

DEBAR TORAH by RABBI ROHDE

Thus Shall Ye Bless

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus shall ye bless the Children of Israel. Say to them: [May] the Lord bless you and guard you! [May] the Lord shine His face upon you and favor you! [May] the Lord lift up His Face unto you and grant you peace! [Thus shall] they put My Name upon the Children of Israel, and I shall bless them” (Numbers 6:22-27)

Our Jewish tradition, particularly the post-Mishnaic part of our tradition, uses Hebrew terms best translated as “blessing” all the time. In the Bible, the equivalent root term is used less often, but the term is pretty common when worship is spoken of. We all indeed have some sense of the term, and similar such conceptions exist across many cultures and religions. But as I pointed out when teaching my Bat-Mitzvah student Lila Bulow, the term “blessing” and its definition and usage are hard to pin down, and even the greatest of Jewish sages have struggled with explaining the term. These verses of the Priestly Blessing are one of the primary Hebrew sources for this “blessing” concept, and they are indeed worth pondering for what they imply.

The key defining word is the last word in 6:25: “and favor you.” To bless is to “look favorably upon” someone so that one is willing to grant them favors or gifts, whether asked for or not. Blessing means being “well-disposed towards” someone to give them things they want or require. When God blesses us or we ask God to bless us, we are asking God to be well-disposed towards doing us the favor of granting what we need. In a way, when God blesses us He puts Himself at our service, at least in a general way. On the other hand, when we bless God, we are showing that we look favorably towards God. This means that we are well-disposed to giving or doing for God any task or gift He might want or require from us. We show our willingness to put ourselves at God’s service. This is how I relate the Hebrew term for “blessing” to the Hebrew term for “knee” and the verb meaning “kneeling.” In showing that we willingly put ourselves at God’s service, we figuratively “kneel,” showing ourselves to be humble “servants.” No wonder then that our “blessing” God in showing our willingness to serve Him has always been a part of worship. We show our appreciation for all the favor God has shown us with a response that we in turn would gladly put ourselves at God’s service to return the favor.

When we ask God to bless us as we do in the Priestly Blessing, this too is part of Divine Worship. Begging for special favor already subjugates us, makes us act like servants. We “take the knee” as poor supplicants begging for favor. Also, although we could theoretically ask for favors from anyone, all truly good gifts stem from God Himself. Asking for special favor and blessing from a fellow human being, while permitted, smacks of a kind of “idolatry.” We are forbidden from asking for such favor from any divine power or natural force other than God. And although one should seek to serve one’s elders, family, nation, and government, we should not seek to debase ourselves by slavishly seeking favor. That’s why the proper way for a person to show favor and to give gifts is to do so invoking God’s blessing, acknowledging that Man is merely a conduit for God’s blessing, that any protection Man can provide is merely an extension of God’s protection. All favor we receive from our fellow man as well as from our worldly circumstances must be acknowledged as stemming from God’s Blessing

In Jewish tradition, blessings are formulated by strict rules. Although a person can theoretically make up his own blessings, we largely don’t do that. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik famously pointed out how careful our tradition is in formulating blessings, often basing them upon Biblical phraseology. Perhaps a basis for this strictness can be found in our verses: “Thus shall ye bless the Children of Israel.” The laying out of this very specific formulated blessing emphasizes that only “thus” shall the Priests bless, implying that they should not use other formulations. Again, acknowledging that favor or gifts or goodness or power comes from any intermediary smacks of idolatry, of putting oneself at the service of lesser powers. And the giver should not take too much pride in the wealth which enables him to give, nor should he insist for too much from the receiver in return - for that would be acting as though he the giver was god. Rather, the giver should humble himself in giving, recognizing that his possessions are a trust granted by God. And the receiver should humble himself through his service, but not debase himself into slavery. The receiver should still recognize that it is ultimately God who is Master, not any human or divine intermediary. Both givers and receivers must strictly train themselves to both seek and acknowledge God Himself as the True Source of all Blessings.



