

RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE TABERNACLE

By

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During a recent session of *Torah* study at my synagogue, the rabbi began by discussing a variety of terms used in *Torah* to describe the *tabernacle*, the sanctuary constructed in the desert as a dwelling place for *God*. Of the various terms mentioned, the one that particularly caught my eye was *ohel moed* (*aleph-hey-lamed, mem-vav-ayin-dalet*), the *Tent of Meeting*. What immediately struck me about this term was that the *gematria* or numerical value of the word for *tent* is thirty-six, a number that is generally used in Judaism as a numerical symbol for *righteousness*. This value is derived from a *Talmudic* passage that, in turn, is based upon *Isaiah 30:18*.

“And therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious to you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you; for the Lord is a God of judgment; happy are all those who wait for Him.”

(Isaiah 30:18)

“The world never has less than thirty-six righteous men who are vouchsafed a sight of the Shechinah every day, for it is said, Happy are they that wait for Him (lo, lamed-vav) and the numerical value of ‘lo’ is thirty-six.”

(B.Sukkah 45b)

The appearance of the value 36 in the word *tent/ohel* intrigued me, and on the drive home I began to free associate regarding the meaning of the word *righteous*. On the one hand, the Hebrew word for *righteous* is linguistically related to the word for *justice* as well as the word for *charity*, and the core meaning is, perhaps, that of *justice*. For instance, when we say we should do something because it is the *right* thing to do, there is also a connotation that it is the *just* thing to do, and in Judaism, *charity* is generally seen not necessarily as an act of love, but as one of *justice* which helps correct economic imbalances in the world. Thus, the words *righteous*, *justice*, and *charity* all enhance the meanings of one another when looked at through the lens of the Hebrew language. Other associations to *righteousness* can be found, though, by examining different passages in the *Hebrew Bible* and rabbinic literature. From these associations we find the following:

Righteousness enhances life and saves one from death.

“Treasures of wickedness profit nothing; but righteousness saves from death.”

(Proverbs 10:2)

“In the way of righteousness is life; and in its path there is no death.”

(Proverbs 12:28)

In connection with the *tabernacle*, the association of *righteousness* with life is important because approaching the *tabernacle* in inappropriate ways could result in an individual’s death.

“When they go into the Tent of Meeting, they shall wash with water, that they die not.”

(Leviticus 10:7)

“Do not drink wine nor strong drink, you, nor your sons with you, when you go into the Tent of Meeting, lest you die.”

(Leviticus 10:9)

“Neither must the people of Israel henceforth come near the Tent of Meeting, lest they bear sin, and die.”

(Numbers 18:22)

Righteousness is associated with peace.

“And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and security forever.”

(Isaiah 32:17)

“Loving kindness and truth meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.”

(Psalm 85:11)

We can find a further association between *righteousness* and *peace* by simply examining the spelling of *peace* in Hebrew, *shin-lamed-vav-mem*. The middle two letters of *shalom/peace* are *lamed-vav* which is also the traditional representation for the number 36 and the legendary *thirty-*

six righteous ones. This conveys an important lesson that there can be no *peace* without *righteousness* being at its core. Furthermore, the outer two letters, *shin-mem*, spell *name* in Hebrew, and *The Name* is frequently used as an epithet for *God* in *Judaism*. Hence, from this we might conclude that not only is there no *peace* without *righteousness*, but also when *peace* does have *righteousness* at its core, then that *peace* will be surrounded by the presence of *God*.

Righteousness is associated with faith.

“And he (Abraham) believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness.”

(Genesis 15:6)

“And I will restore your judges as at the first, and your counselors as at the beginning; afterward you shall be called, The city of righteousness, the faithful city.”

(Isaiah 1:26)

The Lord requite to every man his righteousness and his faithfulness.”

(I Samuel 26:23)

And righteousness shall be the girdle of his loins, and faithfulness the girdle of his reins.”

