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Rabbi A. Leib Scheinbaum

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subject: Parashas Naso

איש על דגלו באתת לבית אבתם

Every man shall encamp by his banner with the sign of his father's house.
(2:2)

Chazal teach that the arrangement of the Jews' encampment in the Wilderness paralleled the configuration of the Heavenly entourage that accompanied the Shechinah when it descended upon Har Sinai prior to the Giving of the Torah. Myriads of Heavenly Angels descended with Hashem, all grouped in composition under Degalim, banners. When Klal Yisrael saw this pattern, they, too, sought a sequence of Degalim for their encampment. It did not stop there. Chazal (Bamidbar Rabbah 2:4) state that when umos ha'olam, the nations of the world, saw Klal Yisrael encamped under the Degalim, they approached the Jewish People and attempted to initiate a relationship with them. They said, "We too will grant you distinction, giving you positions of importance, power and monarchy. The Jewish response was straightforward, "You cannot give us anything that will in any way match the greatness of the Degalim which Hashem bestowed upon us." In summation, the gentiles attempted to disenfranchise us from Hashem, by enticing us with kavod, honor, prestige. Our response is quite simple: Whatever you tempt us with pales in comparison with the distinction Hashem accorded us with the Degalim.

What was notable about the Degalim that granted such extraordinary prestige to Klal Yisrael? What was it about the Degalim that made them feel so special? Chazal (Bamidbar Rabbah 2:6) teach that the Degalim were a sign that Klal Yisrael represented the legion of Hashem. It elevated their image. They were Hashem's children, His hosts, His guard. The Shechinah reposed in the middle of the Camp, with all of the Shevatim, Tribes, encamped

around it – each in its own pre-arranged place based upon its purpose and mission vis-à-vis the nation of Hashem. Yissachar symbolized and focused on Torah, Yehudah focused on the monarchy, while Reuven represented the attribute of teshuvah, repentance. Each of the tribes focused on its own Heavenly-designated mission; each was part of the large conglomerate of Klal Yisrael, who together were mekadesh, sanctified, the Name of Hashem. What is the adhesive that bonds us together? The Meshech Chochmah (commentary to Parashas Emor) explains that the unified connection of Klal Yisrael that links us together as one people is unlike the relationship that the nations of the world have with one another. People of one country are linked to one another by virtue of the fact that they were born and raised in the same country and that they are culturally like-minded (for the most part). Klal Yisrael is bound together, its hiskashrus is its eternal bond with Hashem. This enduring relationship is ceaseless and constant, and it is what perpetuates us as a people.

Yaakov Avinu descended to Egypt with shivim nefesh, seventy souls (Bereishis 46:26). Nefesh is singular, because Yaakov's entire family was viewed as one unified soul. Eisav's family consisted of six nefashos, souls, in the plural (Bereishis 36:6), because they were all distant from one another, each with his own god, own religious philosophy, own way of life, own value system and goals. Klal Yisrael is focused collectively on Hashem – one G-d, one hashkafah, one matarah, purpose and meaning in life.

This, explains Horav Eliyahu Svei, zl, is why we require the services of our gedolei Yisrael, Torah giants, who lead and guide us. Chazal (Bamidbar Rabbah 2:8) teach that when Hashem instituted the designated places for each tribe's encampment around the Mishkan, Moshe Rabbeinu was concerned lest the tribes dissent and challenge their assigned places. Hashem reassured him that each tribe "knew" its allotted place. They would follow the same configuration that was designated by the Patriarch Yaakov for his funeral. He had demonstrated to them how and where each one should stand around his bier. This taught them volumes concerning each one's ordained place. This is where he belonged; this is where he should encamp.

The Rosh Yeshivah gleams from here that in order to place everyone in his designated place, to show him clearly what is his mission, his purpose, how valuable and crucial he is to the success of an endeavor, how important his involvement is in its every aspect, one needs a father (figure). It was Yaakov Avinu who was mei'acheid, unified, Klal Yisrael, by showing each respective tribe where it should stand, where it belonged. This can only be performed by a father, because it is only to a father that one will listen and adhere.

This is the function of manhigei Yisrael, Torah leaders. They act as our "fathers." That is how they should feel toward us and how we should respond reciprocally to them.

ונתנו עליו כסוי עור תחש ופרשו בגד כלייל תכלת מלמעלה

They shall place upon it a tachash – hide covering, and spread a cloth entirely of turquoise wool over it. (4:6)

erves that in the case of the other klei haMishkan, vessels of the Mishkan, they were first covered with wool and then covered over with the tachash – hide. The Aron HaKodesh was singular in that it was first covered with the tachash – hide and then was covered with the techeiles, turquoise wool. Chazal describe techeiles as having a color similar to that of the sea, similar to the sky which symbolizes the purity of Heaven. Thus, (according to Ramban) it was placed above the tachash – to call attention to the purity and sanctity of the Aron/Torah.

Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, offers another perspective on the Aron's distinction vis-à-vis its coverings. Techeiles and tachash represent distinct concepts. The blue color of techeiles makes people think of Heaven, the place of Hashem's Kisei HaKavod, Throne of Glory. Thus, techeiles denotes faith in Hashem. Tachash, on the other hand, focuses on material/physical beauty (the tachash – hide-was unusually beautiful) which encourages us to enhance our mitzvah observance by cloaking them in physical beauty.

[Understandably, we perform mitzvos because they are the tzivui Hashem,

command of G-d, but people will find mitzvah observance more attractive and desirable if the mitzvah involves an element of aesthetic beauty. We perform mitzvos due to our commitment rooted in faith in Hashem. This does not mean that we cannot enhance our performance.] Thus, the uppermost cover of the Aron, which is visible to the eye, should be techeiles, which calls to mind unarguable, accomplished faith in Hashem. This sets the standard and tone for how we are to view mitzvos. Only then can we cover the other vessels – the other mitzvos – with tachash – hide, representing beauty and enhancement of mitzvos which make their performance more inviting.

Horav Zev Weinberg, zl, takes a basic approach to the variation of the covers between the Aron and other vessels. The Aron is the receptacle in which the Torah is housed. The Torah is our spiritual guide. As such, its inner beauty, the beauty of the mitzvos, the beauty of living as a Jew, is what should be emphasized – not externals. Techeiles personifies a beauty of sorts – a beauty of purity of action, of deed, of service to Hashem. The Torah’s greatness lies in its inner aesthetics, not in its external beauty. When we feel the need to couch Torah in external elegance, we diminish its inner sublimity. Torah’s radiance shines from within. Does one daven better, with greater and more intense fervor, in a magnificent, spacious and elegant appealing shul? How many of us grew up davening in shtieblach that were situated in old, dark basements and storefronts? Those of us who have been davening in hot (in the summer) and cold (in the winter) tents (during the pandemic) have neither felt shortchanged, nor our davening lacking. On the other hand, this does not mean that beauty is denigrated. The significance of the Kohanim’s vessel’s, the Klei haMishkan was not diminished by showing their beauty. Torah, however, requires the motif to project its majesty. We have been in exile for too long. As a result of our persecution, poverty, always being on the run, we have neglected the aesthetics in our service to Hashem. The world has not wanted to see Jews who dress better than they do, have nicer homes and cars than they do, and have places of worship which are tributes to the finest, most talented architects. We have been instructed to keep our collective heads low and our mouths silent. Today, baruch Hashem, the Jewish community is thriving and, in some instances, has lost sight of its age-old parameters. While the pursuit of a pleasant, aesthetically-pleasing environment is wonderful and can, in some instances, enhance our service to Hashem, we should not allow ourselves to fall into the abyss of excessive emphasis on external grandeur. This will ultimately do harm to the inner dimension of our service.

