

Parashat Naso 5776, 2016:

## *Understanding Birkat Kohanim*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, David ben Elazar Yehoshua, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Leah bat Shifra, Tzvi Hirsch ben Fayege Leah and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

One of the best-known passages in our *parasha*, and the entire Torah, is that of *Birkat Kohanim* (the Blessing of the *Kohanim*):

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 translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

The *kohanim*'s recitation of this three-fold *bracha* is simultaneously a holy, dramatic and auspicious moment within the cycle of the *tefilot hayom* (prayers of the day). In nearly all cases, adults suddenly become quiet and intensely focused upon what is to transpire, while young children run to their fathers to find temporary shelter under their prayer shawls - for even they sense that something quite special is about to take place. These behaviors naturally lead us to ask, “What is the true nature of *Birkat Kohanim*?”

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples, discussed our question in one of his weekly *drashot*. He noted that the commandment of *Birkat Kohanim* entails two separate aspects: “the transmission of a direct blessing from G-d and *hashra'at ha-Shechinah* (the

manifestation of Hashem's presence).” Moreover, the Rav stated that *Birkat Kohanim* “is a direct meeting with the *Shechinah* that presents us with an intimate encounter in which we come [so to speak] face to face with G-d.” (These, and all following quotations of the Rav, are from Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, Rabbi Avishai C. David, editor, pages 290-296, brackets my own.)

If, as the Rav maintains, *Birkat Kohanim* is preeminently a time wherein we experience *hashra'at ha-Shechinah*, how is it possible that nearly any *kohen* may participate in this *mitzvah*? After all, it seems logic would dictate that only very holy and righteous *kohanim* should give this *bracha*. Fortunately, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) directly addressed this issue in the *Mishneh Torah*:

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 the Torah states: “They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.” The priests perform the *mitzvah* with which they were commanded, and G-d, in His mercies, will bless Israel, as He desires. (*Hilchot Tefilah* 15:7, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my underlining and emendations.)

Let us briefly review the salient points that are found in this passage: Almost any *kohen* is fitting to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Birkat Kohanim*, since “the reception of the blessings is not dependent on the priests, but on the Holy One, blessed be He.” Moreover, and of singular import, the Rambam stresses that the *kohanim* bestow Hashem's name upon the Jewish people, i.e. they serve as the viaduct through which the Almighty's blessing flows, but it is “G-d, in His mercies, [who] will bless Israel, as He desires.” Based upon a careful reading of our passage, we find that this concept is clearly found in the verse wherein it states: “I [G-d] will bless them.”

While the Rambam specifically addressed the question of “What good will come from the blessing of this simple person?” his response strongly buttresses the Rav’s assertion that *Birkat Kohanim* is the time of *hashra’at ha-Shechinah* – for it is G-d, not man, who actually gives the blessing. Therefore, Rav Soloveitchik maintained:

Here the Rambam states clearly that the blessing in *Birkat Kohanim* comes not from the *kohen* but directly from G-d. This is why the *kohen* who recites the blessing does not require any special level of sanctity... Contrary to appearances, *Birkat Kohanim* is not only a relaying of the heavenly blessing, but also a direct enactment of *hashra’at ha-Shechinah*. *Nesiat kapayim* (the “raising of the hands,” as in the priestly blessing) – a face-to-face encounter between G-d and the Jewish people – leads to *hashra’at ha-Shechinah*. It reflects G-d’s act of extending kindness. (Underlining my own)

May it be Hashem’s desire that He will ever extend kindness and mercy to the entire Jewish people, and bless and watch over us. May He cause His countenance to shine upon us and favor us. May the L-rd raise His countenance toward us and grant peace to all of His people. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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They may also be found on [YUTorah.org](http://YUTorah.org) using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha’s name.

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 <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis,” may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik’s](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.