

A Blessed Life

One of the main distinctions between the tefillah in Eretz Yisrael and the tefillah in the Diaspora, at least in Ashkenazi synagogues, is *Birkat Kohanim*, the priestly blessings. It is well known that in Ashkenazi synagogues in the Diaspora, *Birkat Kohanim* is only performed on the holidays during the Mussaf services. In Eretz Yisrael it is performed on a daily basis, as well as at Shacharit and Mussaf on yom tov. In this article, we are going to explore why there is such a distinction, and the lesson that we can learn from it.

Birkat Kohanim: A Daily Obligation?

If we explore the sources, it would seem that the mitzvah of *Birkat Kohanim* should be performed on a frequent basis. The Gemara states:

מניין שהקב"ה מתאוה לברכת כהנים? תלמוד לומר "ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל, ואני אברכם."

How do we know that the Holy Blessed Be He desires the blessing of the priests? The verse states [in reference to the priestly blessings], "And I will place My name on the Jewish people and I will bless them."

Sotah 38b

If Hashem desires *Birkat Kohanim*, it should be performed as often as possible. In fact, the Rambam writes:

המצוה הכ"ו היא שנצטוו הכהנים לברך את ישראל בכל יום.

The 26th commandment is the commandment on the priests to bless the Jewish people each day.

Rambam, Sefer Hamitzvot, Aseh no. 26



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Rambam's view that the requirement to perform *Birkat Kohanim* on a daily basis is shared by the *Sefer Yereim* no. 269, and the *Sefer Hachinuch*, no. 378.

At the same time, we also find that there are grounds for exemption. The Talmud Yerushalmi, *Berachot* 5:4, records that R. Yuda ben Pazi wasn't feeling well enough to perform the mitzvah, so he wrapped his head in a bandage and hid behind a column. R. Elazar used to exit the synagogue to avoid performing the mitzvah.

Based on this passage in the Yerushalmi, the *Semag* no. 20, the *Ran*, *Sotah* 15b, and the *Tur* and *Beit Yosef*, *Orach Chaim* no. 128, write that while there is a positive commandment on kohanim to bless the Jewish people, a kohen does not violate the commandment unless he is actively called up to the *duchan* (platform) and does not do so. If he is not called up or is not present when the kohanim are called, he does not violate the positive commandment. This would lead one to the conclusion that the obligation is not an active obligation (*mitzvah chiyuvit*), but rather an optional mitzvah (*mitzvah kiyumit*). These sources serve as the basis for an exemption to the commandment of the daily priestly blessing. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the aforementioned language of

the Rambam implies that there is an active obligation to perform *Birkat Kohanim* on a daily basis.

Explaining the Practice of the Diaspora

We find three different approaches to explain why the Ashkenazi Jews of the Diaspora don't perform *Birkat Kohanim* on a daily basis. First, *Beit Yosef*, *Orach Chaim* no. 128, quotes from the *Sefer Ha'Agur* that the practice of kohanim was to immerse in a mikveh prior to performing *Birkat Kohanim*. The mikvaot were often very cold and it was too difficult to immerse on a daily basis. Therefore, the custom developed to only perform *Birkat Kohanim* on the holidays — when the kohanim would make the extra effort to immerse in the cold waters as special preparation for the yom tov.

The *Beit Yosef* is critical of this approach. He writes that the notion that one can only perform *Birkat Kohanim* after immersion is a *chumra d'ati lidei kula*, a stringency that leads to a leniency. There is absolutely no requirement to immerse before *Birkat Kohanim*, and therefore, it is inappropriate to undermine the mitzvah of *Birkat Kohanim* in order to fulfill this custom. He then states something uncharacteristically

remarkable in commenting on a minhag:

ויישר כחם של בני ארץ ישראל וכל מלכות מצרים שנושאים כפיהם בכל יום ואינם טובלים לנשיאת כפים.

We must give credit to the communities in the Land of Israel and Egypt who perform Birkat Kohanim on a daily basis and do not immerse beforehand.

