

## ברכת כהנים Blessing of the Priests

### 1. Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Orah Hayyim 124

ודע דהטור כתב עוד טעם על חזרת שליח הציבור: משום קדושה, עיין שם. ונראה שהיה יכול לומר גם משום ברכת כהנים.

And know that the Tur gave another reason for the repetition of the *Amida*: Because of the *Kedusha*, see there. And it seems that he could have also said because of the Priestly Blessing.

### 2. R. Nehemia Polen, “Birkat Kohanim in the S’fat Emet,” in *Birkat Kohanim*, Ed. David Birnbaum and Martin S. Cohen

While they may be closely related and sometimes overlap, prayer and blessing are really different concepts; each is too important in the biblical world for the two to be confused or for one to be collapsed into the other.

### 3. Numbers 6:23-24

וַיְדַבֵּר יְקֹוֹק אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר:  
דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אָמֹר לָהֶם: {ס}  
בְּרֹכֶךָ יְקֹוֹק וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ: {ס}  
יְאֹר יְקֹוֹק אֶל פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְיִחַנְנֶךָ: {ס}  
יִשָּׂא יְקֹוֹק אֶת-פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְיִשֶּׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם: {ס}  
וְשָׂמוּ אֶת-שְׁמִי עַל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֲנִי אֲבָרְכֶם: {ס}

The Eternal spoke to Moses:

“Speak to Aaron and his sons saying: ‘Thus shall you bless the people of Israel. Say to them:

*May the Eternal bless you and protect you.*

*May the Eternal cast the light of His face upon you and be gracious to you.*

*May the Eternal lift His face up in your direction and set peace upon you.’*

And so shall they set My name upon the Israelites so that I Myself bless them.”

### 4. Leonard Nimoy, Interview in The National Yiddish Book Center’s Oral History Project

So I’m with my father, my grandfather, and my brother, sitting in the bench seats—women were upstairs. Five or six guys get up on the bimah, the stage, facing the congregation. They get their tallits over their heads, and they start this chanting.... And my father said to me, “Don’t look.” So everyone’s got their eyes covered with their hands or their tallit down over their faces.... And I hear this strange sound coming from them. They’re not singers, they were shouters. And dissonant.... It was all discordant... it was chilling. I thought, “Something major is happening here.” So I peeked. And I saw them with their hands stuck out from beneath the tallit like this....

Wow. Something really got hold of me. I had no idea what was going on, but the sound of it and the look of it was magical.

#### 5. R. Nehemia Polen, “Birkat Kohanim in the S’fat Emet,” in *Birkat Kohanim*

The notion of a hereditary priesthood is perplexing in our day and age. We are suspicious of inherited privilege of all kinds, and many people find the idea of innate distinction between individuals to be troubling and problematic. Yet while the special election of Aaron and his progeny is a central feature of all the priestly texts, hardly anything remains in today’s Judaism of the priestly sacrificial system; since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple almost two thousand years ago, Rabbinic Judaism has placed prayer and Torah study at the center of religious life. But the rite of the Priestly Blessing is still practiced in traditional synagogues, chanted by those claiming descent from Aaron. It is almost the only surviving element of ancient Temple-based, priestly-centered ritual in contemporary Jewish practice. What are we to make of this sacred endowed prerogative in our egalitarian society?

#### 6. Blessing on Reciting the Priestly Blessing, Siddur

ברוך אתה יְקוּק אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּקִדּוּשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן וְצוּנוּ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה.

Blessed are You, Eternal our God, Ruler of the universe, who has sanctified us with the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless Your people Israel with love.

#### 7. Mishnah Avot, 1:12

הֵלֵל אֹמֵר, הָיִי מִתְלַמְּדֵיךָ שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן, אוֹהֵב שְׁלוֹם וְרוֹדֵף שְׁלוֹם, אוֹהֵב אֶת הַבְּרִיּוֹת וּמְקַרְבֵּן לַתּוֹרָה:

Hillel used to say: Be of the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace, loving people and drawing them close to the Torah.

#### 8. Zohar III, 146 .2

כָּל כֹּהֵן דְּהוּא לֹא רַחִים לְעַמָּא, אוֹ עַמָּא לֹא רַחֲמִין לֵיהּ, לֹא יִפְרוּס יְדָיו לְבָרְכָא לְעַמָּא.

Any priest who does not love the people or whom the people do not love should not spread out his hands to bless the people.

