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Halachos of Birkas Kohanim – 4

Parshas Korach 5785

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Details of the Mitzva Prior to Birkas Kohanim How to Go Up to the Front

1. When the Kohanim go up to the front, they face the aron, which is on the east side, and their backs are toward the tzibbur (ש"ע ס"י). For Birkas Kohanim itself, i.e. "יברך וכו'", they face the tzibbur and the tzibbur faces them, as the posuk says, "אמור להם"—like a person speaking to his friend. This halacha that they must face each other is essential and if it is missing they are not yotzei even b'dieved (מ"ב סק"ג; see Issue 354, par. 28/29).
2. **Standing behind the Kohanim.** To receive the bracha, one must face the Kohanim's faces, not their backs. Thus, when the Kohanim are at the front facing the tzibbur, people standing behind the Kohanim, e.g., those all the way at the front wall, are not included in the bracha (ש"ע ס"י). They should leave their spots and stand in front of the Kohanim, or at least directly to their sides in a straight line.
3. However, the tzibbur does not need to stand directly in front of the Kohanim. They are included in the bracha even if they are off to the sides, as long as they are to the sides of where the Kohanim are standing and level with them or in front of them (ש"ע שם ומ"ב שם).
4. **Turn around mid-bracha.** Since there is a machlokes haposkim whether the Kohanim should say the bracha facing the aron or facing the tzibbur, the minhag is to satisfy both opinions. They start saying "ברוך וכו' אשר קדשנו בקדושתו של אהרן" still facing the aron; then they turn to face the tzibbur and continue the nusach of the bracha, saying "וצונו לברך את עמו ישראל באהבה" facing the tzibbur (ש"ע ס"א, מ"ב סק"מ, ברכי יוסף סק"ט, קצושיע ס"ק סק"ח).
5. **Turn to the right.** When the Kohanim turn to face the tzibbur, they should turn to their right clockwise, i.e., when they are standing facing east, they should turn to the south and then the west. This is because all turns a person makes should be to the right (ש"ע ב"י, סי"ז). Similarly, when the Kohanim turn back to the aron after Birkas Kohanim, they should turn to their right, i.e., first to the north and then to the east. [This is also what one should do during Kabbolas Shabbos when he turns around to say "בואי ושלום"—always turn to the right clockwise, including when turning back around.]

Minhag to Cover Oneself with the Tallis

Distraction [היסח הדעת]

6. **Not to get distracted.** The Kohanim may not lose focus of the bracha during Birkas Kohanim. Thus, they may not look around; their faces should be downward, as if standing in Shemoneh Esrei (ש"ע ס"א). Similarly, the tzibbur getting the bracha must have kavana during the bracha. Thus, they should not look at the Kohanim's faces or hands, and certainly not somewhere else. They should just stand and focus on the bracha (מ"ב סק"ח).

Kohanim

7. **Covering their faces.** The minhag is for the Kohanim to cover their faces with a tallis during Birkas Kohanim to make it easier not to get distracted (ש"ע ורמ"א סכ"ג). Additionally, it is because the tzibbur getting the bracha must pay attention to the bracha and not get distracted (above, 6), so the Kohanim cover themselves so that the tzibbur cannot look at them.
8. **Covering their hands.** In the times of the Beis HaMikdash, when the Kohanim would use the Shem HaMeforash in the bracha, it was assur to even glance at the Kohanim because the Shechina rested on their hands. Nowadays, though, that they do not use the Shem HaMeforash and the Shechina does not rest on them, that is not a reason not to look at the Kohanim. However, the minhag today is not to look at them at all as a remembrance to the Beis HaMikdash (מ"ב סק"ט). Some are also careful about this today for the honor of the Shechina (כ"ה החיים אות ק"מ ע"פ זוה"ק).

