



## 5 ways to bless

with Aaron's blessing

The priestly blessing in Numbers 6:24-26 is sometimes termed *Aaron's Blessing*. Just as we teach our children *The Lord's Prayer* as a normal part of their Christian upbringing, we can also teach them *Aaron's Blessing* from the Torah. Five practical tips follow.

1. Make (or purchase) an attractively framed presentation of Aaron's Blessing. Hang it in your home in a prominent place—not as a decoration but as a call to prayer. May this blessing become part of the natural rhythms of your life of faith.
2. An advantage of Aaron's Blessing is that it can 'heard' at different levels of spirituality and is unlikely to cause offence to most people. Consider including it in your next gathering of extended family where a variety of spiritualities mingle.
3. Bless young children before they sleep by laying hands upon them and praying Aaron's Blessing. Remind them that God is smiling at them, and check your own face: the medium is the message!
4. Hands held high, arms enfolded... young children love to sing and pray using bodily gestures. Aaron's Blessing lends itself to tactile gestures. Make up some actions and teach them to your children.
5. Farewell visitors at the door, or relatives at the airport, by incorporating Aaron's Blessing into your goodbye hugs and words of endearment. Your children will learn by your example.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 4:21—7:89

Naso:  
'Add up'

## Why reflect on Torah?

In the Jewish Scriptures (which form the major part of our Catholic bible) as well as in the *midrash* (Jewish interpretative storytelling traditions), the Torah is described as spiritual illumination:

*The Lord make His face to shine...with the light of the Torah... May He enlighten your eyes and heart in the Torah ... 'For the commandment is a lamp, and the Torah is light' (Prov. 6: 23). [Midrash Rabbah 11, 6]*

And in the language of ecumenical councils we hear the voice of the Church:

*The plan of salvation...is found as the true word of God in the books of the Old Testament: these books...written under divine inspiration, remain permanently valuable. 'For all that was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope' (Rom. 15:4). [Dei Verbum, 14]*

But if these Scriptures are divinely inspired, spiritually illuminating, instructive, hope-giving, and foundational to Christianity, why are they so often overlooked by Catholics? *Light of Torah* seeks to awaken parishioners to the gift of Torah, with the help of Jewish approaches to the sacred text.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Numbers 4:21—7:89

Today's Torah portion is challenging reading: repetitious numerical data, a bizarre 'test' for women accused of sin, and details about the piety of the Nazarites. Yet, seemingly 'out of the blue,' there appears a beautiful priestly blessing of the people, familiar to Jews and Christians alike. Treat yourself to these verses (6:22-27) as we explore their meaning and prayerful value.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers Vol 1*; (NY, 1983); Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (NY, 1990).

## Tasting Torah

*May YHWH bless you and keep you!  
May YHWH shine his face upon you  
and favor you!*

*May YHWH lift up his face toward you and  
grant you shalom!* (Numbers 6:24-26; Fox)

This blessing makes wonderful use of poetic rhythm, fully appreciated in the Hebrew text as it unfolds in three progressively-longer lines. Read (pray) aloud a few times from Everett Fox's English translation (above) which seeks to be sensitive to the Hebrew rhythmic structures. (Note: the unutterable divine name YHWH can be read as 'the Lord,' or *Hashem*, 'The Name'.)

## Touching Torah

What else do you notice? The repetition of YHWH? And 'face'? The pairs of divine actions: bless and keep, shine and favor, lift up and grant peace? Why might these actions be paired as they are? The *midrash* suggests that one action is consequential to the other. Thus if you receive a blessing/gift, then it needs to be kept/protected or it may be lost/stolen.

Recall how the Psalms (e.g., 68:2; 69:18) describe God's face as 'turning,' 'shining,' 'hiding.' Recall how Moses' face shone after encountering the Lord's glory (Ex. 34:29). Lovely luminous imagery fills this blessing, along with a sense of comfort. YHWH draws near, with face lifted towards us in a gaze of pleasure and affection. Indeed, the text could read: 'May YHWH smile on you.'

## Depthing Torah

Jewish commentators suggest that the three sections correspond to the bestowal of gifts in an ascending order: a blessing of material goods (e.g., food, shelter), followed by a blessing of spiritual qualities (understood as spiritual illumination through the study and living of Torah), and finally the promise of *shalom*, i.e., peace in its fullest sense, arising through the combination of the first two blessings. The *midrash* highlights this climax through a series of statements about the greatness of peace and its fittingness as the 'seal' (conclusion) to the blessings. E.g.,  
*"This is to tell you that the blessings are of no avail unless peace goes with them... Great is peace, for it outweighs everything."* (Midrash R. 11, 7)

That the Priestly Blessing is deeply linked with peace is underscored in the teaching of Hasidic lore that those given the special task of reciting the blessing for the congregation in the synagogue may do so only if they harbor no resentment or hostility towards anyone in the congregation, for this would violate the command "to bless with love."<sup>1</sup>

## Doing Torah

- Torah speaks of God's love using images of bodily gesture (e.g., 'lifting up his face'). Consider your own use of body language and facial gesture to communicate love.
- In your life as a Christian, what does it mean "to bless with love"?



### In Jewish custom

In synagogues to this day, those considered to be Aaron's descendants (known as *Kohanim*) are bestowed with the honor of reciting the Priestly Blessing toward the congregation as they are called forward to stand before the ark (where the Torah scrolls are kept). As this occurs it is customary for fathers in the congregation to cover their children with their *tallit* [prayer shawl]. Many a Jewish adult has comforting childhood memories of standing beneath their father's *tallit* and hearing the chanting of the Priestly Blessing...surrounded by Love from 'above' (the Divine) and 'below' (the parent).

1. The benediction prior to the Priestly Blessing praises God "*who has endowed us with the holiness of Aaron, and commanded us to bless Your people Israel with love.*"