

JUNE 14, 2016

Parashat Naso

Bringing the Blessing of Peace through Raised Hands

In this way you shall bless (Numbers 6:23)

כה תברכו (במדבר ו:כג)

Star Trek fans readily recognize the “[Vulcan Salute](#),” of Mr. Spock, played by the late Leonard Nimoy. The New York Times described the salute as a “double-fingered version of Churchill's victory sign.” Nimoy explained in his autobiography that he based the Vulcan Salute on the Priestly Blessing performed by Jewish *kohanim* with both hands, thumb to thumb in this same position. Nimoy wrote that when he was a child, his grandfather took him to an Orthodox synagogue where he saw the *duchenin*—the blessing—performed by the *kohanim* with their hands raised in this way. But, why do the *kohanim* raise their hands when they bless the people?

The Sages in the Talmud (Sotah 32) taught: “[It is written] that ‘In this way you shall bless.’ This refers to the ‘Raising of Hands.’ [How do we know this? Because] here (Numbers 6) it says ‘In this way you shall bless,’ and later it says, ‘And Aaron lifted up his hands toward the people, and blessed them...’ (Leviticus 9:23) By associating Aaron’s blessing with the Priestly blessing in our parashah, the Sages taught that whenever the priests officially bless the people (as they did in the Temple and as they do in synagogues today) they must do so with raised hands. For this reason, rabbinic terminology refers to the priestly blessing given by the priests to the nation as “*nesiat kapayim*”—“the Raising of Hands.” Rabbi Yosef Chaim Kara, (see *Meiotzareinu Hayashan*, Vol. 3 p. 30) a leading 17th century Polish rabbinic figure from the city of Kalish, explains that the term “*nesiat yadayim*” teaches us an additional message: Blessing others requires much more than mere words. Rather, the priests must, “raise up their hands” and take action to bring about blessing. After all, Aaron himself refused to sit around and assume that blessing the people with peace would suffice. Rather, “He took action in order to bring peace between neighbors; he concerned himself with the distancing of hatred and discord between them.” Only this type of blessing, which combines words with actions, has true value.

If only the organizers of last week’s Paris conference understood this important lesson. When France decided to convene a meeting with the goal of encouraging Middle East peace, at face value the summit sounded like a good idea. Yet, the organizers revealed the true goal of the conference when they shared the list of invited— and uninvited— guests. Although France invited foreign ministers from countries around the globe, it chose to invite neither Israel nor the Palestinians, demonstrating clearly that the event represented an attempt to internationalize negotiations rather than place the onus of peace on the parties themselves.

Rather than taking positive action to promote real peace, in the [final communique](#) following the half-day conference, the participants offered weak words, but took no real steps to forward its implementation. In the communique the nations “reaffirmed that a negotiated two-state solution is the only way to achieve an enduring peace, with two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security.” Yet, they failed to call the Palestinians to task for their extensive campaign of inciting violence, which has prompted [numerous acts of terrorism over the past year](#), including the [brutal murder of four Israelis in Tel Aviv last week](#). Moreover, while the statement noted the importance of “resolving all permanent status issues through direct negotiations,” it failed to acknowledge that Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu has repeatedly called for direct talks without preconditions and expressed his willingness to meet President Abbas “at any time.” To paraphrase Rabbi Kara, the international community offered mere words, but failed to take any action that would distance hatred and discord and bring actual peace between neighbors.

In fact, the conference quite possibly achieved the opposite result. An Israeli statement [noted that](#), “instead of urging Abbas to ‘answer the prime minister’s repeated calls to immediately begin direct negotiations without preconditions,’ the international community is enabling him to continue avoiding negotiations. In the annals of history, the Paris conference will go down as only having hardened Palestinian positions and made peace more distant.” ■

Supporting Israel Through Personal Initiative

Six covered wagons (Numbers 7:3)

שש עגלות צב (במדבר ז:ג)

“In January of 2009, while Hamas was firing rockets into Israel, a number of artists recognized that those who were attacking Israel were also attacking the arts—arresting, intimidating and, in some cases, killing artists who dared to express themselves freely. Worse, they saw that these groups were abusing the arts to spread lies and anti-Israel propaganda.” So wrote the group “Artists4Israel,” an organization dedicated to “cultural resistance” aimed at supporting Israel and its artistic and cultural freedoms. Today, Artists4Israel organize art and cultural programs around the world supporting the Jewish state, including programs in schools and college campuses. The group also brings artists to Israel to paint and beautify Israel and improve the lives of Israelis. And perhaps most importantly, every program Artist4Israel hosts, “has been conceived, created and run by an artist or collective.” In other words, Artists4Israel isn’t about a top-down hierarchy. Rather, it draws its power from the personal initiative of its members, who dream up, coordinate and run the programs that support Israel.

The *nesi'im*—the princes of each tribe of Israel—would have been proud. After all, they established the precedent for personal initiative many centuries ago when they offered their sacrifices at the consecration of the Tabernacle. When the princes offered their tribute, they added an additional element to their gift: “Six covered wagons, and twelve oxen: a wagon for every two of the princes...” (Numbers 7:3) Ramban (on verse 2) notes that the princes felt that while the Tribe of Levi was tasked with transporting the Tabernacle across the desert, it wasn’t reasonable to expect them to carry the heavy beams and boards on their shoulders. Therefore, they donated wagons and oxen to assist the Levites in their task. According to the Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 12) Moses wasn’t so sure. The Sages taught that, “[The princes] came and stood before the Tabernacle, and [Moses] did not accept [the wagons] from them, until it was said from Above, ‘Take [the gift] from them.’ (verse 5) At that moment, Moses became afraid and said, ‘Perhaps the divine spirit has been removed from me and placed upon the princes?’ Said the Holy One to him, ‘Moses, if I had told them to bring [the wagons], I would have instructed you to tell them. Rather, ‘Take it from them’—the initiative came from them—their idea coincided with the thought of the One Above.’” Moses worried that absent a divine commandment to construct wagons, perhaps the princes’ gift, while well-meaning, was out of bounds? God’s answer is clear: their gift was special precisely because it came not from a command, but arose from their creativity and personal initiative.

The pop-artist, known as “Banksy,” once said, “A lot of people never use their initiative because no-one told them to.” Too often, this is true about so many of us that want to make a difference, but do nothing because no one told us how to do it. The best answer is that we make the most difference when the actions we take come from within—when we harness the power of our own initiative to make a difference. Artists4Israel harness the power of artists and what they do best—make art—to promote peace and security for Israel. Last month, the group [shared on Facebook](#) that, “our first Palestinian artist has joined us to paint under the Artists4Israel name. There is no limit to what can be achieved. Art. Peace. Israel.”

What about us? Every one of us has a passion and a talent that we can utilize for the causes most dear to our hearts. When we follow the example of the *nesi'im* and take the initiative to create change, there is no limit to the power that we can have to make a difference. ■

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