(Isaiah 11:5)

“It is Chabakuk who came and based them all (the 613 mitzvot) on one principle, as it is said, ‘But the righteous shall live by his faith (Chabakuk 2:4)’” (B. Makkot 24a),

The righteous are the foundation of the world.

“The righteous is an everlasting foundation.”

(Proverbs 10:25)

“R. Hiyya b. Abba said also in the name of R. Johanan: Even for the sake of a single righteous man does the world endure, as it is said: But the righteous is the foundation of the world.”

(B. Yoma 38b)

“R. Eleazar b. Shammua’ says: The world rests on one pillar, and its name is ‘Righteous’, for it is said: But ‘Righteous’ is the foundation of the world.”

(B. Chagigah 12b)

If we return now to *Isaiah 30:18*, notice that the wording is somewhat reminiscent of the *Priestly Blessing* found in *Numbers 6:24-26*.

“And therefore will the Lord wait, that he may be gracious to you, and therefore will he be exalted, that he may have mercy upon you; for the Lord is a God of judgment; happy are all those who wait for Him.” (Isaiah 30:18)

Thus, we’ll now examine some of the underlying structure of the *Priestly Blessing*, and to do this it will be helpful to arrange the Hebrew letters in a grid following first our presentations of the blessing in both English and Hebrew below.

To find additional structure, notice that the three words *Adonai panav elecha* that can be found by looking at the center word of each verse are also the three central words of the second verse, and these words also appear in the third verse. I loosely translate these words as, “*God’s face to you,*” and I see this as the core meaning of the *Priestly Blessing*. Again, this pattern hardly seems accidental

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There are several other patterns that may be found in the *Priestly Blessing*, but for now I’ll focus only on those related to *righteousness*. In particular, let’s start with the middle letter of each of the three verses. Both the first and the last verses have letters exactly in the center, but the second verse, since it contains an even number of letters, has no letter in the middle, and so in the grid below I have inserted a grey space to denote its omission. However, the middle letters that we do have are indicated in the grid below by the color blue.

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And now we see something wonderful! The two middle letters are *lamed* and *vav*, and these are the letters that symbolize *righteousness* in *Judaism*. Thus, this suggests that if we want to have “*God’s face to us,*” then we need to have *righteousness* at our core. Notice, too, that in our

diagram above that the *lamed-vav* are literally found in a *pillar*, and recall the following verse from the *Bavli*:

“R. Eleazar b. Shammua’ says: The world rests on one pillar, and its name is ‘Righteous’, for it is said: But ‘Righteous’ is the foundation of the world.”

(B. Chagigah 12b)

Once more, I doubt that this is just coincidental. Furthermore, a clue within the *Priestly Blessing* of the existence of this pattern lies within the fact that this blessing contains sixty letters and 60 is the numerical value of the letter *samech*. If we write out *samech* as a word in Hebrew, *samech-mem-kaf*, then this word has a *gematria* of 120 which is the same as that of *amud*, *ayin-mem-vav-dalet*, which means *pillar*, and “The world rests on one pillar and its name is ‘Righteous.’”

There is yet another place where we find *righteousness* encoded as the number 36 in the *Priestly Blessing*, and we can see it as follows. If we think of the three center words of the three verses as forming a square and if we examine the letters at the corner points, then the sum of the numerical values of these letters is once again 36. This is illustrated in the table below, and again, I doubt that all of these occurrences of 36 are entirely coincidental.

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| ם | ו | ל | ש | ך | ל | ם | ש | י | ו | י | ך | ל | א | ו | י | נ | פ | י | ו | ה | ו | ה | י | א | ש |

And for the *coup de grâce*, recall that the *gematria* of *amud* for *pillar* is 120, and let's return to the often used term of *Tent of Meeting* for the *tabernacle*. The Hebrew for this phrase is *ohel moed*, and this is spelled *aleph-hey-lamed, mem-vav-ayin-dalet*. As we've already mentioned, the *gematria* of *ohel* is 36, but what makes this even more interesting is that the *gematria* of *moed* is 120. Thus, *Tent of Meeting* can now be thought of as a code phrase for the *righteous pillar* found at the center of the *Priestly Blessing*, and again, there is the implication that we must be a *pillar of righteousness* in order to safely merit having *God's face turned to us*.

