halachic authority, in 1948, to rule that Yom ha'Atzmaut should be celebrated as a holiday, with recitation of Hallel.

Rabbi Shalom's opinion on contemporary halachic issues was sought beyond his community, but he focused particular energy on the needs of Yemenite Jewry. He fought to develop institutions to enable Yemenite immigrants to retain their Jewish practices in the early days of the State, when the Histadrut was working against that goal. Rabbi Shalom HaLevi's publications include his *Divrei Chachamim* responsa, and an edition of Mishnah punctuated according to the Yemenite tradition.

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Weekly Halachah: Mind the (Parshah) Gap!

Rabbi Yehuda Mann

Question: I had a wonderful Shavuot in Israel, followed by an inspiring Shabbat (May 27) on which the shul read Parshat Naso, while outside of Israel they observed Shavuot and read the Torah reading for Shavuot. Was I supposed to learn Parshat Naso in *shenayim mikra* (the practice of learning the weekly parshah twice in the original text and once in Targum Onkelos) for May 27? If I did learn *shenayim mikra* for Naso that week, do I need to recite it again in Toronto ahead of June 3, when Toronto will read it?

Answer: The Talmud (Berachot 8a) says that one is obligated to prepare the parshah in the *shenayim mikra* format "with the *tzibbur*" – with the community. This seem to mean that one does whatever the community is doing. However, how do we determine to which *tzibbur* this person belongs – Israel or Canada?

Rabbi Betzalel Stern (*B'tzel HaChochmah* 1:9) says the following:

- If a person was in Israel on a Shabbat when Israel and the Diaspora read different parshiyot, and he will be back in his Diaspora residence on the following Shabbat so that he will hear the same parshah again, he is not required to learn *shenayim mikra* in Israel for the first week. He should instead learn it during the week when he travels back to the Diaspora.
- However, if he will stay in Israel for another week, so that he won't have the chance to read this parshah in the Diaspora, then he should learn *shenayim mikra* in Israel for both portions.

So in our example: If the person is flying to Toronto between May 27 and June 3, he should only learn *shenayim mikra* of Naso between May 27 and June 3. If he is flying back between June 3 and June 10, he should learn *Shenayim Mikra* for both Naso and Behaalotcha in Israel. He need not repeat Behaalotcha during the week he will hear it again in shul in Toronto, on June 10.

One who travels to Israel during this period, so that he misses a parshah altogether, should learn *shenayim mikra* for the missed parshah as well as the one they will hear in Israel. However, if they will have a minyan in Israel of people from the Diaspora, and they will read that missing parshah, then he may learn just the *shenayim mikra* for the parshah of the Diaspora. (*Piskei Teshuvot* 285:9)

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Sefer haChinuch #28, 29: Bowing and Worshipping

By Rabbi Mordechai Torczyner

Shemot 20:5 warns, "You shall not bow to [sculptures], and you shall not serve them." This verse is understood by Ramban as expressing a single prohibition against accepting gods other than Hashem. However, Rambam counted these as two prohibitions, because they prohibit two distinct classes of actions toward a god, even if one does not accept the god itself. (Minchat Chinuch 26:1) Sefer haChinuch follows Rambam's system, and counts these as the Torah's 28th and 29th mitzvot.

Per Sefer haChinuch, the 28th mitzvah ("You shall not bow") prohibits all bowing to idols, regardless of purpose. "Bowing" is understood to include all forms of lowering one's self, whether one bows from the waist or one lies on the floor. Additionally, the biblical juxtaposition of "bowing" and "serving" teaches that this mitzvah prohibits certain other activities which are normally associated with ritual service: slaughtering a sacrifice, burning an offering, pouring libations or presenting blood from an offering.

On the other hand, the 29th mitzvah ("You shall not serve") prohibits any act toward an idol which the worshippers of that idol consider a form of "service". There have been idols worshipped by stone-throwing and defecation, and performing such acts before those idols would constitute prohibited worship.

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Shabbat June 2-3

After hashkamah R' Yehuda Mann, Halachah from the Parshah, Clanton Park

6:00 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Guarding the Ger, BAYT (Gruda Bais Medrash) (women)

6:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, The Story of Manoach's Wife and Her Husband, Clanton Park (women)

30 min pre-minchah R' Steven Gotlib, Big Topics, Village Shul *not this week*

After minchah R' Mordechai Torczyner, Gemara Ketuvot, BAYT (Milevsky Bais Medrash) (men)

After minchah, Idan Rakovsky, Halachah in the Parshah, Shaarei Tefillah

Sun. June 4

9:00 AM R' Zev Spitz & R' Yehuda Mann, Semichat Chaver, Clanton Park (men): Hilchot Seudah

Mon. June 5

2:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, The Jewish Zoo, Week 2, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/idanrak>

7:00 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Legal Ethics: Artificial Intelligence and the Practice of Law
CPD-approved, Laypeople welcome

ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/mtethics>, Register: <https://torontotorah.com/cpd>

8:00 PM Prielle & Idan Rakovsky, Song of the Week, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklysong>

Tues. June 6

8:00 AM R' Steven Gotlib, Sefer Emunah uBitachon, Village Shul

9:00 AM Idan Rakovsky, Tzidkat haTzaddik, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university men)

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Wisdom of King Solomon: Kohelet, ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt>

7:00 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel (Chap. 19), ZOOM: <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (men) *Last Week!*

8:30 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Contemporary Halachah, Clanton Park (women)

Wed. June 7

9:00 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Halachic Philosophy of the Rav, Or Chaim (university men)

10 AM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Your Favourite Torah, at Beth Emeth
Register @ <https://torontotorah.com/wednesdays>

8:00 PM R' Steven Gotlib, Ashkenazi and Sephardi Differences, The Village Shul

8:00 PM Idan Rakovsky, Shir haShirim, Shaarei Tefillah

8:15 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Contemporary Halachah, Clanton Park

Thurs. June 8

8:00 AM R' Steven Gotlib, Jewish Mysticism, Village Shul

1:30 PM R' Mordechai Torczyner, Shemuel II, ZOOM <http://tiny.cc/weeklymt> (women) *Last week*

8:00 PM R' Yehuda Mann, Beitzah (advanced), for location: ymann@torontotorah.com

Fri. June 9

9:00 AM R' Jared Anstandig, Parshah, Yeshivat Or Chaim (university)

10:30 AM R' Jared Anstandig, R' Mordechai Torczyner, R' Yehuda Mann, Ketuvot Perek 1 *advanced*
In-person at Yeshivat Or Chaim, on ZOOM at <http://tiny.cc/frishiur>

COMING UP!

SHABBAT JUNE 9-10

AFTER HAR SINAI: A SHABBATON OF THOUGHT AND INSPIRATION AT BAYT

7:30 PM WEDNESDAY JUNE 14

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MACHLOKET: A SHABBATON OF THOUGHT AND INSPIRATION AT SHAAREI SHOMAYIM