CONGREGATION SHEARITH ISRAEL
The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue

Shabbat Naso

June 2-3, 2023 | 14 Sivan 5783

SHABBAT SCHEDULE

Kaplan: p. 676 | Haftarah: p. 1184

Hertz: p. 586 | Haftarah: p. 602

Candle Lighting | 8:03 pm

Friday Evening Services | 7:00 pm | Main Sanctuary

Zemirot | 8:30 am / **Shahrit** | 9:10 am | Paved Paradise

Youth Groups/Tot Shabbat | Meet at 10:00 am | Fidanque Youth Room

Jr. Congregation | 10:30 am | Small Synagogue | Led this week by Rafe Sasson

Kiddush | following services | Paved Paradise

Shabbat Afternoon Class | 7:15 pm | Rabbi Soloveichik | Elias Room

Evening Services | 8:00 pm

Habdala | 9:04 pm

Weekday Service Times

Mornings:

Sunday: 8:05 am

Monday-Friday: 7:05 am

Evenings:

Sunday-Thursday: **6:45 pm (note new time)**

COMING UP

Young Professionals Shabbat Dinner

NEXT Friday night, June 9 | For ages 21-35

Services at 7:00 pm | Dinner at 8:00 pm

*Dinner Committee: Isaac Haberman, Devorah Goldstein, Ariel Bengio,
and Daniel De Sola Marks*

Register at shearithisrael.org/yp-june-dinner.

Graduation Kiddush & Scroll of Honor

Shabbat, June 17 | Following Services

Oh, the time has come to celebrate
All the graduates, both small and great!
From pre-school to PhDs they've come,
And we're so proud of every one!

Honor your graduate at shearithisrael.org/grad-kiddush2023.

CSI Youth & Young Families Bring-Your-Own-(Dairy) Picnic Lunch

Shabbat, June 17 | Following the Graduation Kiddush | Paved Paradise

Youth and young families are invited to celebrate closing out the school year by feasting picnic-style under our Paved Paradise tent. You bring the food, we'll bring (dairy) dessert! No cost, but registration is required.

Register at shearithisrael.org/year-end-picnic.

Shearith Israel & DOROT present

Old World Klezmer String Duo – Live!

with Jake Shulman-Ment and Pete Rushefsky

Tuesday, June 13 | 12:00 pm | Paved Paradise

Two of the most recognized names on the international Yiddish music scene join us for an entrancing concert at the covered outdoor space of Shearith Israel. Long before klezmer encountered the sounds of clarinets and brass, the fiddle and tsimbl (dulcimer) expressed the heart and soul of Central & Eastern European Jewish music.

Register at shearithisrael.org/events/klezmer-live.

COMING UP

Mets vs Nationals at Citi Field

July 30 | 1:40 pm | Fun for the whole family!

Don't miss this chance for highly discounted tickets! Limited supply!

Pricing:

CSI Members & Young Families - \$25

Non-member adults attending without children - \$30

(Tickets have \$54 face value)

Sign up at shearithisrael.org/events/mets2023.

Summer Schedule

Starting this Shabbat, we are transitioning to our Summer Schedule: Shabbat morning services will begin at 8:30 am, and will take place outside on Paved Paradise, weather permitting.

COMMUNITY ANNOUNCEMENTS

Mazal tob to our rabbi, **Meir Soloveichik**, upon the publication of his new book, *Providence and Power: Ten Portraits in Jewish Statesmanship*. He will be discussing the book with Dr. Leah Garrett, Director of the Hunter College Jewish Studies Center, at the Roosevelt House on Thursday, June 8, at 6 PM. The discussion will be followed by a reception and book signing.

For more information and to attend, visit tinyurl.com/rms-booktalk.

We welcome new member **Aleksander Hansen** to our growing Shearith Israel family.

Valerie and Daniel Feder are pleased to announce the engagement of their daughter, Rebecca Feder, to Kurt Moskovitz, son of Dr. Martin and Boni Moskovitz of West Orange, NJ. Congratulations as well to siblings Sophia and Jeremy, and to Grandma, Mrs. Raymonde Schroeder.

We mourn the loss of our longtime member, **Rae Beispel** (née Franco): wife of **Paul Beispel**; mother of **Steven (Ina) Beispel**, and of Rick Beispel; sister of the late **Robert (Elinor) Franco**, and of Lilian Macken.