The Beit Ephraim, Orach Chaim no. 6, offers a second approach as to why kohanim don't perform *Birkat Kohanim* on a daily basis. He suggests that kohanim nowadays don't have an established lineage (*yichus*) and we can't be completely sure who is a real kohen. Since there are problems with a non-kohen performing *Birkat Kohanim* and we don't know for sure who the real kohanim are, it is best if nobody performs *Birkat Kohanim*. However, if we were to abandon the mitzvah completely, the kohen legacy would not be passed on as effectively from generation to generation. This would lead to real kohanim not realizing that they are kohanim and violating the restrictions that they must follow (not marrying a divorcee and not coming into contact with a dead body). Therefore, the practice developed to perform *Birkat Kohanim* on the holidays. This explanation does not, however, explain how the custom to *duchan* daily in Israel developed.

The third approach — which is the approach most often cited — is presented by R. Moshe Isserles. In his glosses to *Shulchan Aruch*, he writes:

נהגו בכל מדינות אלו שאין נושאים כפים אלא בי"ט, משום שאז שרויים בשמחת יו"ט, וטוב לב הוא יברך מה שאין כן בשאר ימים, אפי' בשבתות השנה, שטרודים בהרהורים על מחיתם ועל ביטול מלאכתם. ואפי' בי"ט, אין נושאים כפים אלא בתפלת מוסף, שיוצאים אז מבהכ"נ וישמחו בשמחת יו"ט.

It is common practice in these areas

to only perform Birkat Kohanim on the festivals because it is then that the [kohanim] are absorbed with the happiness of the festival, and someone who is satisfied and happy is worthy of reciting a blessing. However, this is not true on other days of the year, even on Shabbat, when everyone is worried about their stability and livelihood. Even on the festival itself we only perform Birkat Kohanim during Mussaf because that is when everyone is about to leave synagogue and enjoy the festival.

Glosses to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 128:44

According to the Rama, preoccupation with one's daily needs and survival in the Diaspora preclude the kohanim from being in a proper state of mind to perform *Birkat Kohanim*.

The idea that simcha is a requirement for *Birkat Kohanim* is echoed in another comment of the Rama in the same *se'if*, where he writes that someone who is not married should not perform *Birkat Kohanim* because he is not in a state of simcha.

Why is simcha such an important factor in *Birkat Kohanim*? The Gemara, *Shabbat* 30b, states:

שאין שכינה שורה ... אלא מתוך שמחה.
The Divine presence doesn't descend ... unless one is in a state of happiness.

If the goal of *Birkat Kohanim* is to cause the Divine presence to rest among us, it makes sense that we would require kohanim to be in a state of simcha. In fact, Maharam MiRutenburg in his *Teshuvot* (Prague edition no. 345) writes that we find support to the idea that *Birkat Kohanim* requires one to be in a state of simcha from the fact that Yitzchak asked Esav to bring him *matamim* (delights) before giving him a beracha.

Yitzchak sought to be in a state of simcha in order to be a proper conduit of blessing to his son.

The Simcha of Living in Eretz Yisrael

If a concern about livelihood, security, and welfare is the litmus test for the performance of *Birkat Kohanim* on a daily basis, it would seem ironic that those who live in the Diaspora have more such concerns to warrant this exemption than those living in Israel. It is worthwhile to explore why it is that the Diaspora is considered a place where these concerns are an impediment to simcha and Eretz Yisrael is not.

Of course, there is a historical component that can't be ignored, and that is that the religious Ashkenazi community in Eretz Yisrael was primarily founded by the students of the Vilna Gaon. The Vilna Gaon did not accept the Rama's reasoning for omitting *Birkat Kohanim* and tried to institute daily performance of *Birkat Kohanim* in Vilna but was unsuccessful. His students, upon settling Eretz Yisrael, instituted daily performance of *Birkat Kohanim*. Nevertheless, the reason for failure in Vilna and success in Eretz Yisrael is ultimately rooted in the longstanding practice of the Jews of the Diaspora to omit *Birkat Kohanim* and the practice of the Jews of Eretz Yisrael to recite it.