#### 9. R. Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein of Krakow, *Maor Va-Shemesh, Parashat Naso*, “*Va-Yedaber... Daber al Aharon*”

ובזה נראה לי כי הפסוק ירמוז שמי שבא לברך את ישראל צריך שיהי' בו מדה זו שיהי' אוהב אותם אהבה עזה כנפשו וכלבו ואפילו לפחות שבפחותים מישראל יאהב כנפשו ועי"ז הוא מפאר אותם לפני אביהם שבשמים בכמה מעלות טובות ועי"ז הוא מעורר רחמים וחסדים גדולים וממשיך עליהם כל מיני ברכות.

The verse hints that one who comes to bless Israel must have this quality, that he loves them with a love as powerful as he loves his soul and heart. Even the lowest of the low among Israel

he loves like his soul. And through this he glorifies them before their Father in heaven with a plethora of virtues. And through this he arouses compassion and great forces of loving-kindness, and draws down upon them all manner of blessings.

#### 10. Babylonian Talmud, Sotah 38a

תניא אידך כה תברכו פנים כנגד פנים אומר אתה פנים כנגד פנים או אינו אלא פנים כנגד עורף ת"ל אמור להם כאדם האומר לחבירו.

“Thus shall you bless” (Numbers 6:22)—face to face. You say “face to face,” but perhaps it should be face to back? The verse teaches us, “Say to them”—like someone speaking to a friend.

#### 11. Toldot Ya’akov Yosef, Parashat Naso

כי בש"ס דרשו אמור להם פנים בפנים וכו'... כמ"ש רמ"א ואהבת לרעך כמוך אני ה' ע"י שיש אהבה בתחתונים גורם אהבה בעליונים על ידי החזרת פנים בפנים גורם שפע וברכה על ידי אור ישר... ובזה יובן אמור להם, שיהיו פנים בפנים, שהוא תואר אהבה וחיבה בין אדם לחבירו, ועי"ז יברכה ה', הטעם כי יאר ה' פניו אליך, שהוא החזרת פנים בפנים, ואז גורם אור ישר.

As in the Talmud (Sotah 38a:13), they explained, “Saying to them, face to face, etc.” ...This is like Rabbi Moshe Alshikh wrote [about], *you shall love your neighbor as yourself, I am the Lord* (Leviticus 19:18): Through there being love among the lower ones, it causes love among the Upper ones. And through turning the face towards the face, it causes bounty and blessing via the direct light... And this explains, “Saying to them,” that they should be face to face, which is a description of love and affection between people, and through this the Eternal will bless you, and this is why when the Eternal casts the light of His face upon you, which is turning face to face, this causes direct light.

#### 12. Alon C. Ferency, “Why Pray?” from *Birkat Kohanim*

The Priestly Blessing can have transformative, even radical, effects on a community. Namely, it is by nature a blessing by the community, to the community, of the community—which is a fancy way to say that via Birkat Kohanim, we ourselves bless ourselves from ourselves. Primarily, the Priestly Blessing is a sacred moment to foster unity within community, which effect may ideally spread beyond the time of its recitation...

In a word, the mitzvah fulfillment of Birkat Kohanim is a concretization, on the loftiest level, of ahavat yisrael, loving all Israel, completely and unconditionally. That we have to work hard to get beyond the superficial to uncover the true essence, the great truth of the Priestly Blessing, is itself a reminder that we should do the same with every member of the community: get behind the superficial to see the good in everyone.

#### 13. James Jacobson-Maisels, “Receptivity, Dependence, Love, and the Healing Power of Blessing: In Defense of Birkat Kohanim” in *Birkat Kohanim*

To be blessed is to recognize not only that one is needy, but also that one cannot meet all of one's needs by oneself. It is, in many ways, the fundamental posture of prayer...

The true blessing is the ability to relax in the midst of the struggle, to find peace in the uncertainty, to receive what is... This passivity is neither disempowering nor about being weak or helpless. Rather, it is about recognizing that no matter how efficacious we can be, we are never in control—and that the striving, fear, and tension of control has no place for peace or love.

...The surrender, dependence, receptivity, and passivity structured into the Priestly Blessing are what enables that love, and the peace that is its fruit, to be actualized. That is: love is actualized through receptivity and surrender. The protection of love, the peace it provides, is the deep knowing that we are held in love, held from outside, in a posture of dependence and passivity.

Birkat Kohanim invites the blessed to simply let go: to no longer be in control, to give up self-protection, to relinquish the illusion of ultimate autonomy...and so to be opened to love, blessing, and peace; to be opened to the vastness of divinity...

Birkat Kohanim is a precious and relatively rare opportunity to open and receive the love that is being sent to us. It is an opportunity to stop doing, controlling, and making and instead to take a few moments, a recurring Shabbat, to soften, open, surrender, relax, and receive.

