

## Parashat Naso

Think 'faces' this morning. Our faces tell a lot. A scowl, a frown, a sullenness, a rebelliousness, or, a smile, an amiable look, a beam of affection. I was reading Psalm 80 this week. Asaph, its writer, was worried. He lived in Judah - Jerusalem. Up north, Israel had just fallen to the Assyrians. Would Judah be next? And so, fearfully, Asaph prayed his psalm. Three times, in verses 3,7,19, he prays the same request of the Lord, "Make Your face shine, and we will be saved." That is, "'smile' on us Lord, and all will be well." It is good to look away from the 'scowl' of a fear and seek the re-assuring 'smile' of the Father.

The scene conveyed by the first few chapters of Numbers is of the host of Israel encamped according to tribes in square formation (2:1-34), and grouped around the Tent of Meeting, which is guarded and tended by the Levites. Such was the idealised picture held in later days of the desert life of Israel, centred on the worship of Adonai and ready for the march upon the Promised Land. As befits an encampment of the people of God, nothing that would defile it would be allowed to remain within it (5:1-4) and moral offences must be punished (5:5-31). Provision is made for men and women who wish to take special vows of holiness (6:1-21), and the form of the priestly blessing of the people is appointed in 6:23-27. Numbers 6:23 says, "The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them.....'"

What is a blessing? It is an affirmation of favour, and power, given by a person of authority, in this case Adonai, to a person, or, as in this case, to a nation - Israel. God has blessed humanity from the days of Adam & Eve, on to Abraham and his descendants, and here, in Numbers, the people of Israel. God is blessing His chosen people as they are about to embark on the momentous journey into Canaan. The blessing given to Aaron is of three lines; in the Hebrew each one actually longer than the previous one.

*The Lord bless you and keep you* - two blessings here.

*The Lord make His face to shine upon you & be gracious to you* - two blessings again

*The Lord lift up His face to you and give you peace (shalom)* - two blessings here.

Adonai is expanding His powerful blessing until its culmination in *shalom* - the fullest expression of a total peace, within and without, for His people. Verse 6:27 is the 'icing on the cake' - "So they will put My Name on the Israelites and I will bless them ." The children of His nation has His total blessing as they go forward into history. Through fair wind and foul, Israel has, in the finality, total cover - as have we today. Worry and fear not is the message.

Because of the simple elegance and profound sentiments expressed in this blessing, it has been used throughout the centuries long after the sacrifices of the Aaronic priesthood ended. It is commonly used today in Jewish circles and known as the Priestly Blessing, the Priestly Benediction (*birkat kohanim*). the "Raising of the Hands" (the *Dukhanen*), although the specific time and method of pronouncement differs within the various Jewish groups. The Blessing is also used in Catholic and Protestant liturgy. The emphasis is on God. God initiated this blessing. It emphasise that it is the Lord who blesses the people and does for them what

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they cannot do for themselves.

We have encountered the Hebrew root for "keep/guard" - *shamar* - before, in Torah. In Genesis 2, Adam and Eve were to work and keep the Garden of Eden. Keeping and guarding the Garden indicates that the battle was to prevent outside interference which would despoil a beautiful Creation ( With regard to the environment, that commandment still applies; especially today, when ocean and land is under severe threat) The Aaronic Prayer is God's blessing but there is great duty to perform before nation and individual can receive its full fruitfulness. "Keep or guard" remind us that we have to honour God's commandments, keep His Shabbat, honour His Holy Days; especially when outside happenings crowd in on us, and temptation tempts us to 'take our eyes off the ball.'" As Rabbi Resnik rightly remarks, "Thus the kohen says, "May the Lord bless you and keep you in a condition to receive blessing. May His blessing not be a passing experience, but an abiding condition of obedience and right standing with the Lord." This promise involves both protection and discipline, helping us to keep out of our lives all that would disqualify us for blessing. For Israel this "keeping" would also have a serious practical application, for they were surrounded by enemies. God promised to protect them as long as they were faithful to Him. Israel, today, is surrounded by enemies that would long to destroy her.

I do like the line, "The Lord make His face shine on you.....". When a person is in favour and is suddenly spotted, one's face "lights up". It shines. One's face radiates "favour" and fondness for the person. God's "face" radiates "favour" for those He loves. New Covenant believers such as we have the promise of God's never-ending love, having already experienced God's gracious response to save us from our greatest enemies, sin and death. The Blessing continues this theme of God's "face" in the next line, "The Lord turn His Face towards you and give you peace." This has the idea of God's people receiving His fullest attention. In other words, God is not easily distracted. He is not distracted for a moment. What a difference to the taunts of Elijah at the useless prophets of Baal. Those little gods of their's did not appear on the scene, they were asleep or on the toilet! As we know, *shalom* is more than just an absence of warfare but a completeness, or wholeness and maturity. Judges 2 records what happened when God turned His face from His people for a time and they lost *shalom*. But, no matter, He turned His face to them again, on His receiving their genuine repentance. And so it is today, with us as individuals, and Israel as a nation.

For Israel, the Aaronic blessing expresses the highest state of blessing that the nation enjoys when faithful to God. For us, Yeshua believers, Yeshua has already granted us all of the things that are asked for in the Blessing, and they have been granted on a permanent basis. For us, each time we hear the Blessing, it should be a reminder of what one has in Yeshua.

Indeed, that great 18th bible commentator Matthew Henry, wrote, "We may take the Blessing to ourselves, as if our names were inserted." We do that this morning.

Our Messianic reading was brief this morning, just one verse, "As many as I love I rebuke and chasten; be zealous therefore and return to me" (Rev. 3:19). God's love is the ultimate blessing

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but it is co-partner with God's sharp 'tap on the ankles' when we wander off into the wilderness. It's that tackle that "keeps/guards" our progress through life. God's blessing is not a sloppily sentimental one. It is full of His God-given power and vitality. It is inspirational but we are foolish to drift along with precious little discipline in our worship and in our day-to-day living. May we continue to be kept safe from everything that would diminish His blessing.

Think about it, the Lord our God, Creator of all things, seeks to bless us, His people. One day, all in Yeshua will enjoy the splendour of His face. Never, never doubt, whatever the trials of life, that the Lord desires to bless you. Count your blessings day by day.