



Birkat Kohanim -

The Priestly Blessing

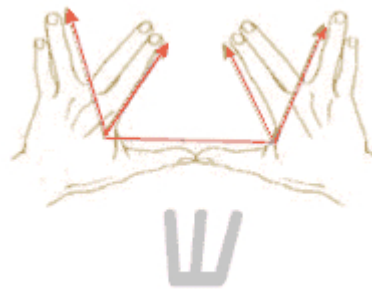
דַּבֵּר אֶל-אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל-בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

*Speak to Aaron and his sons: In this way shall you bless
the people of Israel. - Numbers 6:23*



THE PRIESTLY BLESSING is found in Numbers 6:23-27. Traditionally, the priests blessed the people every morning after the sacrifice at the Temple. Today, many synagogues end their service with this blessing as a benediction.

When recited, the *kohen* (priest) raises his hands with the palms facing outward and the thumbs of his outspread hands touching. The four fingers on each hand are split into two sets of two fingers each (thus forming the letter Shin, an emblem for *Shaddai*):



The letter Shin for Shaddai

Note that the LORD does not command the *kohanim* (priests) to bless the people using their own words, but rather provides the exact formulation for the blessing, prefacing the instruction with the words: “Thus shall you bless.” This reveals that the blessing comes from the LORD Himself, and the priests are but the means for transmitting His gracious will. This is further indicated by the verse that immediately follows the *birkat kohanim*: “So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them” (Num 6:27).





In the blessing that follows, the text in brackets is said (in an undertone) in response to the priest's recitation:

יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ:

ve-yish-me-re-kha Adonai ye-va-re-khe-kha
and protect you May the Lord bless you



[פֶּן יְהִי רָצוֹן.]

ra-tson ye-hi ken
Yes, may it be His will.

יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנֶּךָ:

vi-chun-ne-ka e-ley-kha pa-nav Adonai ya'er
and be gracious to you to you his face May the Lord shine

[פֶּן יְהִי רָצוֹן.]

ra-tson ye-hi ken
Yes, may it be His will.

יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם

sha-lom le-kha ve-ya-sem e-ley-kha pa-nav Adonai yi-sa
peace to you and give to you May the Lord turn his face

[פֶּן יְהִי רָצוֹן.]

ra-tson ye-hi ken
Yes, may it be His will.

Did you know?

Orthodox Jews do not look at the Kohanim (priests) while they are saying the blessing, for two reasons:

1. One is not supposed to look at anything during the blessing. Instead one should look at the ground and concentrate on the blessing. Looking at the Kohanim could be distracting.
2. When the Holy Temple stood in Jerusalem, the Divine Presence would shine on the fingers of the Kohanim as they would bless the Jews, and no one was allowed to look out of respect for God. Today Orthodox Jews continue this practice as a reminder of what praying was like in days past.



Note that this blessing is also used to bless members of your household, for example, during the Kiddush on Shabbat, as well as on other occasions.



יְבָרְכֶךָ יְהוָה וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ:
יָאֵר יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנְדֶּךָ:
יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ
וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

Scripture:

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them, "The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace." So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. (Numbers 6:23-27, ESV)

Note that the phrase, "May the LORD lift up His face toward you..." (יִשָּׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ) provides a picture of God holding you up in His arms, as a delighted father might hold up his young child in joy.... God "lifts up His face" as He holds you up in divine joy!



Kavanah

According to midrash (and Jewish tradition), in the beginning only God could bless other people. His first blessing was to Adam and Eve ("Be fruitful..."). Later He blessed Noah and his sons when they left the teivah (ark). God especially blessed Abraham the *tzaddik*, who was given the power of blessing others (Gen. 12:3 - "Who you bless, I will bless"). Abraham did not directly bless Isaac, however, since he did not want to also bless Ishmael, so God stepped in and blessed Isaac directly (Gen. 25:11). The power of blessing others was then transferred to Isaac, who then transferred it to Jacob (Gen. 27:30), who then blessed his twelve sons before he died (Gen. 48-49). In the Torah, God later taught Moses that the power to bless others would now come from His appointed kohanim.

All mitzvot should be performed joyfully, though if someone cannot attain this emotion, the mitzvah must still be performed. The mitzvah of *birkat kohanim* (the "priestly blessing") is unique in that if a kohen is unhappy, he must not recite the blessing (therefore a kohen who is in *aveilut* (mourning over the death of a parent) is required to leave during the blessing).