A shul is a house of worship because of the prayers and supplications that are rendered there. Just because it looks like a shul does not make it a place of worship. Physical structure can expand one’s spiritual consciousness, but if his focus is on the scenery, his prayers will lose their urgency and intensity. Thus, the colors of the tachash – hide overlapped the pure color of techeiles. Modesty and purity have a greater impact on inspiring, heartfelt prayer than large, imposing, art-deco edifices.

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An Important Rokeach to Know When Listening to Birkas Kohanim
Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Outside Eretz Yisrael, we only say Birkas Kohanim on limited occasions—the Shalosh Regalim, Rosh HaShanah, and Yom Kippur. Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his sefer *Oznayim L'Torah*, stresses that when the Kohanim recite the three Priestly Blessings mentioned in Parshas Naso, they should realize that they have vast power in their hands. Every word of the Birkas Kohanim can make tremendous differences in a person’s life. The pesukim in the beginning of Parshas Bechukosai, prior to the Tochacha, contain the blessings of “Im Bechukosai Teileichu.” The Rokeach writes that throughout all those pesukim, which describe the blessings that will come our way if we keep the Torah’s laws, [Vayikra 26:3-13], the letter Samech does not appear. The Rokeach explains that the blessings of Parshas

Bechukosai are all conditional, as implied by the word ‘Im’ (‘if’ you will follow My laws). However, he says, the blessings of Birkas Kohanim, which contain sixty letters are unconditional. The letter Samech, with a numerical value of 60, represents the Birkas Kohanim. Those blessings do not have strings attached. Therefore, we do not find the letter Samech in the conditional blessings of Parshas Bechukosai.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin quotes an idea from Rav Yaakov Gezuntheit, who wrote a sefer on Maseches Chullin and other masechtos as well. The end of Parshas Shoftim contains the parsha of Eglah Arufah (the Decapitated Calf). When a dead body is found whose murderer is unknown, there is a whole ceremony which must be performed, involving the Elders of the closest city, to achieve communal atonement for this tragedy. The pasuk there [Devorim 21:5] singles out “the Kohanim, sons of Levi, who were chosen by G-d to serve Him and to bless in the Name of Hashem“. They need to participate in that ceremony. Following that, representatives of the Court come and proclaim “Our hands have not spilled this blood...” [Bamidbar 21:7] Rav Gezuntheit asks – What do the Kohanim have to do with all this? We understand that the Beis Din represents the city. They need to proclaim the innocence of the population. They state that they did not do anything wrong. “We did not send this victim away without food and accompaniment, etc.” But what is the role of the Kohanim? More pointed, why does the pasuk need to say that the Kohanim are “the sons of Levy, for G-d has chosen them to serve him and to bless in the Name of G-d?”

Why is that germane to this parsha? What does this mean? The Tiferes Yaakov explains that if the Kohanim would have had proper Kavana (intent) when uttering the blessing “And He will place upon you Peace” (v’Yasem Lecha Shalom) this would have never happened. If a Jew kills another Jew, it is because there is no Shalom. That is why the Torah mentions the Kohanim and singles out their role in blessing in the Name of G-d.

The Rokeach writes that the congregants should face the Kohanim with open arms and make personal requests for whatever their needs are during Birkas Kohanim. This is a most propitious time for making such requests, which then have an increased potential for being answered. If someone has pressing needs, a most fitting time to ask for Help is during Birkas Kohanim—a point in the liturgy that is particularly ripe for Heavenly dispensation of blessing. This is something worth keeping in mind when listening to Birkas Kohanim.

Why Didn’t Manoach’s Wife Tell Her Husband the Rest of the Story? Parshas Naso’s Haftorah contains the story of the birth of Shimshon. Shimshon’s mother was childless. The Angel of Hashem appeared to her and told her that she was going to become pregnant and give birth to a son. That son turned out to be Shimshon haGibor. However, the pasuk does not only say she would become pregnant and have a son. It begins by saying “Behold you are barren and have not given birth.” [Shoftim 13:3]

The Medrash asks – why was it necessary for the Angel to tell Manoach’s wife that she was barren and had not given birth. This was a fact of which she was obviously aware! The Medrash answers “This teaches that there had been a dispute between Manoach and his wife.” In Biblical times, they did not possess the medical knowledge or technology that we have today to determine when a couple is infertile, whether the cause lay with the husband or the wife. Manoach had told his wife “Our childlessness is your problem! You are the barren one.” She argued back to her husband, “No. The problem comes from you. You are the infertile one and the reason we do not have children.”

According to the Medrash, this was part of the Angel’s message to the woman. The Medrash first says that Manoach’s wife was a Tzadekes (a righteous woman) and for that reason the Malach appeared to her with this Divine message rather than to her husband. The Medrash says that the Malach came to make peace between husband and wife, by presenting them with the “Divine diagnosis” of the source of the problem. “It is indeed your “fault” that you have not had children with your husband. Stop fighting about that. But you should know that now, you are going to become pregnant!”

Manoach's wife told him, "An Angel told me that we are going to have a baby." [Shoftim 13:7] However, she conveniently left out from her statement to her husband the fact that the Malach confirmed that he had been right all those years in their argument regarding the cause of their inability to have children.

Now this seems somewhat odd. The Medrash says that she was a Tzadekes, and that in her merit, the Angel appeared. We are not talking here about just your average woman on the street. We are talking about a woman who merited speaking with a Malach, and whom the Medrash calls a Tzadekes! So then why does she not confess to Manoach that she had been wrong? Why doesn't she tell him "You know, after all these years that we have been fighting with each other about this matter, the Angel revealed to me that you were right and I was wrong!"?

The reason is that one of the hardest things to do in life is to say "I am wrong. It is my fault." The novel idea here is that a person can be a Tzadekes, and a person can be on the level where they merit speaking with a Malach, but to say the words "It is my fault. I am wrong" is a very difficult challenge.

I once gave a drasha entitled "The Three Most Important Words in Marriage." I began my speech by asking "What are the three most important words in a marriage?" Some suggested "You look beautiful." Others suggested "I love you." I maintain that the three most important words in a marriage are "It's my fault." This is very hard to do. One can be a Tzadekes, one can speak with an Angel, and one can announce that "we are going to have a baby." But to say "You were right. I was wrong. It was my problem"—that is very difficult.

from: **The Rabbi Sacks Legacy** Trust <info@rabbisacks.org> v

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subject: The Politics of Envy (Naso 5781)

The Politics of Envy (Naso 5781)

Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks zt"l

Rabbi Sacks zt"l had prepared a full year of Covenant & Conversation for 5781, based on his book *Lessons in Leadership*. The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust will continue to distribute these weekly essays, so that people all around the world can keep on learning and finding inspiration in his Torah. Few things in the Torah are more revolutionary than its conception of leadership.

