



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת נשא תשס"ט • 5769 Parshas Nasso

EVERYONE'S BLESSING

On those periodic occasions when Birkas Kohanim (the priestly blessing) is recited during the Mussaf prayer, a certain excitement permeates the air. The Kohanim and Leviim file out to the wash basin, where the Leviim perform the service of purifying the Kohanim's hands. The entourage then re-enters the *shul*, and the Kohanim ascend the "*duchan*" (stage). Following the lead of the *chazzan*, the Kohanim pronounce the blessing, which is accompanied by a sublime and haunting chant.

While the ceremony is fraught with meaning and emotion, a certain wistful feeling may creep into the hearts of the rest of the congregation – the Yisraelim. While the other segments of the Jewish population played major roles in this event – the Leviim manned the wash stations, and the Kohanim took center stage (literally) – the Yisraelim appear to have been relegated to serve as mere spectators. True, receiving the blessing is no small benefit, but – some may wonder – is there no way for the Yisraelim to serve as active participants in this service as well?

Actually, from the words of the *poskim*, it seems that the Yisraelim may play a more active part than most realize.

THE GREAT DEBATE

There is a question raised and debated by the great commentators: who exactly is commanded in the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim?

At first glance, the question may seem somewhat odd. Who is commanded? Why, the Kohanim, of course! They are the ones who recite the blessing, and the commandment to give this blessing –

as spelled out in this week's *parshah* – is clearly directed toward the sons of Aharon:

וַיְדַבֵּר ד' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, דַּבֵּר אֶל אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: לְבִרְכָהּ... יָאֵר... יֵשָׂא... וְשָׂמוּ אֶת שְׁמִי עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and to his sons, saying: 'So shall you bless the B'nei Yisrael: Hashem should bless... He should enlighten... He should raise... And they shall place My Name on the B'nei Yisrael,'" (*Bamidbar* 6:22-7).

What is clear is that the Kohanim have a mitzvah to perform the blessing. The question of the commentators focuses on the role of the Yisraelim themselves: do they also share in this mitzvah? Is a commandment addressed to the Yisraelim as well, instructing them to *be blessed*? Or are they mere recipients of the blessing, the obligation of which rests solely on the Kohanim to carry out?

Now, some may be entertaining, at this point, a question of their own: *who cares*? Is there a practical ramification to contemplating whether the obligation rests solely on the Kohanim to bless the Yisraelim, or if the Yisraelim are also obligated to serve as the object of the blessing?

Actually, a very real application of this question emerges from a brief look at a well-known concept, as it relates to mitzvah performance in general.

KAVANAH

The Mishnah in Brachos (2:1) states:

הָיָה קוֹרֵא בַּתּוֹרָה, וְהִגִּיעַ זְמַן הַמְקֻרָא, אִם כָּוֵן לְבוֹ, יִצָּא. וְאִם לֹא, לֹא יִצָּא.

"Someone was reading from the Torah. (He happened to be reading that section of the Torah

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that contains the text of the Shema,) and the proper time for (the fulfillment of the mitzvah of) K'rias Shema arrived. If he 'directs his heart' (has *kavanah*), he has discharged his obligation. If not, then he has not fulfilled the *mitzvah*."

An individual casually reading from the *parshiyos* of Sefer Devarim, who happens upon the section of Shema at the very time that there is an obligation to say it, has not fulfilled his mitzvah. This, despite the fact that he actually did say all of the words contained in Shema. What sabotaged his mitzvah? *Kavanah* – intent. Although he performed the very *act* of saying Shema, he failed to have in mind that he was reading for the purpose of fulfilling the mitzvah; this individual thought he was just studying Chumash.

This principle, known as *מְצוּוֹת צְרִיכוֹת בְּנוּנָה* (fulfillment of *mitzvos* requires proper intent), is codified in Shulchan Aruch (*Orach Chaim* 60:4). The Mishnah B'rurah advises that before performing any mitzvah, one should specifically think in his mind that he is intending to fulfill this particular mitzvah; failure to do so may very well cause him to lose his mitzvah (*ibid.* 8, 10).

This idea is manifest in relation to Birkas Kohanim, as well. The Ritva (*Sukkah* 31b) is of the opinion that Birkas Kohanim is a mitzvah *only* for the Kohanim to bless the Yisraelim. The Sefer Chareidim (referenced in the *Biur Halachah* to *Orach Chaim* 128), on the other hand, holds that the Yisraelim are, in fact, included in the commandment of Birkas Kohanim, and are obligated to be blessed by the Kohanim.

A practical ramification of this issue, therefore, would center around the issue of *kavanah*. As previously mentioned, the principle of *מְצוּוֹת צְרִיכוֹת בְּנוּנָה* requires the mitzvah-doer to "state" in his mind that he is doing this act with the specific intention of fulfilling the applicable mitzvah. As it relates to Birkas Kohanim, it seems clear that the Kohanim must make this

"mental declaration" when performing their role. Do the Yisraelim likewise need to formulate such thoughts? According to the Ritva, they have no mitzvah obligation in this instance; as such, no specific intention would be necessary. The Chareidim, on the other hand, who sees the Yisraelim as included in the commandment of Birkas Kohanim, would seemingly require the Yisraelim to employ the necessary *kavanah* (for the purpose of mitzvah fulfillment).

Like the Chareidim, at least, it appears that even the Yisraelim are indeed active participants in this lofty occurrence.

(Please note once again that Mishnas Chayim is provided principally for edification purposes; any actual *halachic* practices should be arrived at through consultation with the proper *halachic* authorities).

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