9. **Hands out.** Some Kohanim cover their faces with the tallis but leave their hands out of the tallis, as the Kohanim should not look at their own hands either, and this way they cannot see their hands (רמ"א סכ"ג). However, this also might lead a Yisroel to look at the Kohanim's hands. Thus, the minhag is for the tzibbur to also cover their faces with a tallis so as not to look at the Kohanim's hands which are outside their talleisim (מ"ב סק"ט). This is not a chiyuv, though, as some people in the tzibbur do not have talleisim, but it is still a good thing to do (כ"ד אות ד'). Some people bring their children under their talleisim so that they should also not look at the Kohanim during the bracha.
10. **Hands in.** Other Kohanim cover both their faces and their hands with their talleisim. This is the minhag in all places nowadays. The purpose is to prevent the tzibbur from getting distracted by looking at the Kohanim's hands (above, 6) and to remember the Beis HaMikdash (10). However, the Kohanim must be careful not to look at their own hands during Birkas Kohanim so they do not get distracted (מ"ב סק"ט).
11. When the Kohanim's hands are under talleisim, it is not so necessary for the tzibbur to cover themselves with talleisim, as the Kohanim are fully covered. Nonetheless, some still cover themselves with talleisim. This helps prevent them from looking around and getting distracted by other things (כ"ה החיים) (אות קמ"ב, מקור חיים לחות יאיר).
12. **Kohen with blemishes.** A Kohen with blemishes or something unusual on him should not do Birkas Kohanim out of concern people might look at him and lose focus of Birkas Kohanim (ש"ע ס"ל). However, if he covers his face and hands with a tallis, he may do Birkas Kohanim despite the blemishes, as people cannot get distracted by seeing him (ש"ע ס"א).
13. **Kohen without a tallis.** A Kohen without a tallis should not do Birkas Kohanim. Since the accepted minhag is for a Kohen to cover himself in a tallis, it would be unusual for a Kohen to not be covered in a tallis and hence a distraction to the tzibbur. Thus, he should go out of the shul before Rצה so he does not become obligated to do Birkas Kohanim (כ"ה סי' קכ"ח סק"ט).

Details of Calling Out the Pesukim to the Kohanim

Mitzva to Call Out the Pesukim

14. We mentioned at the end of last issue (356, par. 42) that it is a mitzva to call the pesukim out to the Kohanim word by word so that they do not become mixed up, as the posuk says, "אמור להם," teaching that the chazzan tells them what to say (ד"ה לא יענה fulfillment of this halacha).
15. **Not essential.** This calling out of the pesukim is not essential. Thus, if it happens that no one calls them out, the Kohanim can still say Birkas Kohanim (פ"ר סק"ג, מ"ב סי' קכ"ח סק"ט).

From a Siddur

16. The shliach tzibbur or the member of the tzibbur calling out the pesukim to the Kohanim should specifically use a siddur and not do it by heart. This is to avoid getting mixed up in the order of the brachos (מ"ב שם).

Calling Out the Word "יברך"

17. **Not calling it out.** Some poskim hold the shliach tzibbur does not call out the word "יברך" because there is no concern the Kohanim will make a mistake on the first word and there should not be an unnecessary interruption between the bracha and the first word (רמב"ם פ"ד תפילה ה"ד, ב"י). This is the psak of the Shulchan Aruch

(סי"ג), and the Sephardi minhag. [This is similar to the minhag not to call out to the tokeia for the first tekiah since there is no concern he will get mixed up and it is a potential interruption between the bracha and the blowing (עי' שעה"צ סי' תקפ"ה בדעת הגר"א)].

18. **Calling it out.** However, many hold the shliach tzipbur also calls out the word "יברך" to the Kohanim. This is the minhag of Ashkenazim everywhere (רמ"א שם) and mekubalim.

Shliach Tzipbur Answering Amen

19. The shliach tzipbur or whoever is calling out to the Kohanim should not answer Amen after the three pesukim of Birkas Kohanim. This is to prevent him from getting mixed up and not being able to accurately call out the second or third posuk of the bracha (שי"ע סי"ט). This is the Sephardi minhag in all cases.
20. **Calling out from a siddur.** However, if he is calling out the pesukim from a siddur and is confident he will not make a mistake, he may answer Amen after the three pesukim of bracha (מ"ב סקע"א). This is the Ashkenazi minhag.

