

Blessings: Thoughts for Parashat Shemini

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Shemini

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And Aaron lifted up his hand towards the people and blessed them...” (*Vayikra* 9:22).

One of the beautiful age-old Jewish traditions is for parents and grandparents to bless their children and grandchildren, generally on Shabbat and holidays. This is a loving way to share their hopes and to invoke God’s blessings on their progeny.

The Torah reports blessings that Jacob gave to his children and grandchildren as well as blessings that Moses offered to the tribes of Israel. Aaron blessed the people during the ceremony dedicating the Mishkan. The Torah assigned cohanim the ongoing obligation of blessing the community, a practice that continues to this day.

But what is the meaning of *berakha*, the Hebrew word for blessing? When we offer someone a blessing, what are we actually conveying?

A *berakha* reflects a desire to invoke God’s blessing since God is the source of all blessing. As a paradigm, the priestly blessing is uttered by the cohanim but the Torah specifies that “*Va-ani Avarekhem*,” and I [God] will bless them. So although human beings verbalize blessings, these are expressions of our hope that God will fulfill them.

This is true of our blessings to others, but how are we to understand blessings we recite to God? We have *berakhot* whenever we eat, fulfill a mitzvah, and on many other occasions. Since God is the source of all blessing, what does it mean when we say *barukh* to God?

The word *barukh* is connected to the word *berekh*, knee. When we “bless” God, we are actually saying: we bend our knees to You, we are dependent on You, we recognize Your sovereignty. Instead of translating the opening of a *berakha* as “blessed are You,” the translation should be “we bend our knees to You” or “we acknowledge You as the Source of all blessing.”

When we bless children, grandchildren or anyone else, we are praying that the Almighty will bless them accordingly. Offering blessings is an expression of love, respect and hope. Those receiving blessings absorb the positive feelings and intentions of those expressing the blessings.

There is an old Jewish tradition of saying 100 blessings each day as an expression of gratitude to the Almighty and an acknowledgement of our dependence on God. It would be well if we would extend this idea to offering blessings to our fellow human beings. The world would be a happier place if we could bless not just those who are closest to us but all those who act righteously and courageously. While curses deepen enmity among people, blessings promote love and mutual respect.

One who blesses is worthy of the blessings of the Almighty.