

Parashat Naso 5781, 2021

Hashem's Love for Our People

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, 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, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, 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.

Birkat Kohanim is one of the most dramatic moments of the *Yom Tov* experience. When we hear the words of the *kohanim* uttered in profound devotion, our thoughts are transported to a higher spiritual plane, and we yearn to draw closer to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. What is the role of the *kohanim* in this entire wondrous process? Do they bless us as active parties, or are they spiritual aqueducts through whom Hashem's blessing mystically flows? In his interpretation of *Bamidbar* 6:27, Rashi *zatzal* (1040-1105) suggests that the *kohanim* actually bestow their *bracha* upon us: *V'ani avarachem: "l'yisrael — v'askim im hakohanim"* ("I will bless them — the Jewish people — and I will agree with the *kohanim*"). The *Siftei Chachamim* (Rabbi Shabbetai Bass, 1641-1718), in his clarification of Rashi's interpretation, states: "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 asserting that the *kohanim* give the *bracha* directly to us, or at the very least, are partners with Hashem in this holy act.

The Rambam *zatzal* (Maimonides, 1135-1204) takes 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 *kohanim*, but on the Holy One, blessed be He, as [the text] states: “And they shall set My name upon the children of Israel, and I shall bless them.” The *kohanim* 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)

For the Rambam, the *bracha* originates from Hashem and not from the *kohanim*: “for the reception of the blessings is not dependent on the priests, but on the Holy One, blessed be He.” In addition, the *kohanim*, at Hashem’s command, are merely the viaducts for Hashem’s *bracha*: “[as it is He who,] in His mercies, will bless Israel as He desires.”

Approximately 700 years later, Rabbeinu Shimshon Raphael Hirsch *zatzal* (1808-1888) echoed the Rambam’s words in his commentary on *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)

In Rav Hirsch’s view, the entire purpose of the *kohanim* during *birkat kohanim* is to serve as the conduits through which the congregation receives its blessing. As such, the function of the *kohanim*, as commanded and defined by the Torah, is to give voice to the spiritual hopes and desires of the congregation.

Closer to our own time, my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the Rav by his students and followers, provides us with a deep insight into the very nature of *birkat kohanim*:

Birkas Kohanim is unique because it requires heartfelt love for its fulfillment. The blessing requires that the love of the *kohen* for the whole of Israel should flow spontaneously. The *kohen*'s blessing is a reflection of the divine love that the Almighty has for His own creatures, as the *Shechinah* [Divine Presence] dwells between the *kohen*'s fingertips. Maimonides (*Hilchot Tefilah u'Nesiat Kapayim* 14:3) indicates that the *kohanim* hold their fingers closed until beginning the blessing, and then open them...During the priestly blessing, these fingers of the hand are spread apart, the open fingers serving as a conduit for blessing. (*Teshuva Lecture*, 1970, cited in, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Bamidbar*, page 47)

The Rav builds upon the Rambam's idea that "the *kohanim* perform the *mitzvah* with which they were commanded, and G-d, in His mercies, will bless Israel as He desires," noting that "the *Shechinah* [Divine Presence] dwells between the *kohen*'s fingertips...the open fingers serving as a conduit for blessing." Moreover, the Rav emphasizes that, even though Hashem is, indeed, the *mevorach* (He who blesses), the act of *birkat kohanim* "requires that the love of the *kohen* for the whole of Israel should flow spontaneously," since his blessing "is a reflection of the divine love that the Almighty has for His own creatures." This enables us to better comprehend why, prior to beginning *birkat kohanim*, the *kohanim* recite, "Blessed are You Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with the holiness of Aharon, and has commanded us to bless His people with love." (Translation, *The Complete ArtScroll Siddur*)

"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." May these words ever resonate in our hearts and souls, and may they remind us of the love He has for our people. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and 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/8hsdpd>

*** 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.