The Procedure

21. It is important for everything to be properly heard by the tzipbur. Thus, care must be taken not to begin saying a word before the previous word is completely finished. We will cite some issues mentioned by the poskim.
22. **After they finish Amen after the bracha.** The person calling "Kohanim!" should not do so until **most** of the tzipbur has finished saying Amen to the bracha "הטוב שמך ולך נאה להודות" (שי"ע סי"ח ומ"ב) "הטוב שמך ולך נאה להודות" (שי"ע סי"ד).
23. **After he finishes calling "Kohanim!"** Similarly, the Kohanim should not start the bracha of "אשר קדשנו וכו'" until the person finishes calling "Kohanim!" (שי"ע שם).
24. **After they finish Amen after the bracha.** Similarly, the shliach tzipbur should not start saying "יברך" until **most** of the tzipbur has finished saying Amen to the bracha of "אשר קדשנו וכו'" (מ"ב ס"ק סי"ה) "אשר קדשנו וכו'" (above, 17), the Kohanim should not start saying "יברך" until **everyone** from the tzipbur finishes saying Amen (שי"ע שם).
25. In places where the tzipbur says "ברוך הוא וברוך שמו" after the mention of Hashem's name in Birkas Kohanim, the shliach tzipbur should not continue until the tzipbur finishes.
26. **After the shliach tzipbur finishes the word.** Similarly, the Kohanim may not begin saying any word of Birkas Kohanim until the shliach tzipbur completely finishes that word. E.g., they should wait until he is completely finished with the word "וישמרך." This is so that the tzipbur will properly hear the word from the Kohanim without the voice of the shliach tzipbur mixing in (שי"ע ומ"ב ס"ק סי"ז).
27. **After the Kohanim finish.** Similarly, the shliach tzipbur should not continue with the following word until all the Kohanim finish saying the earlier word so that everyone will hear the Kohanim's bracha without any other voice mixed in. Similarly, the tzipbur should not say Amen at the end of each posuk before all the Kohanim finish the entire word (שי"ע שם).
28. **The Kohanim should finish together.** Since the tzipbur should hear every word from the Kohanim, the Kohanim should finish each word together so as not to cause the tzipbur to say Amen or the shliach tzipbur to begin the next word prematurely while a Kohen is drawing out his bracha. [For this reason too, the Kohen who feels the need to inform the whole tzipbur that he is in shul today should also finish with the other Kohanim...]

Kohen Serving as Shliach Tzipbur

Other Kohanim Present

29. **Don't do Birkas Kohanim.** Some poskim hold that if the shliach tzipbur is a Kohen and there are other Kohanim doing Birkas Kohanim, he should not do Birkas Kohanim even if he is davening from a siddur and is confident he can resume Chazoras HaShatz without getting mixed up. He should stand silently while someone else calls out the pesukim to the Kohanim (שי"ע סי"ח ומ"ב סקע"ב). This is the opinion of most poskim (שי"ע הצי"ן ס"ק סי"ד). Care should be taken not to tell the shliach tzipbur during the bracha of רצה to go up for Birkas Kohanim, as then he would have a chiyuv d'oraisa to do it even if he is not confident he can resume Chazoras HaShatz (רמ"א שם).
30. **Do Birkas Kohanim.** However, others hold he can do Birkas Kohanim even if there are other Kohanim present if he is confident he can resume Chazoras HaShatz without getting mixed up (פרי"ח). In a place where this is the minhag, one should not object to those who are meikel (שי"ע הצי"ן שם), and this is the minhag Yerushalayim. The reason is likely because they are accustomed to doing Birkas Kohanim daily so there is no concern they will get mixed up (ד' ומונהגיה ב', ד').

No Other Kohanim

31. Even if the shliach tzipbur is the only Kohen in shul, if he is not confident he can resume Chazoras HaShatz, he should not do Birkas Kohanim. However, if he is confident he can resume Chazoras HaShatz or he is davening from a siddur, he should do Birkas Kohanim so that the mitzva is not skipped (שי"ע שם).
32. **Birkas Kohanim by Kohen-shliach tzipbur.** If the Kohen-shliach tzipbur is doing Birkas Kohanim, after he finishes his own tefilla he should remove his shoes and wash his hands as usual. Then, he should start Chazoras HaShatz. When he reaches רצה, he should move his feet slightly toward the front of the shul and continue saying Chazoras HaShatz where he is until the words "ולך נאה להודות." Then he should go up to the front (שי"ע שם) and someone else should call out the pesukim to him.
33. Some hold a Kohen-shliach tzipbur should stay in his spot in front of the aron and do Birkas Kohanim there; he should not leave his spot to go up to the front. According to the Ashkenazi minhag, he should move his feet slightly and turn to stand facing the tzipbur, giving the bracha from his spot with his face toward the tzipbur's faces (רדב"ז סי' תקי"ז).