Ancient societies were hierarchical. The masses were poor and prone to hunger and disease. They were usually illiterate. They were exploited by rulers as a means to wealth and power rather than treated as people with individual rights – a concept born only in the seventeenth century. At times they formed a *corvée*, a vast conscripted labour force, often used to construct monumental buildings intended to glorify kings. At others they were dragooned into the army to further the ruler's imperial designs.

Rulers often had absolute power of life and death over their subjects. Not only were kings and pharaohs heads of state; they also held the highest religious rank, as they were considered children of the gods or even demigods themselves. Their power had nothing to do with the consent of the governed. It was seen as written into the fabric of the universe. Just as the sun ruled the sky and the lion ruled the animal realm, so kings ruled their populations. That was how things were in nature, and nature itself was sacrosanct.

The Torah is a sustained polemic against this way of seeing things. Not just kings but all of us, regardless of colour, culture, class or creed, are in the image and likeness of God. In the Torah, God summons His special people, Israel, to take the first steps towards what might eventually become a truly egalitarian society – or to put it more precisely, a society in which dignity, *kavod*, does not depend on power or wealth or an accident of birth. Hence the concept, which we will explore more fully in parshat Korach, of leadership as service. The highest title accorded to Moses in the Torah is that of *eved Hashem*, "a servant of God" (Deut. 34:5). His highest praise is that he was "very humble, more so than anyone else on earth" (Num. 12:3). To

lead is to serve. Greatness is humility. As the book of Proverbs puts it, "A man's pride will bring him low, but the humble in spirit will retain honour" (Prov. 29:23).

The Torah points us in the direction of an ideal world, but it does not assume that we have reached it yet or even that we are within striking distance. The people Moses led, like many of us today, were still prone to fixate on ambition, aspiration, vanity, and self-indulgence. They still had the human desire for honour and status. And Moses had to recognise that fact. It would be a major source of conflict in the months and years ahead. It is one of the primary themes of the book of Bamidbar.

Of whom were the Israelites jealous? Most of them did not aspire to be Moses. He was, after all, the man who spoke to God and to whom God spoke. He performed miracles, brought plagues against the Egyptians, divided the Red Sea, and gave the people water from a rock and manna from heaven. Few would have had the hubris to believe they could do any of these things.

But they did have reason to resent the fact that religious leadership seemed to be confined to only one tribe, Levi, and one family within that tribe, the Kohanim, male descendants of Aaron. Now that the Tabernacle was to be consecrated and the people were about to begin the second half of their journey, from Sinai to the Promised Land, there was a real risk of envy and animosity.

That is a constant throughout history. We desire, said Shakespeare, "this man's gift and that man's scope." Aeschylus said, "It is in the character of very few men to honour without envy a friend who has prospered." [1] Goethe warned that although "hatred is active, and envy passive dislike; there is but one step from envy to hate." Jews should know this in their very bones. We have often been envied, and all too frequently has that envy turned to hate, with tragic consequences.

Leaders need to be aware of the perils of envy, especially within the people they lead. This is one of the unifying themes of the long and apparently disconnected parsha of Naso. In it we see Moses confronting three potential sources of envy. The first lay within the tribe of Levi. Its members had reason to resent the fact that priesthood had gone to just one man and his descendants: Aaron, Moses' brother.

The second had to do with individuals who were neither of the tribe of Levi nor of the family of Aaron but who felt that they had the right to be holy in the sense of having a special, intense relationship with God in the way that the priests had. The third had to do with the leadership of the other tribes who might have felt left out of the service of the Tabernacle. We see Moses dealing sequentially with all these potential dangers.

First, he gives each Levitical clan a special role in carrying the vessels, furnishings, and framework of the Tabernacle whenever the people journeyed from place to place. The most sacred objects were to be carried by the clan of Kohath. The Gershonites were to carry the cloths, coverings, and drapes. The Merarites were to carry the planks, bars, posts, and sockets that made up the Tabernacle's framework. Each clan was, in other words, to have a special role and place in the solemn procession as the house of God was carried through the desert.

Next, Moses deals with individuals who aspire to a higher level of holiness. This, it seems, is the underlying logic of the Nazirite, the individual who vows to set himself apart for the Lord (Numbers 6:2). He was not to drink wine or any other grape product; he was not to have his hair cut; and he was not defile himself through contact with the dead. Becoming a Nazirite was, it seems, a way of temporarily assuming the kind of set-apartness associated with the priesthood, a voluntary extra degree of holiness. [2]

Lastly, Moses turns to the leadership of the tribes. The highly repetitive chapter 7 of our parsha itemises the offerings of each of the tribes on the occasion of the dedication of the altar. Their offerings were identical, and the Torah could have abbreviated its account by describing the gifts brought by one tribe and stating that each of the other tribes did likewise. Yet the sheer repetition has the effect of emphasising the fact that each tribe had its moment of glory. Each, by giving to the house of God, acquired its own

share of honour.

These episodes are not the whole of Naso but they consist of enough of it to signal a principle that every leader and every group needs to take seriously. Even when people accept, in theory, the equal dignity of all, and even when they see leadership as service, the old dysfunctional passions die hard. People still resent the success of others. They still feel that honour has gone to others when it should have gone to them. Rabbi Elazar HaKappar said: "Envy, lust and the pursuit of honour drive a person out of the world." [3] The fact that these are destructive emotions does not stop some people – perhaps most of us – feeling them from time to time, and nothing does more to put at risk the harmony of the group. That is one reason why a leader must be humble. They should feel none of these things. But a leader must also be aware that not everyone is humble. Every Moses has a Korach, every Julius Caesar a Cassius, every Duncan a Macbeth, every Othello an Iago. In many groups there is a potential troublemaker driven by a sense of injury to their self-esteem. These are often a leader's deadliest enemies and they can do great damage to the group.

There is no way of eliminating the danger entirely, but Moses in this week's parsha tells us how to behave. Honour everyone equally. Pay special attention to potentially disaffected groups. Make each feel valued. Give everyone a moment in the limelight if only in a ceremonial way. Set a personal example of humility. Make it clear to all that leadership is service, not a form of status. Find ways in which those with a particular passion can express it, and ensure that everyone has a chance to contribute. There is no failsafe way to avoid the politics of envy but there are ways of minimising it, and our parsha is an object lesson in how to do so.

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Parshas Nasso

Rav Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Itka bas Dovid.

"May her Neshama have an Aliya!"

Letting Go

Speak to Bnei Yisroel, and say to them, if any man's wife goes astray, and commits a trespass against him... (5, 12)

Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Gemara in Brachos (63a) that explains why the Torah places the laws of Sotah (a woman who was warned by her husband not to go into seclusion with another man) following the laws of giving the Kohanim Teruma and Ma'aser; for anyone who withholds from the Kohen the priestly gifts will find that he needs the Kohen (i.e. he will be obligated to come to the Kohen) and bring his wife to be tested through the Sotah waters.

Maharal (Gur Aryeh 5, 12) asks two fascinating questions: 1) There are a number of reasons that a person would need the service of a Kohen (e.g. tzoraas); why do we necessarily associate the occurrence of Sotah to not giving the Kohen the priestly gifts? 2) Why does the Torah introduce the laws of Sotah with "if any man's wife goes astray"? Why not just begin "when a married woman goes astray;" why does the Torah introduce the man at all?

