



Jewish Mosaic

The National Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity

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torah **QUEERIES**

Welcome to Torah Queeries, a joint project of Jewish Mosaic and the World Congress of GLBT Jews! Check back regularly for creative and incisive “queer” takes on the weekly Torah portion or Jewish holiday, brought to you by some of the Jewish world’s most dynamic scholars, rabbis, activists and lay leaders.

Embracing the LGBTQ community

by Rabbi David Lazar

Parashat Nasso— Numbers 4:21 - 7:89

on Saturday May 26, 2007 (9 Sivan 5767)

**May the Lord bless you and watch over you.
May the Lord look kindly upon you and deal graciously with you.
May the Lord look with favor upon you and grant you well-being.**

(Num. 6:24-26)

Jews all over the world have been using this three-tiered blessing for centuries. Its literary source is in our weekly portion, Nasso, and specified as the words that the sons of Aaron, those who founded the priestly caste, or Kohanim, were both privileged and obliged to pronounce over the people of Israel on a regular basis.

From the context of this passage, one gets the sense that the blessing was intended to

preserve the lives and well being of the Israelites in ancient times. However, the same benediction (or one very similar to it) is inscribed upon two amulets dating back to the 6th or 7th BCE that were found in a burial cave outside the Old City of Jerusalem. This suggests that, at least for some, these were words that referred to well being in the *afterlife* as well.

While we can't be sure as to how this blessing was used during the period of the First Temple in Jerusalem (destroyed, 586 BCE), the Mishnah (Tamid 7:2) tells us that the Kohanim would use it daily in the Second Temple, which was destroyed in the year 70 CE. Since then, this benediction has remained in use, both as part of the public ritual as well as in private settings. In traditional synagogues (in Israel this is daily, outside of Israel, on the three pilgrimage holidays) those who consider themselves descended from the Kohanim will go up to the dais and face the congregation with their *talitot* (prayer shawls), over their heads holding their fingers together according to the ancient custom and slowly utter these words. But in many cases, this blessing has passed from the hands of the Kohanim to those of all Jews—prayer leaders in the morning service, rabbis and cantors at life cycle events, parents and grandparents at family occasions.

On a personal note, this is by far one of my favorite pieces of liturgy. I relish singing it with my family on Shabbat and Holidays and with the community at prayer and on special occasions. I take these words very seriously and it is for this reason that I would like to interpret this passage in light of one of the most important aspects of my work as a Masorti/Conservative rabbi—the struggle for full inclusion of LGBTQs into all aspects of civil and religious life.

May the Lord bless you and watch over you

While enormous gains have been made in the last few years regarding rights—both civil and religious—on behalf of the LGBTQ community, it seems that too often these gains are based upon a notion of protection alone. There is a desire to *watch over*, and protect these members of society from intolerance so that they neither find themselves in physical danger nor suffer discrimination. Surely, the hate crimes laws that now exist in many communities and that target anti-LGBTQ violence are very positive developments. As is the fact that several states in the United States and over two dozen countries around the world now allow same-gender couples to register as officially being together in some sort of civil union.

But there is the other side of this phrase—*bless you*—that needs to be taken into account as well. Protecting from violence or registering couples in what is basically an administrative measure is about *watching over*, but not *blessing*. Straight folk learning from LGBTQs about new and different forms of loving relationships, or recognition of those couples as actually "married"—now that would be blessing!

May the Lord look kindly upon you and deal graciously with you

We have often, in our centuries of religious narrative, expressed our sense of justice

and truth by referring to God's actions in this world. Asking for God's face to be present, to shine and to bestow favor upon another, is not a request based on pity, it is not asking for mercy. It is an appeal for both spiritual and physical well-being. We are, in essence, asking God to be a good role model for ourselves. Full acceptance of the LGBTQ community will only come when the straight community moves from a stance of tolerance to a position of arms-open embracing. It's not only about *watching over*. Even *blessing* is not enough. We all, with God leading the way, need to nurture *kindness and grace*.

Another aspect of this line is worth mentioning: the Hebrew text can also be translated as, "*May the Lord's face shine upon you. . .*" So many LGBTQs have, in the past as well as in the present, been forced to live in darkness. For many, the first step out of the closet might be the *shining light* of another's acceptance, the grace felt through the love and companionship of a fellow human being.

May the Lord look with favor upon you and grant you peace

From an impersonal *blessing*, to the Lord *looking kindly* from afar, the last line of the blessing asks that the *Shekhinah*, God's presence, be up and close and bring about a situation of *shalom*, the wholeness that we often refer to as *peace*. We are all different, some more different than others, but no two of us human beings are alike. And we are all, according to our tradition, created in the image of God. We are all, at least in theory, if not always in practice, able to be a receptacle for the *Shekhinah*, to bring it into our own lives and into the lives of others. But *peace*—in Hebrew *shalom*, meaning wholeness, comes when we realize that as different parts of humanity, we not only complement, but complete each other and create that wholeness.

Both LGBTQ and straight folk need to strive and pray for a society in which each of us come together, not just well wishing from afar, but up front and close. And perhaps in this way we might create that *wholeness*, that *shalom*, that we speak of so much.

***Whenever they pronounce my name over the Israelite people,
I will bless them!***

(Num. 6:27)

About the Author:



Rabbi David Lazar grew up in Los Angeles, California and moved to Israel in 1975. He has studied Jewish Law at the Kerem B'Yavne Seminary, Bible and Jewish Literature at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, from which he holds a BA. He received his MA in Jewish Studies and Rabbinic Ordination from the Schechter Institute in Jerusalem. He is the director of RIKMA: Spiritual Community Leadership Training program and serves as the spiritual leader of the Tiferet Shalom Synagogue in Tel Aviv.