

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Chanah *bas* Mendel HaKohen *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

The Propriety of Blessing

PARSHAS NASSO 5776

There is a beautiful custom observed by many throughout Jewish communities everywhere. On Shabbos night, the father blesses his children, utilizing the three-part Priestly Blessing appearing in this week’s *parshah*: **יְבָרְכֶךָ ד' וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ / יְאָר ד' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי וְיִתְנֶנָּךְ / יִשְׂא ד' פְּנֵי אֱלֹהֵי וְיִשְׁלֹם** – “May Hashem bless you and keep you / May Hashem shine His countenance toward you and favor you / May Hashem turn His face toward you and grant you peace” (*Bamidbar* 6:24-26).

Yes, it is truly a poignant and cherished practice. But it also – at first glance – seems to be a violation of a Biblical prohibition. In issuing the directive to the *kohanim* to bless the people, the Torah states: **וְדַבֵּר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־בָּנָיו לֵאמֹר כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** – “Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying: ‘So shall you bless B’nei Yisrael’” (*ibid.* v. 23). Rashi (*Kesubos* 24b) draws the inference: “You (the *kohanim*, shall bless) – but *zarim* (strangers, i.e., non-*kohanim*) may not (pronounce this blessing).” It would seem, then, that any non-*kohein* who blesses another with this tripartite blessing violates a Biblical injunction. How, then, do so many loyal Jews seem to do just that on (at least) a weekly basis?

A Matter of the Mind

The *poskim* (classical halachic decisors) address this issue and present a number of resolutions to justify the practice. The approach of the *Magein Giborim* is based on the notion of *kavanah* (intention), a principle that appears in the following Mishnah (*Rosh Hashanah* 3:7):

מִי שֶׁהֵיָה עוֹבֵר אַחֲרֵי בַּיִת הַכְּנֹסֶת, אוֹ שֶׁהֵיָה בֵּיתוֹ סְמוּךְ לְבַיִת הַכְּנֹסֶת, וְשָׁמַע קוֹל שׁוֹפָר אוֹ קוֹל מְגִלָּה, אִם כִּוֵּן לְבוֹ, וְאִם לֹא, לֹא יִצָּא. אִךְ עַל פִּי שֶׁזֶה שָׁמַע וְזֶה לִבּוֹ וְזֶה כִּוֵּן לְבוֹ לֹא כִּוֵּן לְבוֹ.

“Someone was passing behind a synagogue or whose house was adjacent to the synagogue, and he happened to hear (emanating from the synagogue) the sound of the shofar (on Rosh Hashanah) or (on Purim) the sound of the (reading of the) Megillah. (The determination of whether or not he has discharged his obligation is based on the following contingency:) If his had intention in his heart (to fulfill the mitzvah), he has discharged his obligation; and if not, he has not discharged it. (This gives rise to the following somewhat ironic scenario; it is possible that two people both passed by and heard the same thing, yet only one of them fulfilled the mitzvah. The reason is:) Even though both this one and the other one heard (the same shofar blast or Megillah reading), this one’s heart had intention (to fulfill the mitzvah), while this one’s heart did not.”

The basic idea emerging from the above is the principle known as “*Mitzvos tzerichos kavanah*”; that is, in order to discharge one’s **mitzvah** obligation, it is **necessary** to have specific **intent** to do so. A person might have performed the same activity as is required to fulfill the mitzvah – say, for instance, he himself blew the shofar. But if he did not have intention to fulfill the mitzvah by doing so (perhaps he was merely playing a tune), then he might not have discharged his obligation.

And so, explains the *Magein Giborim*, those who bless their children Friday night are in the clear. Although they employ the priestly formulation – and the Torah forbids a non-*kohein* from performing the Priestly Blessing – the Jewish fathers blessing their children at this time *do not have intention to fulfill the mitzvah of reciting the Priestly Blessing*; they are merely conveying a special blessing to their offspring (albeit using the same words) outside the context of the actual blessing reserved for the *kohanim*. As such, there is no violation, and the practice can be upheld.

Hands Down

However, the matter might not be so simple after all, as pointed out by the *Mishnah Berurah* (128:3). While the *Magen Giborim's* calculation is solid, it rests on the assumption that, indeed, “*Mitzvos tzerichos kavanah – mitzvos require intent.*” In truth, however, this is a matter of dispute; there is another opinion that contends that “*Mitzvos ein tzerichos kavanah – mitzvos do not require intent.*” According to this second opinion, then, one would fulfill the mitzvah even if he did not have specific intent to fulfill the mitzvah; as such, the Friday-night fathers may not yet be in the clear.

The *Mishnah Berurah* adds, however, that there is an option that would satisfy all opinions. The dispute regarding *kavanah*, he explains, centers chiefly on a “neutral” situation; that is, where the individual does not really have any clear intent in mind. It is regarding such a “state of mind” (or lack thereof) that the two opinions disagree. However, all are in agreement that if a person has definitive *negative* intent – that is, he specifically and actively intends *not* to fulfill the mitzvah – then his deed certainly does not constitute a legitimate mitzvah act. And so, if a father, as he blesses his children, specifically thinks in his mind that he intends *not* to fulfill the mitzvah of *Birkas Kohanim* (the Priestly Blessing), he thereby avoids the risk of violating the Biblical command proscribing a non-*kohein* from performing this deed.

In the *Bi'ur Halachah* section, the *Mishnah Berurah* presents an alternate approach to uphold the custom. He cites the Bach, who maintains that a prerequisite to the mitzvah of *Birkas Kohanim* is the lifting of the hands; consequently, one who pronounces this blessing without the hand-raising does not thereby fulfill the mitzvah. Thus, fathers who omit the lifting of the hands are not considered to be performing the Priestly Blessing and thus are in no violation of the injunction.

However, this raises a separate issue: namely, it would seem problematic, based on the above, to place one's hands on the head of the recipient while issuing the blessing. Indeed, the *Torah Temimah* (*Bamidbar* 6:23) records a reliable tradition that the Vilna Gaon once blessed a *chassan* (groom) under the *chuppah* (wedding canopy) and when doing so only placed *one hand* on the *chassan's* head. When asked why, the Gaon explained that the act of blessing with two hands is reserved only for *kohanim*. Nonetheless, R' Ya'akov Emden in his *siddur* (*Beis Ya'akov*) “upholds” the Friday-night custom of blessing the children with two hands and notes that this was also the practice of his own father (the Chacham Tzvi). A number of modern-day *poskim* (cited in *Piskei Teshuvos* 128:6, footnote # 21) indicate that the prevailing custom is to follow the lenient ruling in this regard.

(We would like to reiterate Mishnas Chayim's policy that these articles are written to stimulate thought and discussion; they are not intended as definitive *p'sak halachah* [final *halachic* rulings]. For that, as always, one is encouraged to consult a qualified *halachic* authority.)