

Parashat Naso 5780, 2020:

What is 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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the well-known *mitzvah* of *Birkat 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 a holy, dramatic, and auspicious moment within the cycle of the *tefilot hayom* (prayers of the day). While the emotive aspects of this act cannot be overestimated, in order to plumb its spiritual depths we must ask ourselves, “What transpires during *Birkat Kohanim*?” We are fortunate that my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples, addresses this question in one of his *drashot*. In his view, this commandment entails two separate and distinct aspects: “the transmission of a direct blessing from G-d, and *hashra'at ha-Shechinah* (the manifestation of Hashem's presence).” Moreover, the Rav opines that *Birkat Kohanim* “is a direct meeting with the *Shechinah* that presents us with an intimate encounter in which we come face to face with G-d.” (These, and the following quotations of the Rav, 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.)

If, as the Rav maintains, *Birkat Kohanim* is preeminently a time when we experience *hashra'at ha-Shechinah*, how is it possible that nearly any *kohen* may participate in this *mitzvah*? After all, it seems that only very holy and righteous *kohanim* should be privileged to participate in this exalted act. The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) focuses on this very issue in his *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 commandment 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.)

This *halacha* has several salient points: 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 when the *kohanim* bestow Hashem’s name upon the Jewish people, i.e. they serve as the viaduct through which the Almighty’s blessing flows, and it is “G-d, in His mercies, [who] will bless Israel, as He desires.” This reading of the Rambam was emphasized by Rabbi Elazar Rokeach (1665-1742) in his commentary on the *Mishneh Torah*, *Ma’aseh Rokeach*:

This, then, is the reason why we need the Torah’s phrase, “*v’ani avarachame* — so that I will bless them,” to say to us, “know that I chose the *kohanim*, and I did not differentiate between them [regarding who is fit to engage in the *Birkat Kohanim*], as the [fulfillment of the] *bracha* is not contingent upon them in any manner. Rather, *osim schlichuti v’ani hu hamevarach* — they act as my agents and I am the One Who bestows the blessing.” (Translation my own)

In addition, the Rambam’s answer to his question, “What good will come from the blessing

of this simple person?" is a powerful support for the Rav's assertion that *Birkat Kohanim* is the time of *hashra'at ha-Shechinah*. As the Rav 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, bless us, 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 and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria 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* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* 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.