Parashat Naso: Me and My Shadow
By Rabbi Dan Moskovitz

Let's do a little exercise. Take you hands and hold them in front of you. Hold them palms up toward the sky and contemplate how it feels. Now slowly rotate your hands and hold them palms toward the ground.

It feels different doesn't it? -- What was different?

All you did was rotate your wrists but beyond the external orientation of your hands something changed inside you as well.

When our palms face up toward heaven we are in the receiving mode, like an outfielder waiting to catch a fly ball. It's hopeful and open, but also inherently passive. We have nothing to do but wait for something to fall into our hands (or our lap if we miss it).

However when our palms face down toward the earth the act becomes active and transformative – we go from receiver to giver.

We have a feeling of power, like we have something to pass on. If done with intention and patience you get a sense that you are sending human energy through your hands. Notice something else, if the sun or light is above or behind you, your hands cast a much fuller shadow when they are facing down than they do when they're turned up. Hand projecting out, by extension you embrace the thing your shadow touches.

In this week's Torah Portion Naso, God instructs Moses to tell Aaron and his sons to bless the people. As the people assemble in the Tent of Meeting they are to raise their hands, palms out toward the people, spread their fingers (think Leonard Nemoy as Spock in Star Trek) and with the eternal light glowing behind them on the menorah and their shadow projecting forth they proclaim: "'May the Lord bless you and protect you; may God cause God's face to shine on you grant you grace; may God lift up God's face toward you and grant you peace.'" (Numbers 6:22-26). Interestingly the Talmud (Sotah 38b) explains: those who are standing behind the priests (and thus opposite the shadow of their hands) do not receive the benefit of the blessing.

From whom does this blessing come? God tells the priests to say it, God chooses the words, but the words clearly come from the mouths of the priests. Is it a blessing from God or is it a blessing from the priests on behalf of God? The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of Hasidism teaches that it was in fact both. Citing Psalm 121:5, "The Eternal is your shadow." He explains, "Just as a shadow does everything that a person does, so the Creator, blessed be God, does, so to speak, everything that a person does." (Kedushat ha-Levi, Naso)

Yes, God tells them what to say, with palms up the priests receive their instruction from God, but then with palms down they pass not only the words but more importantly the heartfelt meaning and intention on to the people in the form of a blessing.

When they do this, when they pass on these words as a parent would lovingly pass on words of comfort to a child, as a friend would reassuringly place an arm around a shoulder, they perform the physical act that God by design cannot perform. God stands in awe of God's creation. The receiver (human beings) have become the giver, extensions of God and to that God can do little more than say Amen.

The act of blessing is so ubiquitous in Judaism; we bless food, we bless candles, we bless the Torah – by one reading of the *shehecheyanu* (The blessing for a joyous occasion) we even bless the fact that we have experienced a blessing. But this blessing is different; it stands out as unique because in its intention and meaning human beings reflect God's own desire for the people.

In his commentary on the priestly blessings, R. Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev cites the above teaching by the Baal Shem Tov, and adds that we should always act in a way that God would be proud of us, in a way deserving of blessing. Because if God is indeed our shadow, God should not be embarrassed to be our "shadow."

Consider your hands again for a moment. Our parsha teaches that we can walk through life with palms turned up, a receiver, asking what do you have for me? Or like the Aaron and his sons we can walk with our palms turned outward ever mindful that we have something to give, to be a blessing upon those whom our shadow rests. That is the role of synagogue, synagogue is the wrist of the Jewish community turning our hands from THIS to THIS, from RECIEVER to **GIVER,** and casting God's shadow of blessing upon all that we touch.