R. Aryeh Tzvi Fromer, *Eretz Tzvi* 1:30, in explaining the Rama's position, suggests that in Eretz Yisrael, even in insecure times, there is a sense of permanence that provides its residents with a peace of mind and resolve to face the ever-present challenges.

This phenomenon can be seen in the laws of *mezuzah*. The *Shulchan Aruch*,

Yoreh De'ah 286:22, rules that if one rents a home in the Diaspora, he is not required to put up a mezuzah until thirty days have elapsed. Whereas if one rents a home in Eretz Yisrael, he must put up a mezuzah right away. We see that no matter how difficult the situation is in Eretz Yisrael, living there is automatically considered more substantial and permanent. Some commentaries add that Eretz Yisrael has a higher level of *ahavah, d'veikut, shleimut*, and a more expansive level of *simcha*. It seems that living in Eretz Yisrael affords a significant sense of permanence, stability and *yishuv hada'at*.

Further, Rav Kook, *Orot Hakodesh* Vol. III (pg. 187), writes that in Eretz Yisrael, there is a certain sense of expansive *simcha* that doesn't exist in the Diaspora.

In Eretz Yisrael, there is a certain sense of *shleimut*, wholeness, that makes living there feel more permanent and more anchored than living in the Diaspora. Even if people living in the Diaspora may externally feel that they are not overburdened by their livelihood or welfare, they don't have the sense of belonging and inner security as those in Eretz Yisrael.

R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook has a beautiful explanation of the Rama's position. He posits that there is a difference

between an ordinary recitation of a beracha and *Birkat Kohanim*. Regarding *Birkat Kohanim*, Hashem is using the kohanim as a vessel to convey a blessing from Hashem. In order for *Birkat Kohanim* to be most effective, that vessel must be healthy and pure.

אבל במצב רוח לא טוב או חולני, אי אפשר לברך. זה דומה לאדם שאין לו תפילין ברשותו, ואינו יכול להניח, כי הוא אנוס. כך המצב בחוץ לארץ: צער הגלות, פירוד הגלות, טירדת הפרנסה בגלות. במצב הגלותי אין אפשרות לברך. זה גדר של אנוס. אמנם, מידי פעם, ביום טוב, יש איזו התרוממות מיוחדת, ומתגברים מכח שמחת יום טוב.

However, when there is a bad disposition or spiritual illness, one cannot provide a blessing. It is similar to a person who doesn't have tefillin in his possession. He can't don [the tefillin] because of circumstances beyond his control. The same is true regarding [Birkat Kohanim] in the Diaspora: The suffering of the exile, the separations caused by the exile and the burden of livelihood in the exile. The exile experience doesn't allow one to provide a blessing. It is a circumstance beyond the control [of the kohanim] (thus exempting them from the mitzvah). However, every now and then, on yom tov, one can transcend these obstacles and reach the proper state of mind because of the joy of the festival.
Sermons of R. Tzvi Yehuda Kook, Naso, Sidra 2 (appendix to 5773)

It has always amazed me to observe the tension and anxiety that encompasses the *olim* as they board an Aliyah flight and how it transforms to excitement, happiness and contentment. I believe that as each *oleh* steps foot onto the airplane they immediately transcend to a new reality and are engulfed by the permanence of Eretz Yisrael. They are caught up within the embrace between the Land and its people after a 2,000-year separation.

This immediate connection to the land and our people's history and destiny provides a powerful comfort and a true sense of belonging and *simcha* that is experienced solely by a Jew living in his home. This understanding of the difference in the practice of *Birkat Kohanim* in the Diaspora and in Israel should hopefully inspire Diaspora Jewry to enhance their *simcha* in the most significant way by returning to their Homeland.

We are living in miraculous times, and we have the historic opportunity to nourish our souls and provide ourselves with a serenity and *shalva* that can only be experienced in Eretz Yisrael. We pray that, after 2,000 years of praying, dreaming and yearning, that all Diaspora Jews see the blessing that awaits them.

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