Minhagim After Birkas Kohanim

The Minhag to Say "Yasher Koach"

34. The minhag today is to say "yasher koach" to the Kohanim after their bracha. The reason is to show gratitude for the bracha they gave and to give them more strength and encouragement in avodas Hashem (מטה אפרים סי' תקצ"ב סי"א). Another intent is to give the Kohanim a bracha that just as they finished this mitzva, they should be zocheh to do more mitzvos (שי"ת מהר"ם מינץ סי' פ"ה). Even though Kohanim are commanded to bentch Klal Yisroel, one can still show them gratitude for it (ע"פ רש"י שביעית פ"ד משנה ב').

Tefilla for a Dream

Individual in Eretz Yisroel

35. If one had a dream and does not know whether the dream was good or not good and he is in distress over it, he should stand in front of the Kohanim while they go up for Birkas Kohanim and say the tefilla for a dream (שי"ע סי' ק"ל) (גמ' ברכות דף נ"ה ע"ב, שי"ע סי' ק"ל).
36. Someone who did not have a dream the previous night should not say this tefilla on any given day (ביאור'ל שם ד"ה מאן). Thus, we do not say it as a tzipbur because not everyone in the tzipbur had a dream.

In Chutz L'Aretz

37. In Chutz L'Aretz or other places where Birkas Kohanim is only done at Mussaf on Yom Tov, the minhag is for the entire tzipbur—even those who did not have a dream the previous night—to say this tefilla during Birkas Kohanim. The tefilla will be intended for all the dreams between the previous Yom Tov and the current Yom Tov (מ"ב סי' ק"ל סק"א).
38. When it is said as a tzipbur, the minhag is for all the Kohanim to sing one tune after the shliach tzipbur calls out the final word, "שלום," and before they repeat it. While they sing, the tzipbur says the tefilla for a dream. Then, the Kohanim finish the word "שלום," and the tzipbur finishes the tefilla along with them so that they can answer Amen to both simultaneously.
39. The Kohanim should determine among themselves in advance a uniform tune to sing or whether the minhag in that place is to sing in the first place. This way, they will not end up getting mixed up and lose concentration in real time.
40. **Tzipbur in Eretz Yisroel.** In many communities in Eretz Yisroel where Birkas Kohanim is said daily, the minhag is not to say this tefilla as a tzipbur, because if someone had a dream, he can say the tefilla the following day; he does not need to wait until Yom Tov.
41. Nevertheless, some held on to this minhag of saying this tefilla every Yom Tov even in Eretz Yisroel, like the minhag in Chutz L'Aretz. One can include the dreams between last Yom Tov and this Yom Tov that he forgot and did not daven about the next day.

How Many Times Is the Tefilla Said?

42. Some say the tefilla "רבנו של עולם אני שלך וכו'" three times, one tefilla at the end of each of the brachos the Kohanim give, i.e., at "וישמרך," "ותשמינך," and "שלום." They finish the tefilla with the word "ותשמינך" at the end of the first bracha; they finish with "ותחנני" at the end of the bracha that ends with "ויחנך"; and they finish "ותרצני" at the end of the bracha that ends with "ומיב סק"ד). Some explain the three tefillos for dreams as follows: "וישמרך" is for a dream that comes from mazikin; "ויחנך" is for a dream that comes from the Heavenly constellations; and "שלום" is for a dream that comes from malachim (מהר"א ברכות דף נ"ה).
43. Some only say this tefilla once at the end of Birkas Kohanim, when they say "שלום," concluding with the three words "ותשמינך ותחנני" (כך החיים סי' ק"ל בשם האריז"ל, שי"ע הגר"ז) "ותרצני".

Tefilla יהי רצון

44. There is another tefilla printed in the siddurim—"יהי רצון וכו'" (כתבי אריז"ל, ס' שערי ציון שער ג', קיצור השל"ה חולין עניני תפילת שמונה-עשרה). Some say it at the word "שלום" at the end of Birkas Kohanim instead of the third tefilla for a dream, and they only say the tefilla for a dream twice or just once.