After a careful reading of Rashi, one can see how he understands what Chazal are teaching: Rashi doesn't say that the man refuses to give the Kohen the priestly gifts, rather Rashi says that the man withholds the gifts from the Kohen. This is a critical point. Essentially, a landowner has the obligation to distribute the priestly gifts to the Kohen. Yet someone who withholds them is trying to exert influence over the Kohen; to make him come and beg for something that, in reality, he is entitled to receive. Why would someone behave in such a manner?

This is how a person with a controlling personality acts. Making someone come to him to ask for what is rightfully theirs is done to send a clear message of who is in charge. The Torah juxtaposes these two sections to

teach us that they are interrelated. A controlling person doesn't just behave this way in business, he behaves like this in all aspects of his life including his personal life. The reason a woman would go into seclusion, after being warned by her husband not to, is to demonstrate her independence. She is rebelling against his overbearing and controlling personality. In other words, she is telling her husband "you're not the boss of me."

This is also why the Torah begins with "any man's wife goes astray;" the Torah is explaining the root cause of her disloyalty. Even if she never sinned by being intimate with another man, by going into seclusion she is trying to send her husband the message that he is not in control.

Living in Denial

Speak to Bnei Yisroel and say to them, when either man or woman shall separate themselves to vow a vow of a Nazirite, to separate themselves for Hashem... (6, 2)

Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Gemara in Sotah (2a) that makes the well-known comment: "Why is the law of the Nazir juxtaposed with the law of the Sotah? To teach us that anyone who sees a Sotah in her degradation should take a vow of abstinence from wine."

When a woman is suspected of infidelity she is tested with the Sotah waters. If she is indeed guilty, she will die a gruesome death. Chazal teach us that a witness to that death should take a vow of Nezirus to prevent himself from succumbing to the temptation for immorality as the Sotah did. Rashi explains that excessive drinking is a common cause of licentiousness, and the Nazir's vow to abstain from wine will thus help a person avoid committing an act of immorality.

Nevertheless, it is hard to understand how a vow of Nezirus can have a greater impact than the sight of the Sotah's death itself. Surely, witnessing such a shocking sight should itself be enough to deter anyone from committing the same sin. Moreover, even if it is not sufficient, it is difficult to imagine that becoming a Nazir will suffice in its place. A Nazir's vow generally takes effect only for thirty days; after that time, the Nazir is freed of the restrictions associated with his vow, including the prohibition of drinking wine. Chazal's intention is obviously that a person who witnesses a Sotah's death should do something to reinforce his own standards of morality on a permanent basis. How can this be accomplished by eschewing wine for only thirty days?

Chazal give us a fascinating insight into human nature: Consider the case of a person who is speeding along a highway when he suddenly comes to the scene of an accident. Traffic slows long enough for him to take in a chilling sight: A car is overturned, there are emergency vehicles with flashing lights, and there is the unmistakable shape of a human body lying motionless on a stretcher at the scene of the crash. For just a moment, the driver passing by will be shaken by what he has just observed. Yet it invariably takes less than a minute for a person to lapse back into all his normal (less than cautious) driving habits even after witnessing such a shocking sight. Why does the effect of the shock wear off so quickly?

The mind makes it very difficult for a person to handle seeing a disaster. The possibility that the same catastrophic event might happen to him is so daunting that the mind will automatically leap into action, conjuring up one rationalization after another to preserve the person's sense of security. Deep down, every person wishes to believe that he is immune to whatever disaster he has seen befall someone else, and the mind will stop at nothing to ward off any feelings of vulnerability. The driver passing the scene of a deadly accident will reason that the other car was made to inferior safety standards, or that the driver was drunk or not wearing a seat belt – anything that he can identify as a risk factor that does not pertain to him. Within seconds of witnessing the disaster, he will have a dozen reasons to believe that whatever happened to the other person has no bearing on him.

For the same reason, a person who witnesses the shocking death of a Sotah is actually unlikely to improve himself as a result. He is far more likely to begin to rationalize away what he witnessed. He will come up with any number of reasons to assume that the Sotah's punishment has no bearing on

his life. Because of this very human tendency, Chazal teach us, the Torah calls for such a person to take a vow of Nezirus. Obviously becoming a Nazir is not intended to serve as a permanent cure for the drive for licentiousness. Rather, the act of taking a vow of Nezirus is a way for a person to acknowledge and internalize the fact that he, too, is susceptible to the sinful drives that caused the Sotah's demise. True, the 30 days of abstinence from wine will not shield a person from immorality for a lifetime, but those days will drive home the message that the Sotah's punishment is indeed relevant to him. Once he accepts that, the very experience of seeing the Sotah's death itself can then have a lifelong impact on him.

Did You Know...

This week's parsha, Parshas Naso, is the longest parsha in the Torah, containing 176 pesukim. Remarkably, we find this exact number in two other places: The longest chapter in Tehillim, Chapter 119, also has 176 pesukim, and the longest Gemara, Bava Basra, goes until page 176! Obviously this can't be a mere coincidence, so what's special about the number 176?

Chapter 119 of Tehillim has 176 verses because it follows a pattern of the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and each letter is used to begin eight pesukim. That is, $22 \times 8 = 176$.

This of course raises the question: What is the significance of the numbers twenty-two and of eight?

Twenty-two is a number of completeness. We know that Hashem created the world through speech. Therefore, the very letters that make up the language incorporate every aspect of the physical world. Rashi in Parshas Vayakhel explains that the Mishkan was created by Betzalel because he knew the secret of combining the letters used in creation.

As for the number eight: We know that seven represents the "natural realm" (seven days of the week), but eight represents completeness beyond nature, what mankind contributes to the physical world (see Maharal Tiferes Yisroel). That is why the bris milah is held on the eighth day of a boy's life. This also explains why Hashem first commanded Avraham to perform his bris milah with the words, "Walk before Me and be complete" (Bereishis 17:1).

The product of two "complete" numbers, twenty-two and eight, is therefore the ultimate completeness. That's why 176 is used to demonstrate the amazing perfection of the Torah.

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Between the Lines - Fascinating Mystical Insights

By Rabbi Abba Wagensberg

The Triple Pattern

Naso (Numbers 4:21-7:89)

by Rabbi Abba Wagensberg

The Triple Pattern

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

One of the highlights of Parshat Naso is the Priestly Blessing. The text of this blessing, which the Kohanim bestow upon the Jewish people, concludes, "May God turn His face to you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26).

Our Sages speak very highly of the quality of peace. For example, we find the statement in the Midrash (Bamidbar Raba 11:7) in the name of R' Shimon bar Chalafta, "Great is peace, for there is no vessel that can receive blessing other than peace." The Midrash brings a proof to this idea from the verse (Psalms 29:11), "God will bless His nation with peace."

We can understand this idea more deeply by taking a closer look at the phrase, "His nation." The Jewish people are composed of three categories of people: Priests (Kohanim), Levites (Leviim), and Israelites (Yisraelim). The Hebrew acronym of the words "Kohanim," "Leviim," and "Yisraelim" spells the word kli, which means "vessel." Once we understand that the Jewish people themselves are a vessel, we can gain a more profound insight into the

Midrash's statement. The vessel of the Jewish people can receive blessing only when there is peace!

