

Insights into Halacha

- Rabbi Yehuda Spitz

Ohr Somayach (yspitz@ohr.edu)

(PhiloTorah editor's notes in green)

Birkat Kohanim and You

The Power of the Blessing

BIRKAT KOHANIM. Words alone can not possibly do justice to this incredible blessing, especially for those privileged to have been a part of the semi-annual Birkat Kohanim at the Kotel on Chol HaMoed Sukkot and Pesach, featuring hundreds of Blessers (Kohanim) and tens of thousands of Blessees. This powerful ritual of the Kohanim blessing Klal Yisrael with this exceptional three-fold bracha which includes physical blessing and protection that we receive in the merit of our forefathers, spiritual enlightenment through the medium of Torah, and the quintessence of freedom, peace and perfection (*paraphrased from Rabbi Zev Leff's excellent recent book "Shemoneh Esrei"*) is considered so great, it is as if Hashem Himself is giving this blessing. In fact, according to the Gemara (Chullin 49a): KOHANIM MEVORCHIN L'YISRAEL V'HAKADOSH BARUCH HU MASKIM L'YADAM.

Unsuccessful in Chu"l

In Chutz La'aretz, although many Sefardic congregations do indeed Duchén every day, on the other hand,

among Ashkenazic Kehilot, this unique service is relegated to Musaf on Yom Tov as per the Rema's ruling (Orach Chaim 128, 44)

The Rema himself gives one reason for this, that only on Yom Tov are people in the proper state of mind: filled with Simchat Yom Tov and unencumbered by the many trials and tribulations of eking out a parnasa. Many commentators offer additional reasons as well.

It is well known that many Gedolim including the Vilna Gaon, the Shulchan Aruch HaRav, Rav Chaim Volozhiner, the Netziv, and Rav Nosson Adler tried unsuccessfully to reinstate the minhag to perform Birkat Kohanim in Ashkenazic Kehilot on a daily basis. The Aruch HaShulchan states that it is as if a Heavenly voice proclaimed not to do Birkat Kohanim on a daily basis outside of Eretz Yisrael and considers it a Decree from Above. In fact, the Beit Efrayim vigorously defends the common practice in Chutz La'aretz not to duchén daily, and maintains that it is an ancient custom as well, dating back to the Maharam miRottenberg, and is a minhag kavua that can not be changed. He cites many proofs to this and questions the validity of duchening daily, even in Eretz Yisrael. He adds an interesting note from Rav Yaakov Sasportas that one of the minhagim that the followers of the false messiah Shabtai Zvi practiced was to duchén

daily. Come what may, not duchening in Chutz La'aretz on a daily basis has since become standard Ashkenazic practice.

On the other hand, in most parts of Eretz Yisrael,

Mishna Berura (128, 164). Although the GR" A himself was unsuccessful in his attempts to establish Birkat Kohanim as daily practice (in Chutz LaAretz) in his lifetime, nevertheless, his students (led by Rav Yisrael of Shklov) who moved to Eretz Yisrael and founded the "Ashkenazic Yishuv", were indeed successful in instituting Birkat Kohanim on a daily basis for Ashkenazim in Eretz Yisrael.

and especially in Yerushalayim, we (Ashkenazim included!) are fortunate to be able to receive this unique bracha every day, and on Shabbat and Yom Tov (and on fast days!) even more than once.

Common Concerns

Halacha dictates what one is supposed to do when hearing and accepting this bracha from the Kohanim: to stand quietly with eyes facing downward and concentrating on receiving this Divine gift.

Yet, a question arises: What should one do if he is still in the middle of his silent Amida when the Chazan reaches Birkat Kohanim during Chazarat HaShatz? Is it proper to continue davening while the Kohanim are blessing the congregation? Or is it preferable to stop and listen to

receive the blessing, thereby receiving the blessing, but possibly making an interruption (HEFSEIK) in his own personal prayer?

The halacha mandates (see Tur and Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 104: 7) that one should not interrupt his Amida, except for D'varim Sheb'kdusha (exceedingly holy prayers) such as Kedusha and AMEIN Y'HEI SH'MEI RABA. In these instances, one is required to stop his own tefila, concentrate, and listen to the congregational prayer. Does Birkat Kohanim fit this criterion, or is one's own personal tefila considered more important for our intents and purpose?

Whose Mitzva Is It?

Birkat Kohanim is a Biblical Mitzva, as the pasuk states (Bamidbar 6: 22-27, in Parshat Naso): KO T'VOR'CHU ET B'NEI YISRAEL - So shall the Kohanim bless the People". Obviously, this mitzva is incumbent upon the Kohanim. In fact, if a Kohen refuses to duchen, he transgresses three mitzvot!