Now I want to briefly discuss *Psalm 67* which is known as the *Menorah Psalm* and which can be thought of as a continuation of the *Priestly Blessing*. This *psalm* is so-called because the words of the *psalm* are often written in such a way as to form a *menorah*, and this makes a connection, also, to the *menorah* that was part of the original *tabernacle* in the desert. Furthermore, the 49 words in the *psalm* are used to count the days between *Pesach (Passover)* and *Shavuot*, the anniversary of the revelation on Mount Sinai.



Below is the text of this *psalm* excluding the first verse which is just introductory.

2. *God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let His face shine upon us. Selah.*
3. *That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.*
4. *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise You.*
5. *O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.*
6. *Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise You.*
7. *The earth has yielded her produce; and God, our own God, shall bless us.*
8. *God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear Him.*

(Psalm 67:2-8)

The very first verse of this *psalm* is highly reminiscent of the *Priestly Blessing*. Also, a connection between this *psalm* and the *Priestly Blessing* which is less obvious is that the first letters of verses two through eight, when considered as numbers, add up to 72. We find this same number encoded in the *Priestly Blessing* if we add onto the 60 letters in that blessing the 12 spaces that exist between the words found in each of the verses, what we call the sum total of the *black fire* and the *white fire*. Additionally, 72 is the *gematria* of *chesed* which is often translated as *love* or *mercy*, and this reflects the basic tenor of the *Priestly Blessing*.

There are also some important contrasts that exist between the *Priestly Blessing* and the *Menorah Psalm*. In particular, the name that is used for *God* throughout the *Priestly Blessing* is *Adonai* (in place of *yud-hey-vav-hey*) while the name used for *God* in the *Menorah Psalm* is *Elohim*. Traditionally, in rabbinic literature the name *Adonai* denotes *mercy* while the name *Elohim* carries a connotation of *justice*, and this suggests that the *Menorah Psalm* is not just a repetition of the *Priestly Blessing* but is in some way complementary to it.

“Wherever the Tetragrammaton (*Lord/Adonai*) is employed it connotes the Attribute of Mercy, as in the verse, *The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious (Exodus 34:6)*, ... Wherever *Elohim (God)* is employed it connotes the Attribute of Judgment: Thus: *You shall not revile Elohim- God (Exodus 22:27); the cause of both parties shall come before Elohim-God (Exodus 22:8).*”
(*Genesis Rabbah 33:3*)

“When I am judging created beings, I am called Elohim, ... When I am merciful towards My world, I am called "Adonai", for "Adonai" refers to the Attribute of Mercy, as it is said: The Lord, the Lord (Adonai, Adonai), God, merciful and gracious (Exodus 34:6).”

(Exodus Rabbah III:6)

“For this reason did the Attribute of Justice seek to attack Moses, as it says: And Elohim spoke unto Moses (Exodus 6:2). But when God reflected that Moses only spoke thus because of Israel's suffering, He retracted and dealt with him according to the Attribute of Mercy, as it says: And he said unto him: I am Adonai (Exodus 6:2).”

(Exodus Rabbah VI:1)

“Said the Holy One, blessed be He: 'If I create the world on the basis of mercy alone, its sins will be great; on the basis of judgment alone, the world cannot exist. Hence I will create it on the basis of judgment and of mercy, and may it then stand!' Hence the expression, ' THE LORD GOD (Adonai Elohim) (Genesis 2:4).”

(Genesis Rabbah XII:15)

The *Menorah Psalm* also has a very clear chiasmic structure. In other words, verses 2 & 8 express a similar theme as do verses 3 & 7, and 4 & 6, and then the center verse (verse 5) gives the central meaning of the *psalm*. Furthermore, this chiasm extends to the number of words in each verse (2 through 8) which are 7, 6, 6, 11, 6, 6, & 7. If we now begin with verses 2 & 8, we see that they both involve blessing by *God*.

