Together...Uniquely: Thoughts for Parashat Naso

View PDF



Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Naso

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When the Almighty calls on Moses to command the priests to bless the people of Israel, the instructions are in the plural (emor lahem). When the blessing is concluded, the Almighty indicates: “and I will bless them” (va-ani avarakhem)—also in the plural. The setting of the priestly blessing, then, is clearly to be a public event intended for the entire collective.

Yet, the tripartite blessing itself is entirely in the singular form. Although the blessing is intended for the plurality of Israel, it is aimed at each individual separately. It prays that God will bless and protect each of us; that God’s countenance should shine on each Israelite and grant each one of us peace—shalom.

The formulation of the priestly blessing is alluding to a profound truth. The blessings are given to the entire community…not as an anonymous mass of people, but as an assembly of individual human beings. The emphasis is on the uniqueness of each person, the desire that each of us finds blessing and fulfillment in life. The goal is shalom…peace, wholeness, personal satisfaction.

God’s infinite wisdom encompasses all…but focuses on each. This idea is underscored in a Talmudic teaching (Berakhot 58a) that requires the recitation of a special blessing when witnessing a vast throng of Jews. We are to praise the Almighty Who is hakham harazim, the One who understands the root and inner

thoughts of each individual. “Their thoughts are not alike and their appearance is not alike.” The Creator made each person as a unique being. He expected and wanted diversity of thought, and we bless Him for having created this diversity among us.

Religious life entails participating in a community, observing shared rituals, following traditional patterns. It can happen that one’s individuality may seem compromised or lost in the process. The overwhelming emphasis on communal mores tends to diminish the uniqueness of each individual. The priestly blessing reminds us of the need to be part of the community…but to retain our own distinctive individuality.

In his famous essay, “Self-Reliance,” Ralph Waldo Emerson taught: “There is a time in every man’s education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion.” We each are who we are; to squelch our individuality in order to imitate others is self-destructive. Emerson lamented the tendency to forfeit one’s ideas, ideals and values in order to blend in with the dominant group. Rather, one should be true to him/herself.

Poignantly, Emerson wrote: “Man is timid and apologetic. He is no longer upright. He dares not say ‘I think,’ ‘I am,’ but quotes some saint or sage.” These words, proclaimed in the mid-19th century, continue to ring true nearly 200 years later. So many religious people, including rabbis, are reluctant to express an original opinion unless it is authenticated by sages of earlier generations. Instead of relying on their own thinking, they seek to amass sources of earlier “authorities.”

The framework of the priestly blessing provides a vital dynamic. We are a community; we stand together in our beliefs and observances. At the same time, though, we are each unique individuals with our own particular thoughts, sensitivities and needs. While we—as members of a community—receive the blessings from the priests and from God, those blessings are directed to each of us separately.

This is not merely a blessing on us. It is a challenge for us.

* * *

Rabbi Marc Angel has a youtube series on religion and literature, with the first session dealing with the teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqP9UMJOwmk