Yet, the Sefer Charedim writes that this mitzva is also incumbent upon the rest of Klal Yisrael, that they must listen to Birkat Kohanim. In fact, this shita is cited as an uncontested opinion by many authorities, including the Hafla'ah, Rabbi Akiva Eiger, the Beis Yaakov, and the Mishna Berura. Accordingly, it would seem

that one must stop his own Amida and listen to Birkat Kohanim.

However, in the words of the Chatam Sofer (Shu"t Orach Chaim 167), "most Halachic authorities follow the opinion of the Ritva (Sukka 35b s.v. MAI LAV), that this mitzva is exclusively the Kohen's domain". This understanding is followed by many decisors, as well, including the Noda Bihuda, the Mahar"i Asad, and the Aruch HaShulchan; Sefer HaChinuch implies this way as well. The Maharsham adds that even according to this shita, nevertheless, it is still a mitzva to help the Kohanim fulfill their duty (M'SAYA'A L'MITZVATAM). All these authorities still maintain that it is proper and required to be blessed by the Kohanim, just not actually part of their Biblical commandment.

Contemporary Kohanic Custom

This understanding, coupled with the fact that Birkat Kohanim is not mentioned authoritatively as one of the tefilot that one is required to stop one's own tefila for, is why several contemporary poskim, including Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank zt"l, Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv zt"l, Rav Ovadia Yosef zt"l, the Rivevot Efrayim zt"l, and Rav Moshe Sternbuch shlit"a, rule that one is not required to stop his own tefila to listen to Birkat Kohanim. Still, they maintain that one is allowed to do so and it would not be

considered a hefsek tefila.

On the other hand, many other contemporary decisors, including the Chazon Ish zt"l, Rav Moshe Feinstein zt"l, Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l, Rav Shmuel HaLevi Vosner zt"l and Rav Binyamin Zilber zt"l, aver that one should indeed stop his own davening to listen to Birkat Kohanim. They maintain that since many authorities count the congregation as part of the Biblical mitzva, and even those who do not agree still hold that it is required and proper to be blessed by the Kohanim; as such, its status is also considered D'varim Sheb'kedusha. This is in fact how several Halacha sefarim on tefila conclude.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l takes this approach a step further, writing that in his opinion Birkat Kohanim is considered superior to Kedusha, as during Kedusha we are talking to and praising the King (G-d); conversely, in Birkat Kohanim, the King is "talking" to us.

Birchat Kohanim was alluded to by Hashem all the way back in the time of Avraham Avinu and is the conduit to receive countless Divine blessings. Especially during these trying times, when we face danger and uncertainty on a constant basis, it behooves us all to try and take advantage of this incredible opportunity, every chance we get!

Rabbi Spitz's footnotes are very extensive. The ones I decide to include are few among the many. If you want more than this PhiloTorah column provides, click on the website, find the topic and do some more reading.

For any questions, comments or for the full Mareh Mekomot / sources, please email the author: yspitz@ohr.edu

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz serves as the **Sho'el U'Meishiv** and **Rosh Chavura** of the **Ohr Lagolah Halacha Kollel** at **Yeshivas Ohr Somayach** in **Yerushalayim**. He also currently writes a contemporary halacha column for the Ohr Somayach website titled **"Insights Into Halacha"**.

ohr.edu/this_week/insights_into_halacha/

Disclaimer: This is not a comprehensive guide, rather a brief summary to raise awareness of the issues. In any real case one should ask a competent Halachic authority.

Rabbi Yehuda Spitz's English halacha sefer, "Food: A Halachic Analysis" (Mosaica/ Feldheim) containing over 500 pages featuring over 30 comprehensive chapters discussing the myriad halachic issues pertaining to food, is now available online and in bookstores everywhere.

Here's a GM tying Birkat Kohanim and this week's Parshat Balak numerically together:

One of many p'sukim that describe steps taken by Bil'am and Balak to hopefully curse B'nei Yisrael is seen in (Bamidbar 22:41, Parshat Balak) -

וַיְהִי בַבֹּקֶר וַיִּקְווּ בְּלֶק אֶת־בְּלָעַם וַיַּעֲלֵהוּ
בְּמֹת בְּעַל וַיֵּרָא בּוֹשֵׁם קֹצֵה הָעָם:

In the morning, Balak took Bilaam, and brought him to the High Altars of Baal, where he could see [as far as] the outer edges of the [Israelite] people.

One can say that the vaccine against their plans is Birkat Kohanim, the vehicle through which HaShem blesses us - every day (Bamidbar 6:24-26).

יְבָרְכֶךָ ה' וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ: יְאֵר ה' א פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ
וַיִּזְנֶךָ: יֵשֵׂא ה' א פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּעַם לְךָ שָׁלוֹם:

May God bless you and keep watch over you. May God make His presence enlighten you and grant you grace. May God direct His providence toward you and grant you peace.

The three-pasuk b'racha from Naso and the abovementioned pasuk from Balak are GMs (2718).