

The Power of the Blessing of the Kohanim

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, the *yahrzeit* of my father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

The L-rd spoke to Moses saying:

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel, saying to them:

“May the L-rd bless you and watch over you.

May the L-rd cause His countenance to shine to you and favor you.

May the L-rd raise His countenance toward you and grant you peace.”

They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.

(*Sefer Bamidbar* 6:22-27, this and all Torah and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

One of the drama-filled moments that we encounter in shul on the *chagim* (Jewish Holidays) is that of *birkat kohanim* (the Priestly blessing). Young children mischievously hide under their father’s *talit* while they listen to the stirring words of the *kohanim*. Adults, perhaps, hear echoes of the *bracha* (blessing) being recited in the holy precincts of the *Beit HaMikdash* (Holy Temple). One thing is clear, something wonderful is happening. In some way, as we hear these holy words uttered in true devotion and with pure intention, we are transported to a higher spiritual plane and come closer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed be He). The tripartite blessing is beautiful to hear, and its fulfillment is something we desire to the depths of our being.

What is the authentic role of the *kohanim* in this entire wondrous process? Are they active parties, i.e., do they bless us, or are they spiritual aqueducts through which the blessing, so to speak, flows from Hashem to His nation? Rashi (1040-1105) seems to suggest that the *kohanim* actually bestow the *bracha* upon us. Thus, on *Bamidbar* 6:27, he explains the words “*v’ani avarachem*” (and I will bless them) by stating: “*l’yisrael - v’askim im hakohanim*” (“I will bless them – the Jewish people - and I will agree with the *kohanim*”). *Siftei Chachamim* (Rabbi Shabbetai Bass, 1641-1718), in clarifying Rashi’s comment, suggests the following: “One should not explain that Hashem will bless them on His own, if that were to be true, what value would the Priestly blessing have since Hashem would [subsequently] bless them?” In other words, it seems that Rashi is suggesting that the *kohanim*, in reality, do give the *bracha* to us, or at least are actively joined with Hashem in this process.

In stark contrast, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) took nearly the polar opposite approach regarding the role of the *kohanim* in *birkat kohanim*:

Do not wonder: "What good will come from the blessing of this simple person?" for the reception of the blessings is not dependent on the priests, but on the Holy One, blessed be He, as [Numbers 6:27] states: “And they shall set My name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them.” The priests perform the mitzvah with which they were commanded, and G-d, in His mercies, will bless Israel as He desires. (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Tefilah and Birkat Kohanim, 15:7, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger*)

Allow me to briefly explicate the Rambam’s position:

1. Clearly, Maimonides views the *bracha* as originating from G-d and not from the *kohanim*. Thus he states: “for the reception of the blessings is not dependent on the priests, but on the Holy One, blessed be He.”

2. The priests, at Hashem's command, are merely the viaducts through which Hashem's *bracha* flows. It is G-d who: "in His mercies, will bless Israel as He desires."

Approximately 700 years later, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) *zatzal* echoed the Rambam's words in his commentary upon *birkat kohanim*:

According to this, our priests in pronouncing the blessing, are a completely passive instrument. Only in reply to the summons of the congregation and only in the blessing dictated to them by the representative of the congregation do they pronounce it. So that in truth it is the congregation which has the blessing prescribed by G-d pronounced over itself through their mouths. (Isaac Levy translation, second edition, London, 1964, page 100)

Once again, the *kohanim* are seen merely as the conduits through which the congregation receives its blessing. Hence, the role of the *kohanim* is reduced to an almost mechanical function whereby they simply verbalize the hopes and desires of the congregation in the commanded and prescribed formulaic fashion.

Whether we accept the perspective of Rashi, the Ramban, or Rav Hirsch as to the exact role of the *kohanim*, it is important to understand the meaning and content of this three-fold blessing. The fifteen Hebrew words of this *bracha* are translated in the Artscroll Tanach in the following manner: "May *Hashem* bless you and safeguard you. May *Hashem* illuminate His countenance for you and be gracious to you. May *Hashem* lift His countenance to you and establish peace for you." (*Bamidbar* 6:24-26) Translations are, at best, the metaphoric equivalent of pouring perfume from one bottle to another. Though you may have nearly the same weight in the second bottle as in the original container, some of the essence escapes into the air. Therefore, we must turn to our holy *meforshim*

(commentators) to authentically understand this *bracha*. In this instance, I will follow Rashi's approach to the verses under discussion.

Rashi explains “*yivarechecha*” (“May Hashem bless you”) as referring to our earthly possessions. In other words, the *bracha* requests that the Almighty provide us with all of our physical needs. If those needs are met, we will then be free to truly serve Him with clear minds and untroubled souls. The prince of commentators follows *Bamidbar Rabbah* 11:5 in his interpretation of “*v'yishmarecha*” (“May Hashem safeguard you”):

in order that brigands will not come upon you to take your money. This is [a *bracha*] since someone who gives a present to his servant is not able to protect him from all people, thus, highway men may come upon him and take the gift from him. If so, what kind of pleasure will there be from this present? *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, however, is different. He both gives a gift and protects it.

The concept, then, of “*Shomer Yisrael*” (G-d as the Guardian of Israel) takes on even greater meaning. Not only does the Master of the Universe protect us, He protects our possessions as well. Truly, we are in His hands.

Rashi explains the *bracha* of “*yaaer Hashem panuv alecha*” (“May Hashem illuminate His countenance for you”) as referring to Hashem shining His Divine presence upon us. In other words, He is immanent and omnipresent in our world. Ideally we should all be able to feel His Being in our lives. *Vi'chunecha* (“and be gracious to you”) is explained very straightforwardly as a *bracha* asking our Creator to grant us “*chen*,” which contextually may be best explained as kindness and mercy. Thus, we are hoping to receive the love and care of a parent - even when the same may not be truly deserved.

The final *bracha* of the three, “*yisa Hashem panuv alecha*,” is explained by Rashi as the blessing of Hashem conquering and holding back His rightful anger against us. After all, as *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) tell us in multiple places throughout the Talmud and Midrash, there is no man who is capable of living a completely sin-free existence. We have been given absolute free will. Nothing forces us to act in a moral way, or to keep the *mitzvot*. All of this is in our hands. It is our choice whether we continue to hear and follow the never-ending voice of the Revelation. Thus, with our imperfections and foibles, we at times fail to achieve the highest levels that are within our grasp. If Hashem were to judge us strictly according to our deeds, no one of us could survive His scrutiny of our ways. This *bracha*, therefore, asks Hashem to judge us with mercy and with the strongest benefit of the doubt. If we recognize and relate to Hashem in this manner, we will be able to honestly relate to Him as *Avinu Malkeinu*, our Father our King.

May each of us have the *zechut* (merit) to see the fulfillment of the *birkat kohanim* in our lives, our family’s lives, and the lives of the entire Jewish people. May we always feel Hashem’s presence amongst us, and be the recipients of his protection and mercy.

V’chane yihi ratzon.

Shabbat Shalom

Past drashot may be found at my website:

<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added please do not hesitate to contact me via email at rdbe718@gmail.com.