Traditionally, the priests blessed the people every morning after the sacrifice at the mishkan (and later at the Temple). Today, Sephardic synagogues end their service with this blessing as a benediction (Ashkenaz only recite it on Pesach, Shavuot, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, and Sukkot).

When the cantor is finishing the *modim* (thanksgiving) blessing (i.e., "Our God and God of our fathers, bless us with the threefold [priestly] blessing...") and reaches the word "kohanim," the Kohanim present are summoned to recite the prescribed blessing upon the assembled minyan (representing Israel). The congregation (or cantor) then responds by quietly saying, am kedoshkha ka'amur ("Your consecrated people, as it is said...") before the kohanim actually go on to recite the blessing itself.

The Talmud (Sotah 39a) says that before the kohanim bless the congregation they must make a blessing in which praise is given to the LORD for the honor of blessing the people. The blessing is called "l'varekh et amo Yisrael b'ahava" ("to bless His nation Israel with love"):

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּקִדְּשָׁתוֹ שֶׁל אַהֲרֹן,
וְצִוָּנוּ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת עַמּוֹ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה.

baruch attah Adonai, Elohenu melech ha'olam,
asher kideshanu bikdushato shel Aharon,
v'tzivanu l'varekh et am Yisrael b'ahavah.

Blessed are You, LORD our God, King of the universe,
Who makes us holy with the holiness of Aaron,
and has commanded us to bless His people Israel with love.

The phrase "with love" is integral and is intended to represent the love of the LORD for His people. Just as God blesses us as an expression of His kindness, so too the kohen must seek to display God's love in this manner. The preparatory blessing is intended to induce a state of kavanah in the heart of the one performing the commandment.

According to the sages, the obligation to bless the people “with love” comes from the Scriptures themselves. The verse that immediately precedes the commandment to bless the people says, “Thus you shall bless the people of Israel: you shall say to them...” The word “say” here is amor, and is written with an “extra Vav,” i.e., אמור.. This “full spelling” of the verb is said to indicate that the act of blessing others should not be done in a halfhearted or impatient manner, but rather with fullness of heart and sincerity. The desire of the blesser to see others blessed is considered vital -- just as the desire of the hearer should be to sincerely receive the blessing itself. When the priest lifts his hands during the recitation (“May the LORD bless you and keep you...”), it is a virtual “semikhah” (ordination), something that the sages regard as integral to every blessing.



The “Three-in-One” Blessing

The text of the priestly blessing is in three parts and is therefore called “the three in one blessing.” Notice that it is phrased in the singular rather than plural because it is meant to have personal application, not to be a general benediction over a crowd of people. It has been sometimes noted that the first section consists of three words, the second of five, and the third of seven, and various speculations have been offered as to why the blessing is structured this way (e.g., 3+5 is the number of grace, 7 marks completion, etc.). Notice that the phrase, “The LORD lift up His face toward you...” (שָׂא יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ) pictures the beaming face of a parent as he lifts up his beloved child in joy... The repetitive construction of God “lifting up His face” (יְהוָה פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ) suggests that God’s justice has been fully satisfied and His compassion now flows outward to the child in loving grace.

Under the terms of the older covenant, only the descendants of Aaron were chosen to convey the blessing of God to the people of God, but under the terms of the greater New Covenant, all followers of Yeshua are made part of “a chosen people, a priesthood of King Messiah, a holy nation, a people for his own possession,” so that we may proclaim the glory of Him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9; Rev. 1:5-6). “Through Yeshua, then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his Name” (Heb. 13:15). It must be remembered that the subject of the priestly blessing is the LORD (יְהוָה); He (alone) is the One who does the blessing, and even under the older covenant the sons of Aaron merely transmitted or conveyed God’s blessing to the people. Since the LORD God Almighty is the only true Blessor, undoubtedly Yeshua recited the “priestly blessing” over his disciples when he ascended back to heaven, though of course He would have spoken it in the first person: “I bless you and keep you; I shine upon you and am gracious to you; I lift up my countenance upon you, and give you my peace” (Luke 24:50-51). As Yeshua said to his followers, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you” (John 14:27; 20:19). After all, who but the Prince of Peace (שֵׁר שְׁלוֹמִים) could speak these words in the truth? This Prince was promised by the prophet to be God’s Son, the anointed King of Israel Himself:

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his Name shall be called ‘Wonderful One,’ ‘Counselor of the Mighty God,’ ‘the Father of Eternity,’ ‘the Prince of Peace.’”

(Isa. 9:5[h])



Indeed to receive Yeshua is to receive the Blessing of God. “Whoever has the Son has *life* (חַיִּים); whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life” (1 John 5:12).