

Parshat Nasoh- 2019/5779

For 25 years, I lived in New York City, and I relished in the fact that I rarely found myself in midtown, especially during the day when sidewalks were filled with herds of people that looked, and felt, like a cattle drive. You've seen those scenes on TV programs and in movies: the throngs of workers saturating the sidewalks, all those soul-less zombies coming and going somewhere.

What depressed about these scenes of mass humanity was that they lacked individuality: who were each of these people? What did they do for work, what were their stories? How could each of their aspirations, their needs, be addressed over the sea of people in the herd? My reticence at falling in with these crowds was that in this mass of humanity, I feared that I would lose my humanity.

What is it about the fear of losing oneself into a sea of nameless, individual-less homogeneity, that makes someone like me stay away from such crowds? Is it the fear that in these crowds, there are no inter-personal connections, there are no obvious sons or daughters, no fathers or mothers, brothers, sisters, lovers...that in these crowds, it is unclear if we are loved as individuals?

For me, there was one more fear. As I looked into these crowds, I wondered, "what if there was one person in that sea of people who was praying deeply to G-d to help heal their loved one, or to help them have a healthy baby, or to give them the confidence to do well on their college entrance exam?" How would G-d be able to hear that one person, how could a G-d find them?

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks relates the story of a large crowd gathered on top of a hill overlooking a harbor as a ship sails out. Among the crowd is a young boy waving vigorously at the ship. One of the men in the crowd asks him why. He says, "I am waving so the captain of the ship can see me and wave back." "But," said the man, "the ship is far away, and there is a crowd of us here. What makes you think that the captain can see you?" "Because," said the boy, "the captain of the ship is my father. He will be looking for me among the crowd."

In this week's parsha of Nasoh, we read probably the most famous blessing in the Torah, the *birchat kohanim*, the 3-part priestly blessing.

יְבָרֶכֶּה יְהוָה וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ:

May Adonai bless you and protect you;

יְאֵר יְהוָה | פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיִתְנֶכֶךָ:

May Adonai make His face shine on you and be gracious to you;

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה | פְּנֵיו אֵלֶיךָ וְיַשֵּׁם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

May Adonai turn His face toward you and give you peace.

Rabbi Sacks notes that two of the three blessings use the word, פְּנֵיו

d's-G d shining or turning-in referring to G face to you. He explains that it's the same as the young boy in the crowd: although we assume that he is lost in the amongst the crowd, if he knows that G-d is looking for him, he also understands that G-d will not able to find him unless he goes ahead and signals. This, then, is the central beauty of this priestly blessing: that even if you think that you're just one in 7 billion members of the earth, if you signal, G-d will shine towards you, find you in the crowd, face you, and give you peace.

The other night at the Tikyn Layl Shavuot, we discussed how revelation had changed in the Torah. We read of the G-d of Exodus, a G-d of epic proportions who brought plagues upon the Egyptians, saved the Israelites by parting the Red Sea, nourished them in the wilderness with daily manna, and guided them with daily pillars of clouds by day or fire by night. But, by the time the sons and grandsons of Aaron offered the priestly blessing in the current parsha, Nasoh, the Israelites had received the 10 commandments from Mount Sinai, and had begun a new phase of revelation, one in which G-d's beneficence came from honoring the mitzvot, the commandments of the Torah. In this new phase, we, as Jews, would need to interact with G-d on a personal basis, one based on a relationship of love.

By the time we get to the final book of the Torah, דְּבָרִים, the relationship between the Israelites and G-d is not merely one of "fear" and "respect", but one of love. Our new attestation of our belief in G-d is summed up in the first words of the Shema prayer:

שְׁמַע, יִשְׂרָאֵל: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, יְהוָה אֶחָד. 4 Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one.

וְאַהֲבַתְּ, אֶת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ, וּבְכָל-מְאֹדְךָ. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.

Rabbit Sacks reminds us of this in the actual *birchat kohanim* ritual in our *Musaf* service. This blessing by the priests, the kohanim, amongst us starts with a unique *bracha*, a unique blessing:

בְּאַהֲבָה: יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-עַמּוֹ לְבָרַךְ וְצִוְנוּ שְׁלֹאֲהֵרֶן בְּקִדּוּשְׁתּוֹ קִדְשָׁנוּ אֲשֶׁר אָמַתָּה בְּרוּךְ

Blessed are you that sanctified us with the holiness given to Aaron, and commanded us to bless G-d's nation of Israel with love.

It is the only occasion in which “love” is a formal part of *bracha*, and it clearly is meant to say that the 3-part blessing the kohanim are about to bestow on the rest of us is given as evidence of G-d's love for each and every one us, as if we were the young boy waving from the crowd. You should know that the split hands that kohanim hold up are meant to form the letter “shin” for Shaddai, another name for the Almighty. Thus, the kohanim are showing us that it is not they who are blessing us; rather, they are the vessels through which G-d blesses us.

But is this a one-way street? What is our responsibility to merit these blessings?

One of the last revelations from Mount Sinai was that in the moment Moses appeared to the congregation of Israel with the second set of tablets, he uttered the true name of G-d, the one we as Jews no longer pronounce, and by each and every person hearing it, they had a personal connection with holiness. This ritual was repeated every year on Yom Kippur by the High Priest, as we recount in our High Holiday liturgy:

When the kohanim and the people, standing in the Temple courtyard, heard the glorious, awesome, Ineffable Name pronounced by the High Priest in holiness and purity, they would fall to ground, bow and prostrate themselves, exclaiming, “Praised be God's glorious kingdom forever.”

It is for this reason that the sentence right after the 3-part blessing is:

אֲבָרַכְכֶם, וְאָנִי; יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּנֵי-עַל, שְׁמִי-אֶת וְשִׁמּוֹ

And if you will place my Name on the children of Israel, then I will bless them.

This is meant to say that we have a responsibility to put G-d's name in everything we do, which is to say that we must obey the *mitzvot*, we must give charity, we must help the widow, the orphan and the stranger in our midst, we must actively make our a better place.

After the 2016 election, the Congressional Institute, a non-profit Republican-leaning organization, did an analysis of what motivated a large portion of Republican voters. They concluded that it was a deep frustration of not being heard. They also noted that Donald Trump seemed to target many in this group by saying things that validated them, as if someone had finally resonated with their long pent-up aspirations. And although this general population has nothing in common with white supremacist groups, the latter share the theme that their aspirations were not being heard. Again, many of these hate groups cite Donald Trump as being the one leader who seemed to validate their unrequited needs. So why can I tell you clearly that these haters are not counted amongst "good people on both sides"? It is because their message is one of hate and not love, a message that repudiates G-d's teachings of kindness and charity.

My friends, none of us wants to be in those crowded New York City sidewalks, a nameless grain of sand whose personal aspirations are lost to a sea of humanity. All of us want to believe that we can be that young boy in the crowd; all of us want to count and to be counted. But we must remember that we will not merit G-d's true blessings and true love until we fulfill our side of the relationship. If we don't have this moral compass to know which ship is captained by our loving father, we might just be waving at a pirate ship skippered by Blackbeard.