

## Parshat Naso

### Who is Fit to be a Leader? Someone Who Knows how to Bless Others Briah Cahana - Class of 2023

*In honor of my grandfather, Rabbi Moshe Hillel Cahana, z"l, a civil rights activist who passed away on Shabbat Naso, May 29, 2004*

How do we uplift each other in the middle of what feels like a series of chaotic *tohu va'vohu* moments, caught between a global pandemic and racial violence, protests and riots that have taken center stage in the United States and further? Just last week, we celebrated the quintessential moment of receiving the Torah (*lukhot*) from God at Sinai, a scene that also recalls a type of pandemonium, *lehavdil*. In that moment, the Israelites beseeched Moshe to mediate God's thunderous and fiery revelation so that they could understand the message and not die by it (Exodus 20:16). We may be looking around now asking ourselves how do we act vis-à-vis these metaphorical and actual fires? Where are our leaders? How tremendously have and do our systems continue to fail and devastate the economically, physically and racially vulnerable in our societies? The desire to have people in charge attune to these urgent cries for justice and respond with radical care is all the more stark when we face the depth of brokenness and lack of shalom in our midst.

This week's parsha, Naso, understands our human need for reassurance that those in power seek our collective and individual safety, well-being and wholeness. The priestly benediction, *birkat hakohanim*, is tucked within a parsha that describes both the overall operational structure and inauguration of the Tabernacle, on the one hand, and then details what should be done in aberrant cases, such as with the individuals who become ritually impure, Israelites who have wronged each other, a jealous husband who accuses his wife of infidelity (*isha sotah*), and the nazirite who separates his or herself from the community. In most cases, there are ways for individuals who have gone astray to return to Israelite society, either through sacrificial offerings or recompense.

But what is the responsibility of the leaders in charge to reintegrate those members and ensure that harmony is restored within the community once the offerings have been brought and the payments made? I would like to suggest that this is the function of *birkat hakohanim*. These leaders are responsible not solely for overseeing that the rituals and services in the Temple are conducted smoothly, but for turning outward to the people, facing the messiness of reality and nevertheless bestowing this divine blessing of peace to uplift every soul. The passage reads (Numbers 6:22-27):

<p>22 The Lord spoke to Moses: 23 Speak to Aaron and his sons: Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them: 24 The Lord bless you and protect you! 25 The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you! 26 The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace! 27 Thus they shall link My name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them</p>	<p>22 וַיִּדְבֹר ה', אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר 23 דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר, כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: אָמֹר, לֵהֶם. 24 יִבְרַכְךָ ה' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ 25 יְאָר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיִּחַנֶּךָ 26 יִשָּׂא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם. 27 וַיִּשְׂמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי, עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וְאֲנִי, אֲבָרְכֵם.</p>
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The priests were instructed to bless the people daily with these words, raising their outstretched hands as a conduit for God's light and protection. In so doing, they elevated the entire community. Rashi derives from *amor lahem*, say unto them (vs. 23) that *everyone* needs to be present in order to hear the blessing.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, he notices that the word *amor*, אָמֹר is written in plene form, with the *vav* included. Rashi beautifully learns from this detail that the priests were instructed to bless the people unhurriedly, with

<sup>1</sup> שְׂיָהוּ כָלֵם שׁוֹמְעִים

a full heart and deep *kavanah*, intention.<sup>2</sup> Further, a Kohen is forbidden to have hatred in his heart toward anyone in his community when reciting this blessing, rather he must bless with unfettered *ahava*, love (Mishnah Berurah 128:7). What do these personal prescriptions governing *birkat hakohanim* indicate to us about the relationship of the priests toward the community? And what can this teach us about what we are looking for in our own leaders at this moment?

First, the Torah is teaching us that no one can reside “outside the camp” of the Kohen’s heart when delivering the blessing. The entire community must be elevated together. In order for *birkat hakohanim* to function, it is the Kohen’s responsibility to look upon all individuals that make up the collective with equal love, respect and dignity. Second, if there is any ill-will, the Kohen must do work to undo those knots and correct his biases. His love must extend to the nazirite who has returned to her community as well as the jealous husband and wife who endured the shame of the bitter waters ceremony. The effect of this blessing allows for those on the periphery to reintegrate, restoring faith and a sense of unity.

There is a lot of brokenness in our systems. As the many cries for justice, safety and freedom enter our homes our sense of community and responsibility has expanded. We are tied up in each other’s sufferings and liberations and we will have to bring many offerings and make amends to build a better society. But we also must slow down, check our hearts, know the inherent value in each of us and elevate each other from a place of love and affirmation. Good and holy work emerges from there.

May we merit to have compassionate, courageous and humble leaders who can bless all of us toward more wholeness and dignity. And may we in turn know how to elect ourselves to do the same for others.



Raised in the social, linguistic and culturally diverse Jewish communities of Gothenburg, Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, Bria Cahana is honoured to begin a new chapter in New York at Yeshivat Maharat. Over the years, she has immersed herself in many formal, traditional and experiential Jewish learning environments such as Hadar, Kivunim, Pardes, and Urban Adamah all of which inform her understanding of the expansiveness of Jewish life and tradition and depth of its values. Bria is a passionate student of Torah and has experience teaching Tanakh informally at summer camp and coaching elementary and high school students for the Chidon Hatanach competition. She received her BA at McGill University in Philosophy, Jewish Studies and Arabic, which she put to use by participating in interfaith dialogue groups and co-creating a space for religious women to gather to discuss their faiths and build personal connections through art, poetry, music and volunteering. Later, she completed her MA at McGill University in the History of Bible Interpretation and wrote a thesis that focused on the story of the Hebrew Midwives, inspired by her work as a doula. In between waiting for babies to be delivered and writing her thesis, she had the opportunity to study *sofrut*, which is as much an outlet for her spirituality as for her creativity.

<sup>2</sup> מלא — לא תברכם בחפזון ובהליות, אלא בכונה ובלב שלם