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Upcoming Events:

June 13-June 20 Rabbi Dr. Yaakov Elman at the JCC in NYC on "Modern Orthodoxy—the Fourth Century Version" 7:00-8:15 pm

June 13 Dr. Lawrence Schiffman at the JCC in NYC on "A Brief History of Heresy" 8:30-9:45 pm

June 18 Edah mini-conference at the JCC NYC

Parents and Teachers as Quasi-Priests?

By Rabbi Yaakov Bieler

The Biblical blessing appearing in Parshat Naso, that the Priests are commanded to bestow upon the Jewish people (Numbers 6:22-27) is typically more well-known than most other portions of the Torah not only because of its regular invocation during most morning prayer services, but also due to the custom of parents blessing their children at the advent of each Sabbath (e.g., ArtScroll Sid-dur, pp. 354-5), as well as upon the occasion of their wedding (e.g., The RCA Lifecycle Madrich, pp. 86-7).

However the assumption that the blessings appearing in these verses can be freely used by parents, or anyone else for that matter, outside the context of the ritual services in first the Tabernacle, and then the Temples that were specifically and exclusively led by the Priests, and now commemorated during the repetition of the morning prayer services, appears to be belied by **Numbers 6:22-23** and its Rabbinic commentary.

And God Spoke to Moses, Saying:
Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: "Koh" (**in this particular manner**, i.e., in these specific words) "Tevarchu" (**you will bless**) the Children of Israel, say to them...

Ketubot 24b

...In the case of "Nesiat Kapayim" (lit. lifting up the hands, i.e., the act of blessing the people by the Priests that entails their extending their hands before them while pronouncing the Priestly Blessings, implied in Leviticus 9:22 "And Aaron lifted up his hands to the people and he blessed them...") if one who is not a Priest performs the pronouncing of the Priestly Blessing, he is transgressing the prohibition of a positive commandment...(although the Torah never explicitly states in the form of a negative injunction that a non-Priest must not invoke these blessings, there is a clear implication that if it is the Priests who ought to bless the Jewish people in this particular manner, others are precluded from doing so—see Rashi's commentary on this passage.)

The following anecdote, related by R. Baruch Halevi Epstein, author of the well-known Bible commentary "Torah Temima", (Numbers 6:23, #131; Tosefet Ber-acha, Bamidbar, p. 30) illustrates how at least one illustrious Rabbinic figure took pains to avoid bestowing the Priestly Blessings in a manner identical to how they were invoked during Temple times:

I heard from a trustworthy man in Vilna, who in turn heard from his elderly father, my father-in-law, the Gaon, R. Yechezkel Landau, head of the Vilna Rabbinic Court (who died in 5631 [1871] at the age of 91), that on the day of his wedding, the Gaon of Vilna blessed him, and placed a single hand upon his head at the time of the blessing. Since it was well-known that all of his actions and behaviors were performed in strict accordance with Jewish law, some who were close to him asked him why he did so, i.e., place only one hand upon the individual being blessed. The Vilna Gaon responded, "We only find a blessing given with two hands when the Priests bestowed blessings in the Temple."

While one could make similar technical adjustments to the manner in which the Blessings are given, following the lead of the Vilna Gaon, that would ostensibly allow non-Priests to impart the Priestly Blessings upon others—the Tora prohibition could be understood to apply only to someone who is intrinsically disqualified from participating in the Temple rituals were there a Temple today, going up before the congregation during a synagogue service at the point of "Nesiat Kapayim" and acting as if he were a Priest; consequently as long as the Blessing in question is given in some sort of informal context and in a manner formalistically distinct from what was done during the Temple period, no infraction has occurred—nevertheless it is interesting to consider why a non-Priest would be interested in using these particular Blessings in the first place. What is their attraction, and why would someone as punctilious as the Vilna Gaon have relied upon what amounts to essentially a legal loophole in order to be able invoke these specific blessings?

Nedarim 35b presents an intriguing conceptualization of the role played by Priests that might lend itself to explaining why "Birkat Kohanim" is appropriate for parents and teachers to pronounce upon their children and disciples. The Talmud poses the following question: "These Priests, are they our surrogates/representatives or are they the surrogates/representatives of Heaven?" This question's formulation reflects the assumption that Priests occupy a unique dualistic position within the human hierarchy. On the one hand, the Priests assist everyone else to properly conduct worship of the Divine; but they are also extensions of God, and both receive on His Behalf sacrifices as well as conduct His Holy Service. Consequently, who could be more appropriate to beseech the One Who Appoints them to care for and protect the people they are charged to represent?