We can offer four primary pieces of advice for how to achieve peace with others:

Make sure that all our efforts are for God's sake. If we do everything for the honor of God, and not for the sake of boosting our own ego, we can view one another as part of the same team, pooling all of our different strengths and talents for a common goal.

Train ourselves to see only the good in others. Instead of being threatened or challenged by others' differences, view the differences as positive qualities. The Peleh Yoetz suggests that we should focus on the reward we receive for making peace, as an incentive to pursue it. He gives a striking example.

Imagine a person approaches you and asks you to make peace with someone you can't stand. Your initial reaction is to immediately turn down the offer. Then the person asks, "What if I give you \$50? Do you think you could try? How about \$100? Or \$1,000? If I give you \$100,000, could you do it? How about two million dollars?" There is a point at which every person would give in and decide it was worth the effort to make peace.

According to the Peleh Yoetz, the reward we get in the World to Come for making peace far outweighs any financial bonus this world can offer. This knowledge should be an incentive to us to make peace.

Making peace sometimes requires us to compromise or to give in. We can do this only if we cultivate our humility and learn to be satisfied with the minimum.

* * *

THREE LEVITE FAMILIES

Although these four points are important, we can also suggest another approach in understanding God's expectation of us when it comes to peace.

The beginning of this week's Torah portion focuses on the tribe of Levi, which is composed of three main families: Kehat, Gershon, and Merari. Based on the Shem MiShmuel and the Netivot Shalom, we can understand these three families as representing three spiritual levels.

The family of Kehat represents the highest, most righteous level. Their role is to carry the Holy Ark (Rashi on Numbers 4:4) - the highest component of the Tabernacle. The importance of this task underscores their lofty spiritual level.

The family of Gershon represents the middle level. They carry the curtain that divides the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Sanctuary (Numbers 4:25). One side of the curtain is close to the intense sanctity of the Holy of Holies, while the other side is not. We could suggest that this curtain hints to the spiritual level of an average person, who fluctuates between moments of intense devotion and moments of feeling less connected to the Divine.

The family of Merari represents the lowest level. They carry the beams and pillars of the Sanctuary (Numbers 4:31), the weight of which can be burdensome. This physical weight represents the heaviness of the lowest spiritual level.

The tribe of Levi is charged with teaching the Jewish people how to attach themselves to the Divine (see Rambam, "Shmita V'Yovel," 13:12-13). The three main families in this tribe show us that we are required to serve God not only when we are on a spiritual high, like the most righteous people, and not only when we feel average, but even when we feel the lowest and furthest away from God. Regardless of the emotional state in which we find ourselves, we must commit ourselves to doing God's will with a positive attitude.

This idea will offer us a new perspective on God's expectation of peace. In addition to being at peace with others, we must learn to be at peace with ourselves - whatever level we are functioning on. When we are frustrated with ourselves, it is much more likely that we will lash out at others. Being at peace with ourselves, however, usually leads to our being at peace with others. If we can learn from the tribe of Levi how to maintain our inner equilibrium, we have a much better chance at establishing peace with others as well.

May we be blessed to cultivate within ourselves the four primary qualities

that lead to peace: acting only for God's sake; seeing the good in others; focusing on the rewards earned through this behavior; and being humble and satisfied with the minimum, which will enable us to compromise. Most important, may we learn to be at peace with ourselves. May we recognize the worth of our service, even at its lowest point, and realize that, even then, we have the potential to function at the highest level.

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Rav Kook Torah

Naso: Divine Favoritism?

Chanan Morrison

The Complaint of the Angels

The last blessing of Birkat Kohanim, the priestly benediction, is a request that God should be lenient when judging us:

”יְשֹׁא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ — May God lift His countenance to you” (Num. 6:26).

“Lifting one’s face” is a Hebrew idiom for showing special consideration, especially by a judge. Is it fair that the Jewish people should be judged leniently, more than other nations?

In fact, the Talmud (Berachot 20b) relates that the angels raised this very question.

“The ministering angels asked the Holy One, ‘Master of the Universe, it is written in Your Torah (Deut. 10:17) that You do not show favor or take bribes. And yet, You show Israel special consideration, as it is written, ‘May God lift His countenance to you!’

God replied to them, ‘How can I not favor Israel? For I commanded them, ‘When you eat and are satisfied, you must bless the Lord, your God’ (Deut. 8:10), and they are punctilious [to say grace] over an olive-sized piece of bread [even though they are not satiated].”

What is the significance of this stringency that the Jewish people accepted upon themselves, to recite the grace after meals (Birkat Hamazon) even for a small piece of bread? Why should this earn them special treatment?

When is Leniency Appropriate?

While leniency sounds like a good thing, this is not necessarily the case. We are punished for wrongdoings, not out of Divine retribution or revenge, but in order to direct us to the proper path. Even if an individual is bursting with merits and good deeds, he will not gain from a reprieve, even for the slightest of errors. Without the appropriate measure of Divine justice, we do not learn to mend our ways and strive towards ever-greater perfection.

There is, however, a situation when the absence of Divine justice will not have an adverse effect. This case involves an individual who will continue to strive towards self-improvement even without the Divine wake-up call to introspection and moral accounting.

Such a person must have acquired the quality of hakarat ha-tov, sincere appreciation. When applied to God and His kindness, this trait is the height of morality. Our sense of gratitude is intensified when we feel that we are the recipient of undeserved kindness and compassion. And the only way we can return this favor is through spiritual and ethical growth, thus fulfilling God’s will.

The appreciative individual recognizes that God’s generosity is not commensurate to his actions. Not only will this Divine leniency not cause him to become lax in his conduct, but it will inspire him to work even harder to improve himself, since he has an additional reason to be appreciative of God’s ways.

Now we can understand God’s response to the angels. The explanation that the Jewish people deserve special consideration because they recite blessings even on olive-sized pieces of bread is not just some form of Divine tit-for-tat. Rather, their behavior is indicative of a refined appreciation of God’s kindness for their physical sustenance, even keener than that which the Torah requires.

The Appreciation Test

There is an additional factor at play here. When misdeeds go unpunished, two contradictory processes occur. On the one hand, undeserved leniency bolsters our feelings of gratitude. On the other hand, we may be ensnared by a sense that our actions are not accounted for — so why bother laboring over ethical improvement and spiritual growth?

Which feeling will prevail? An individual blessed with strong character traits will think: I am indebted to God’s compassion; therefore, I must redouble my efforts to improve. A weaker person, on the other hand, will be misled by the mistaken sense that God does not fully monitor our actions.

How can we determine which way of thinking will triumph? Here is a simple test. If a person recognizes God’s kindness even when all of his needs have not been met, this is a sure sign that he is blessed with a robust trait of appreciation. Such a person has a correct understanding of God’s relationship to His creations, and recognizes that God does everything for the good. In this case, we can be assured that, in a conflict between these two feelings — appreciation for God’s leniency, and a deluded impression of limited Divine providence — the true feeling of appreciation will prevail. Thus, one feels the need to express gratitude for even a small measure — even an olive-sized piece of bread — despite the fact that he is still hungry and his needs have not been fully met; it is clear that his natural sense of appreciation is strong and healthy. The Jewish people, who recite Birkat Hamazon even when they are not satiated, demonstrate their innate mindset of hakarat ha-tov, and will always interpret God’s leniency and special consideration in the correct way.