2. God be gracious to us, and bless us; and let His face shine upon us. Selah.

8. God shall bless us; let all the ends of the earth fear Him.

Next, if we compare verses 3 & 7, we see that they both reference the earth. Blessings are now becoming physical!

3. That your way may be known on earth, your salvation among all nations.

7. The earth has yielded her produce; and God, our own God, shall bless us.

When we look at verses 4 & 6, we readily see that they are exactly the same, and this is a huge hint that this *psalm* should be read from the outer verses toward the center!

4. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise You.

6. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise You.

And finally, the central fifth verse reveals the core meaning of the *psalm*.

5. O let the nations be glad and sing for joy; for you shall judge the peoples righteously, and govern the nations on earth. Selah.

Putting it all together, we might say that things progress in the following manner:

- *God* blesses humanity.
- Salvation and an increase in earthly productivity result.

- The people return praise to *God*.
- Justice and righteousness prevail.

If we now look for meaning in the numerical chiasm of 7, 6, 6, 11, 6, 6, & 7 that is based upon the number of words in each verse, then it is perhaps found by thinking not in terms of, for example, seven plus seven, but rather seven times seven, or as it would likely be expressed in those times, seven sevens. This results in 49 which is exactly the number of words in the *Menorah Psalm*! And now if we do the same with the next pair of verses, 3 & 7, then we have six sixes which yields 36, the number that symbolizes *righteousness*. Furthermore, the next pair of verses, 4 & 6, also results in six sixes or 36, and if we add 36 and 36 together, then we get 72 which, again, provides a numerical link to the *Priestly Blessing*.

All in all, I see the *Menorah Psalm* as expressing the need for people to “close the loop” by responding to *God’s* blessings with thanks and praise. This message is reiterated if we take the last letter of each verse (two through eight) and compute the corresponding numerical sum. When we do this, we derive 206 which is also the exact value of the phrase *peoples praise you* that is found in verses 4 & 6. Thus, the first letters of the verses add up to 72, representing *God’s* mercy toward us, while the last letters add up to 206, representing the praise that we should return to *God* in response. A verse from the *Talmud* and another from the *Midrash Rabbah* collection highlight the need for this type of response.

“R. Hanina b. Papa said: To enjoy this world without a benediction is like robbing the Holy One.”

(B. Berachot 35b)

“I, God, cause the winds to blow for you, clouds to ascend, rain and dew to fall, make plants to grow and ripen, and prepare a table before every individual and supply the needs of every individual and every person sufficient for his wants; and yet you refuse to bring me the omer?”

(Ecclesiastes Rabbah I:4)

The end result of praising and giving thanks back to *God* in exchange for what is received is given by verse 5, justice and righteousness shall prevail upon the earth! Recall, too, that at the beginning of this paper we saw a connection between justice and righteousness, and we also saw hints in the phrase *ohel moed* (*Tent of Meeting*) that righteousness (36) must be present in order to withstand an encounter with *God*. This theme was further illuminated by looking at the *gematria* of *moed*, and when we did, we arrived at $mem + vav + ayin + dalet = 40 + 6 + 70 + 4 = 120$, the *gematria* also of the word *amud* that we saw previously and that means *pillar*. Recall, too, how when we looked at the grid of letters in the *Priestly Blessing*, we saw that *lamed* and *vav*, symbolizing *righteousness*, stood in the center as a *pillar*, thus reflecting the *Talmudic* statement that *“The world rests on one pillar, and its name is ‘Righteous.’”* Hence, if we mold our lives into a *righteous pillar*, then we can safely withstand a close encounter with *Divinity*, and this, in turn, is brought about by returning praise to *God*, thus establishing a higher communication that helps bring forth justice, righteousness, and peace upon the face of the earth. *“And the work of righteousness shall be peace. (Isaiah 32:17)”*