From such a vantage point, parents and teachers could be understood as paralleling the Priests in terms of serving and representing “two masters” simultaneously, i.e., they are bound to care for and educate their offspring and disciples, even as the Torah Commands that they are to be viewed by their charges as entitled to respect comparable to that of God Himself. The placement of the obligation to respect parents in the Ten Commandments at the end of the laws governing relationships between man and God which is simultaneously the beginning of the dicta governing how human beings are expected to interact with one another (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16) reflects the “Priesthood” of parents, just as R. Elazar ben Shamma’s dictum in Ethics of the Fathers 4:12, “...And the fear

of your teacher should be comparable to the Fear of Heaven” is an indicator of the “priesthood” of Torah teachers. Consequently, just as parents and teachers can be understood to serve as unofficial “Priests” within the galaxy of Jewish interpersonal relationships, perhaps they more than others are entitled to bless those dependent upon them who at the same time look up to them as God’s Surrogates, with the Priestly Blessing.

Rabbi Yaakov Bieler is the Rabbi of Kemp Mill Synagogue in Silver Spring, Maryland.

SAMSON’S STRENGTH WAS ALSO HIS WEAKNESS

By Mordechai Beck

In my non-Jewish, and sometimes threatening environment, as a youngster growing up in post-war London, the Biblical Samson seemed just the model I needed for psychological and emotional support. My hero, moreover, was also a judge: what better combination could I ask for?

Yet as I grew up, Samson’s antics -- not to mention his violence -- became increasingly problematic. It’s true his enemies, the Philistines, were a brutal lot. They set fire to one of his wives and her father (Judges 15:6) and waited to assault our hero after a visit to the whore of Gaza (16:1). But Samson’s violent response is rooted in a desire for revenge rather than being a measured reaction motivated by a sense of national pride or moral rightness. His inability to distinguish between his individual gripes and the situation of his people -- as targets of continual Philistine aggression -- makes his personality as much a subject for psychoanalysis as for theology.

Samson’s fate was sealed from before his birth. According to the haftarah for the Torah portion of Naso, his birth is preceded by an angelic announcement promising him to be “a Nazarite [Hebrew: nazir] to the Lord” (13:5) and the savior of his people.

Despite this promise, the Rabbis are uneasy in granting Samson a Nazarite status. His unshorn hair and grapeless diet notwithstanding -- he is hardly a model of self-restraint and the sacred life.

According to Rabbi Yehudah, Samson’s Nazarite status is doubtful since it is imposed upon him by his father Manoah, following the angel’s command. Maimonides concurs; in his Mishneh Torah, he states that Samson “was not a complete Nazarite, since he never took a Nazarite vow voluntarily.”

The conclusion that emerges from all these hesitations is that the entire Samson narrative is nothing more than a parody. Samson’s Nazarite-ship is not from choice. His life is reduced, at one level at least, to a game. He must follow the rules, and these rules precede him. His situation is unnatural, perverse. It is no wonder that he is drawn to games - sexual games, social games, riddles. Even the wily Delilah finds it hard

to get him to give her a straight answer to her constant, nagging question: wherein lies your strength?

Yet if his life is a game, it is played in deadly earnest. All shades and nuances are erased, so as to sharpen the inner tensions of the tight narrative. Even his marriage to Delilah is no normal Jewish-Gentile clash, but takes on a cosmic dimension: Samson (Shimshon in Hebrew) signifies the sun (shemesh) and thus the day; Delilah means literally ‘of the night’ - she is the obverse, the female, she matches his anarchism. Together they are a dangerous mix of elements, as irreconcilable as day and night, that must inevitably explode.

Within Samson’s own life, too, there is conflict and contradiction. He is an impossible combination: in one figure the judge and man of spirit is pitched against the wild, brutish bully of the Philistines, who repeatedly self-destructs. If his birth is a parody of that of Isaac’s, his life is a parody of what a Jewish judge ought to be. His violence, which on one level might be excused given the nature of his enemies, is nevertheless executed in a wild and blind way, so it is perhaps only poetic justice that he dies blinded, again echoing the Isaac narrative.

Psychologically, Samson is a perfect example of how repression of the natural instincts will inevitably produce a counter-reaction. Life-long asceticism or monasticism is not the Jewish way. The mishnah in tractate Nazir suggests that it is Samuel, who follows him, who is a true life-long Nazarite, in whom power and spirituality are finally integrated. Saintry Samuel -- “the father of the prophets” -- personally anoints Saul and David, yet also executes Agag, the Philistine king, not from personal motives but from a strong sense of divine obligation.

Samson is the last of the Judges. His story is a fin de siècle piece. The Biblical narrative had grown tired of Judges. Unlike his predecessors on the job, Samson’s career extends for only 20 years - half that of the typological span. The experiment had run its course. Profligate power was not the answer. It still isn’t. Our strength as individuals, and as a people, has to lie elsewhere.

MORDECHAI BECK IS a Jerusalem-based artist, writer and teacher. His original prints are to be found in MoMA, the Library of Congress, the Universities of Yale, Berkeley, YU, and JTS and in private collections. He is a regular contributor to the London “Jewish Chronicle,” “The Guardian,” and other professional journals.