(Gold from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Ein Eyah vol. I, pp. 102-103.)

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Uniformity and Uniqueness

Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb

One of the interesting paradoxes of human life is our tendency to copy one another and to try to “fit in” with friends and acquaintances, while simultaneously trying to be distinct from others, and to be our “own person.” The pressures of conformity are very strong in all human societies. People who are different are often treated as outcasts. And each of us determines our behavior with an eye toward others’ opinions. We want to be part of the group, part of the crowd.

The pressures that human groups, large and small, exert upon each of us results, not only in conformity, but in uniformity. Groups demand that all members act in accordance with their norms and its standards. Behavior which breaks the mold of uniformity is seen as threatening, even bizarre. And yet, we all feel the need to assert our uniqueness, our own precious individuality.

One of my personal favorite cartoons shows a crowd of penguins, looking identical, all black and white. In the center of the horde is one penguin with a barely noticeable red bow tie. The cartoon’s caption has that penguin saying, “I got to be me”.

Obviously, conformity is necessary for a society to function efficiently, and to maintain its equilibrium. Individual self-expression is also necessary, to introduce new coping methods into the social process.

There are dangers to both tendencies, that which demands uniformity, and that which allows for the individual’s urge for autonomy and self-assertion. Countless times in history, we have witnessed terrible dangers intrinsic to crowd behavior. We have seen the negative effects of cults, which encourage blind conformity to group norms. We have seen entire nations unquestioningly following cruel calls for the genocide of targeted populations.

We have seen the urge to be different result in equally harmful and dangerous behavior. Individuals who just want to be noticed will resort to

serial murders of innocents, or to venting their rage by spraying a school campus with bullets. Self-expression carried to the extreme. Apparently, there are good sides and bad sides to both social conformity and individualistic behavior. The secret lies in the balance between the two. In the Torah portion Naso, which is read in the synagogue this week, even the casual reader will be troubled by the repetitive description of the offerings of the twelve tribal princes. Each of them contributes an absolutely identical set of celebratory gifts to the tabernacle. The uniformity of the twelve sets of gifts is absolute. It seems as if each of the twelve princes strove to totally conform to the others, and none dared defy the standards of the rest of the group. An example of conformity, if there ever was one. The congregants in the synagogue who hear the Torah reader repetitively chant the monotonous lists of contributions often feel bored and ask, "Why the repetition, and why the uniformity?"

Here, the rabbis of the Midrash help us out. They take a different, deeper, and more perceptive view. Motivated by the same discomfort as today's Torah listener, they exclaim, "Their gifts are all identical, but each has his own unique intention."

Although the gifts all shared common explicit language, the thoughts and emotions behind each gift differed from prince to prince. Each lent a different kavanah, a distinct unspoken meaning, to his gifts. And that meaning was based upon the unique nature of each prince and the tribe he represented. The gifts were all the same; the underlying intentions were as different as one can imagine. The lyrics were identical; the melody, different. The rabbis speculate at some length as to the nature of these implicit intentions. They wonder as to how the prince of the tribe of Reuben might have expressed his tribe's uniqueness in contradistinction to the prince of the tribe of Simon, and Levi, and Judah, and so forth.

All human societies contain the tension between the pressure to conform and the inner urge to be distinctive. Religious societies contain that tension all the more. Judaism, for example, requires conformity to an elaborate set of behavioral guidelines. The casual observer of a group of Jews at prayer, or at the Passover Seder table, or circling the bimah with their palm fronds during the holiday of Succoth, will see a group of people who seem to be obsessively imitating each other.

But the observer who is familiar with the inner lives of those who comprise that group of Jews will realize that each person's prayer is different and reflective of his or her unique experience. Everyone around the Seder table is responding to different religious memories, and each of those who are circling the bimah is doing so with a very distinctive and unique set of religious emotions.

If there is a lesson to be gained from this perspective of our Parsha, it is this: Religious behavior calls for a great deal of uniformity, but also insists that each individual draw from his or her own wellspring of inspiration.

We all must be the same, yet we all must be different. This paradox is true of all human societies. It is especially true of the society of Jews.

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subject: Birkas Kohanim

Birkas Kohanim

By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff

Question #1: Why is this bracha different?

"Why is the bracha for duchening so different from all the other brochos we recite before we perform mitzvos?"

Question #2: Hoarse kohein

"If a kohein is suffering from laryngitis, how does he fulfill the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim?"

Question #3: The chazzan duchening

"If the chazzan is a kohein, may he duchen?"

Answer:

I have written other articles about the mitzvah of duchening; this article will

deal with a few specific issues not mentioned in the other articles.

First of all, I should explain the various names of this beautiful mitzvah. Ashkenazim usually colloquially refer to the mitzvah as duchening. The word "duchen" means a platform, and refers to the raised area in front of the aron kodesh on which the kohanim traditionally stand when they recite these blessings. However, in many shullen today, there is no platform in front of the aron kodesh, and, even when there is, in many shullen there are more kohanim than there is room for them on the duchen. In all these instances, the mitzvah is performed with the kohanim standing on the floor alongside the wall of the shul that has the aron kodesh, facing the people.

There are at least two other ways of referring to this mitzvah. One way of referring to the mitzvah is "Birkas Kohanim," which is very descriptive of the mitzvah. I will use this term throughout this article, because it avoids confusion.

Nesi'as kapayim

The Mishnah and the Shulchan Aruch call this mitzvah by yet a third term, nesi'as kapayim, which means literally "raising the palms," a description of the position in which the kohanim hold their hands while reciting these blessings. According to accepted halacha, the kohanim raise their hands to shoulder level, and each kohein holds his hands together. (There are some mekubalim who raise their hands directly overhead while reciting the Birkas Kohanim [Divrei Shalom 128:2]. However, this is a very uncommon practice.) Based on a midrash, the Tur rules that, while he recites the Birkas Kohanim, the kohein should hold his hands in a way that there are five spaces between his fingers. This is done by pressing, on each hand, the index finger to the middle finger and the small finger to the ring finger. This creates two openings -- one between the middle finger and the ring finger on each hand. Another two are created between the index finger and thumb on each hand. The fifth opening is between the thumbs. There are various ways for a kohein to position his fingers such that he has a space between his thumbs. I know of several different methods, and I have never found an authoritative source that states that one way is preferable over any other. Most kohanim, myself included, follow the way that they were taught by their father.

An unusual bracha:

Immediately prior to beginning Birkas Kohanim bracha, the kohanim recite a birkas hamitzvah, as we do prior to performing most mitzvos. The text of the bracha is: Boruch Attah Hashem Elokeinu Melech ha'olam asher kideshanu bikedushaso shel Aharon, ve'tzivanu levareich es amo Yisroel be'avahavah. "Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who sanctified us with the sanctity of Aharon, and commanded us to bless His people, Yisroel, with love."

Two aspects of this bracha are different from the standard structure of brochos that we recite prior to fulfilling mitzvos. The first change is that, instead of the usual text that we say, asher kideshanu bemitzvosav ve'tzivanu, "Who sanctified us with His mitzvos and commanded us," the kohanim leave out the reference to "His mitzvos" and instead say "Who sanctified us with the sanctity of Aharon." The second change is that the kohanim not only describe the mitzvah that they are performing -- that Hashem "commanded us to bless his people Yisroel" --but they add a qualitative description, "with love."