#### 14. Leviticus 9:22

וַיִּשָּׂא אֶהָרָן אֶת-יָדָיו אֶל-הָעָם וַיְבָרֶכֶם.

Aaron lifted his hands toward the people and blessed them.

#### 15. R. Nehemia Polen, “Birkat Kohanim in the S’fat Emet,” in *Birkat Kohanim*

[The S’fat Emet] sees the raised hands as a posture of yielding, of receiving, of humility. He notes that Aaron’s hands were lifted “toward the people”—which he takes as a gesture of gratitude, acknowledging that the greatness and the distinction he had just attained (the passage refers to the inauguration day of the priests and Tabernacle service) are due to the people as a whole. That is: in Leviticus 9:22 Aaron was saluting the people, acknowledging the centrality of their role in his own elevation. Although in Leviticus 9 Aaron had himself offered an entire series of sacrifices, he realized, at the end of the day, that God had granted him authority only because of the people—which fact he acknowledged by lifting his hands, saluting them. Greatness comes from, and requires constant nurturance from, surrender.

Everyone can and should take on the role of the priest, affirming and confirming blessing for those who are not aware that they are already blessed. To the extent of one’s certainty—in the place of clarity about blessedness—one is invited to bless those who are not yet clear that they are also already blessed. The role of the priest is to empower others to face forward and bless still others, ultimately inviting all into the great chain of united being, the cascading flow of blessing..

In this light, it is not surprising that the S’fat Emet does not emphasize the unique qualities of the lineage of the Aaronide priesthood. Aaron and his sons are chosen to give blessing; that is true. But that chosenness is little more than the confidence to welcome others into the

ever-expanding blessed circle. Only when the priests realize that their election is grounded in the supposedly non-elect, only when the priests surrender their sense of specialness—only then do they justify and secure their election. **At the end of the day, we are all priests.**

#### 16. *Sim Shalom*, Siddur

שִׁים שְׁלוֹם טוֹבָה וּבְרָכָה חַן וְחֶסֶד וְרַחֲמִים עָלֵינוּ וְעַל כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַמָּךְ. בְּרַכְנוּ אֲבִינוּ כְּלָנוּ כְּאַחַד  
בְּאוֹר פְּנֵיךְ. כִּי בְּאוֹר פְּנֵיךְ נִתְּתָ לָנוּ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ תּוֹרַת חַיִּים וְאַהֲבַת חֶסֶד וְצִדְקָה וּבְרָכָה וְרַחֲמִים  
וְחַיִּים וְשְׁלוֹם. וְטוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמָּךְ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל־עֵת וּבְכָל־שָׁעָה בְּשְׁלוֹמְךָ: בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ  
הַמְּבָרֵךְ אֶת־עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשְׁלוֹם:

Place peace, goodness and blessing; life, grace, lovingkindness and compassion, upon us and on all the people Israel. Bless all of us as one, our Father, with the light of Your Face. For by the light of Your face you have given us, Eternal our God, a Torah of life, love of kindness, charity, blessing, compassion, life, and peace. May it be good in Your eyes to bless all of Israel at every time and every hour with Your peace. Blessed are You, Eternal, who blesses the people Israel with peace.

#### 17. James Jacobson-Maisels, “Receptivity, Dependence, Love, and the Healing Power of Blessing: In Defense of Birkat Kohanim” in *Birkat Kohanim*

The Sim Shalom prayer, in this sense, is thus a kind of extension of the Priestly Blessing, the receiving of blessing from outside into lay practice, where lay practitioners continue the practice of blessing for themselves and their people.

...In the Sim Shalom prayer we are invited to join in the well-wishing of the priests’ channeling of the divine blessing. We ourselves becomes as we are, one of a “kingdom of priests” (Exodus 19:6).

This points to the way in which the practice of blessing—in our prayer life (where the Amidah, the “prayer” par excellence, is structured as a series of blessings) and in our spiritual life more broadly—can be a powerful spiritual practice.

#### 18. Michael Graetz, “Birkat Kohanim: How Humans Reframe Traditions” in *Birkat Kohanim*

The custom to bless the children is based on the concept of the rest of Shabbat being a whole and complete rest, and thus there must be peace and feelings of support and love between parents and children. A parent may well have scolded a child during the week or become angry with a child over some matter, yet the warm embrace and the words of blessing change that residue to one of peace and harmony, which is the goal of Shabbat... The custom is clearly another example of how humans have reframed traditions... In my opinion, this is also further testimony to the demystifying of Temple ritual and priestly status over the course of Jewish history. The Jewish people assume a more direct relationship to God, and to the rituals formerly reserved for a priestly caste. Thus the power of this biblical text continues to inspire a ritual that enhances and tightens the relationship between parents and children.