The fact that the kohanim make reference to Aharon's sanctity is, itself, not unusual. It is simply atypical for us to recite or hear this bracha since, unfortunately in our contemporary world, we have no other mitzvos for which we use this text. However, when we are again all tehorim and when we have a Beis Hamikdash, every time a kohein performs a mitzvah that only a kohein can perform, such as eating terumah, korbanos or challah, donning the bigdei kehunah in the Beis Hamikdash (Artzos Hachayim, Eretz Yehudah 18:1, page 81b), or performing the mitzvos of offering korbanos, he recites a bracha that includes this reference. Unfortunately, since we are all tamei and we have no Beis Hamikdash, a kohein cannot perform these mitzvos today, and therefore we do not recite this bracha text at any other time.

“With love”

The other detail in this bracha that is highly unusual is the statement that the mitzvah is performed be’ahavah, “with love.” No other mitzvah includes this detail in its bracha, and, in general, the brochos recited performing mitzvos do not include details about how the mitzvos are performed. For example, the bracha prior to kindling the Shabbos or Chanukah lights says simply lehadlik neir shel Shabbos or lehadlik neir shel Chanukah, and does not add that we do so “with wicks and oil.” Similarly, note that the bracha recited before we pick up and shake the lulav and esrog does not even mention the esrog, aravos and hadasim, and says, simply, al netilas lulav. Again, the bracha for washing our hands is simply al netilas yadayim without mentioning any of the important details of the mitzvah. Yet, the bracha recited prior to Birkas Kohanim includes the word be’ahavah, with love. Why is this so?

Let us examine the original passage of the Gemara (Sotah 39a) that teaches us about the text of this bracha: “The disciples of Rabbi Elazar ben Shammai (who was a kohein) asked him, ‘Because of what practices of yours did you merit longevity?’ He answered them, ‘I never used a shul as a shortcut, I never stepped over the heads of the holy nation (Rashi explains that this means that when people were sitting on the floor in the Beis Hamedrash, as was common in his day, he never walked over them, but either arrived before everyone else did, or else he sat outside) and I never recited the nesi’as kapayim without first reciting a bracha.”

The Gemara then asks, “What bracha is recited prior to Birkas Kohanim? Answered Rabbi Zeira, quoting Rav Chisda, asher kideshanu bikedushaso shel Aharon, ve’tzivanu levareich es amo Yisroel be’ahavah.”

Thus, we see that the text that we recite prior to Birkas Kohanim is exactly the way the Gemara records it, and that the word “be’ahavah” is part of the original text. Why is this required?

The Be’er Sheva, a European gadol of the late 16th-early 17th century, asks this question. To quote him (in his commentary, Sotah 39a): “Where is it mentioned or even hinted in the Torah that the kohein must fulfill this mitzvah ‘with love’? The answer is that when the Torah commanded the kohanim concerning this mitzvah, it says Emor lahem, ‘Recite this blessing to the Jewish people,’ spelling the word emor with a vov, the full spelling of the word, when it is usually spelled without a vov. Both the Midrash Tanchuma and the Midrash Rabbah explain that there is an important reason why this word is spelled ‘full.’ ‘The Holy One, blessed is He, said to the kohanim that they should bless the Jewish people not because they are ordered to do so, and they want to complete the minimum requirement of that “order,” as if it were “forced labor” and therefore they say it swiftly. On the contrary, they should bless the Jews with much focus and the desire that the brochos all be effective – with full love and full heart.”

We see from this Gemara that this aspect of the mitzvah, that the kohanim bless the people because they want to and not because they are required to, was so important to Chazal that they included an allusion to this in the text of the bracha, something that is never done elsewhere!

Brochos cause longevity

There are several puzzling questions germane to this small passage of Gemara that we quoted above. What was unique about Rabbi Elazar’s three practices that he singled them out as being the spiritual causes of his longevity? The commentaries explain that each of these three acts were personal chumros that Rabbi Elazar, himself one of the last talmidim of Rabbi Akiva and a rebbe of Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, practiced (Keren Orah, Meromei Sadeh et al). Since our topic is Birkas Kohanim, we will address only that practice: What was unique about Rabbi Elazar’s practice of reciting a bracha before performing the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim? Didn’t every kohein do the same? And, if so, why did the other kohanim not achieve the longevity that he did?

The Keren Orah commentary notes that the Gemara quotes the amora, Rav Zeira, as the source for the bracha on Birkas Kohanim, implying that the bracha on Birkas Kohanim was not standardized until his time, and he lived well over a hundred years after Rabbi Elazar’s passing. This implies that a

bracha on this mitzvah was not necessarily recited during the era of the tanna’im and early amora’im. The Keren Orah suggests the reason for this was because Birkas Kohanim itself is a blessing, and we do not recite a bracha prior to reciting birkas hamazon or birkas haTorah, even though they themselves are mitzvos. Notwithstanding this consideration, Rabbi Elazar was so enthusiastic about blessing the people that he insisted on reciting a bracha before performing Birkas Kohanim. This strong desire to bless people was rewarded by his having many extra years to continue blessing them (Maharal).

Notwithstanding that the mitzvah is such a beautiful one, technically, the kohein is required to recite the Birkas Kohanim only when he is asked to do so, during the repetition of the shemoneh esrei. We will see shortly what this means practically.

Hoarse kohein

At this point, let us examine the second of our opening questions: “If a kohein is suffering from laryngitis, how does he fulfill the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim?”

Let us examine this question thoroughly, starting from its sources in the Gemara: “One beraisa teaches: Koh sevarchu (‘this is how you should bless’): face to face... therefore the posuk says Emor lahem (say to them), as a person talks to his friend. Another beraisa teaches: Koh sevarchu, in a loud voice. Perhaps it means that the bracha should be said quietly, therefore the posuk says Emor lahem, as a person talks to his friend” (Sotah 38a).

This derives from the words of the posuk Koh sevarchu and Emor lahem two different laws. The first is that the audience receiving the kohanim’s bracha should be facing them during the Birkas Kohanim. (In error, some people turn around while the kohanim recite Birkas Kohanim, in order to make sure that they do not look at the kohanim’s hands. It is correct that they should not look at the hands of the kohanim who are duchening, but they can look down to avoid this problem, and, anyway, most kohanim cover their hands with their talis while duchening.)

The second law derived from these pesukim is that the kohein should recite the Birkas Kohanim loudly enough so that the people can hear him. Although there are kohanim who shout the words of the Birkas Kohanim, the continuation of the Gemara clearly explains that be’kol ram, in a loud voice, means simply loud enough for the people to hear the kohein. However, someone whose voice is so hoarse that people cannot hear him is not permitted to recite Birkas Kohanim and should leave the sanctuary part of the shul before the chazzan recites the word retzei in his repetition of shemoneh esrei (Mishnah Berurah 128:53).

Why retzei?

Why should the kohein leave the shul before retzei?

Some mitzvos aseh, such as donning tefillin daily, making kiddush, or hearing shofar, are inherent requirements. There isn’t any way to avoid being obligated to fulfill these mitzvos. On the other hand, there are mitzvos whose requirement is dependent on circumstances. For example, someone who does not live in a house is not obligated to fulfill the mitzvah of mezuzah. Living in a house, which most of us do, creates the obligation to install a mezuzah on its door posts. Someone who lives in a house and fails to place a mezuzah on the required doorposts violates a mitzvas aseh.

Similarly, the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim is not an inherent requirement for the kohein. However, when someone asks the kohein or implies to him that he should perform the Birkas Kohanim, the kohein is now required to do so, and, should he fail to, he will violate a mitzvas aseh.

The Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 128:2) rules that a kohein who remains in shul is required to recite Birkas Kohanim if (1) he hears the chazzan say the word kohanim, (2) someone tells him to ascend the duchen or (3) someone tells him to wash his hands (in preparation for the Birkas Kohanim). Any of these three actions summon the kohanim to perform the mitzvah, and that is why they create a requirement on the kohein. A kohein for whom it is difficult to raise his arms to recite the Birkas Kohanim should exit the shul before the chazzan says the word kohanim (see Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim 128:4 and Mishnah Berurah). The Magen Avraham and the

Elyah Rabbah conclude that it is preferred if he exits before the chazzan begins the word retzei. The Shulchan Aruch mentions that the custom is for any kohein who is not reciting Birkas Kohanim to remain outside until the Birkas Kohanim is completed.

Washing hands

The Shulchan Aruch we just quoted rules that telling a kohein to wash his hands creates the same obligation to recite Birkas Kohanim as directly summoning him to recite the Birkas Kohanim. Why is that so?

This is because the Gemara rules that “any kohein who did not wash his hands should not perform nesi’as kapayim.” The Rambam (Hilchos Tefillah Uvirkas Kohanim 15:5) rules that the washing before Birkas Kohanim is similar to what the kohanim do prior to performing the service in the Beis Hamikdash. For this reason, he rules that their hands should be washed until their wrists. We rule that this is done even on Yom Kippur, notwithstanding that, otherwise, we are not permitted to wash the entire hand on Yom Kippur (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 128:6). Several acharonim rule that, since Birkas Kohanim is a form of avodah, washing before performing this mitzvah includes other requirements, such as washing with a cup, with clear water, and with at least a revi’is (about three ounces) of water (see Magen Avraham, Yeshuos Yaakov, Shulchan Shelomoh and Mishnah Berurah). In many shullen, a sink is installed near the duchen, so that the kohanim can wash immediately before Birkas Kohanim. Others have a practice that water and a basin are brought to the front of the shul for this purpose. These customs have a source in rishonim and poskim and should definitely be encouraged. Tosafos (Sotah 39a s.v. Kol) concludes that the kohein should wash his hands immediately before ascending the duchen. He rules that the kohein should wash his hands within twenty-two amos, a distance of less than forty feet, of the duchen. The Magen Avrohom (128:9) rules according to this Tosafos, and adds that, according to Tosafos, since the kohanim wash their hands before retzei, the chazzan should recite the bracha of retzei rapidly. In his opinion, the time that transpires after the kohein washes his hands should be less time than it takes to walk twenty-two amos, and, therefore, retzei should be recited as quickly as possible. The Biur Halacha (128:6 s.v. Chozrim) adds that the kohanim should not converse between washing their hands and reciting Birkas Kohanim, because this also constitutes a hefsek.

The chazzan duchening

At this point, let us examine the third of our opening questions: “If the chazzan is a kohein, may he duchen?”

This question is the subject of a dispute between the Shulchan Aruch and the Pri Chodosh. According to the Shulchan Aruch, if the chazzan is a kohein, he should not recite Birkas Kohanim, unless he is the only kohein. The reason he should not recite Birkas Kohanim is out of concern that he might get confused and not remember the continuation of the davening. The Pri Chodosh disagrees, concluding that this was a concern only when the chazzan led the services from memory, which, although very common in earlier era, is today quite uncommon. If the kohein-chazzan is using a siddur, such that Birkas Kohanim will not confuse him from continuing the davening correctly, he can recite Birkas Kohanim.

In chutz la’aretz, the accepted practice in this halacha follows the Shulchan Aruch, whereas in Eretz Yisroel, customs vary in different locales. In Yerushalayim and most other places, the accepted practice follows the Pri Chodosh, and the chazzan performs Birkas Kohanim.

When the chazzan does recite Birkas Kohanim, he turns around to face the people, recites Birkas Kohanim, and then turns back to complete the repetition of the shemoneh esrei. He is even permitted to walk to the front of the shul from his place in order to recite Birkas Kohanim should he be leading the services from the middle of the shul rather than the front.

Conclusion

As a kohein myself, I find duchening to be one of the most beautiful mitzvos. We are indeed so fortunate to have a commandment to bless our fellow Jews, the children of Our Creator. All the more so, the nusach of the bracha is to bless His nation Israel with love. The blessings of a kohein must flow from a

heart full of love for the Jews that he is privileged to bless.

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Weekly Parsha NASSO 5781

Rabbi Wein’s Weekly Blog

The Torah reading of this week continues with the count of the different families within the tribe of Levi. We are aware that this tribe has been chosen for public service in the Temple and, generally, on behalf of the Jewish people. They do not own land, and their financial support is based upon the tithe that the Jewish people contributed from their produce.

The Levites serve at special functions in the Temple service and are worthy guardians who maintain the physical aspects of the Temple, as well as the talented artists who provided song and melody during the Temple services. The Torah guaranteed that there would be a special cadre within the general Jewish public that would be devoted to the spiritual needs of the people, with responsibilities in caring for the Temple. The Levites also provided the necessary atmosphere through song and melody that would provide impetus for the spiritual experience when visiting the Temple in Jerusalem and participating in its services. Apparently, it is necessary to have such an elite group function amongst the public, for the great masses of Israel to be directed towards noble goals, high ideals and, in their own way, the service of heaven and the Jewish people. The Levites were a living spiritual force that taught the people and inspired the spiritual goals and the fulfillment of the mission entrusted to Israel at Mount Sinai. In this three-family group, the Levites were the vanguard of Jewish spirituality and defined the purpose of the Jewish people and of the Temple service in Jerusalem.

The problem with being a special elite group within a general larger population is that the group often becomes discouraged when it fails to see the results that are desired taking hold in the general population. There is, therefore, a tendency amongst elitist groups and institutions to separate themselves from the population that they are to serve, and eventually to look askance, and even in disappointment, upon the masses that somehow fall below the expectations set for it by this elitist group. We then have a situation where the elitist group either gives up on its mission or withdraws in splendid isolation into its own world and institutions. The Torah created 48 cities for the Levites to be scattered throughout the land of Israel, where they would intersperse with the population and become part of the general makeup of the country. By so doing, they served as role models and examples. Through instruction they would guide the Jewish people in becoming a holy nation that would continually aspire for spiritual greatness and a more just society. The Levites were meant not only to be teachers, but moral examples of the type of Jew that the Torah envisioned. The Levites were not to be hermits living in their own splendid isolation in faraway caves, divorced from the lives and problems of the average worker and member of Jewish society. Rather, they were to be the living leaders and examples of a society steeped in Torah, in the service of God and Israel.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein