

TWO HANDS

by Rabbi Daniel Travis

Many parents have the custom to bless their children on Shabbos evening with the verses of Birkas Kohanim. While doing so they place both hands on their children's heads. The Zohar explains that using two hands creates a complete connection between parent and child, allowing the full power of the blessing to flow into the child (as cited in Responsa Yaavetz 2,125).

Birkas Kohanim is a mitzva reserved exclusively for kohanim, and a non-kohen who recites it has committed a serious transgression. But doesn't the traditional Friday-night blessing violate this halacha? Are we not performing Birkas Kohanim?

Some authorities suggest that a non-kohen saying Birkas Kohanim is only problematic if he does so with his hands spread out like a kohen. For this reason students of the Vilna Gaon would only rest one hand on their children's heads while blessing them (as cited in Chumash Torah Temima Bamidbar 6,23). This practice never caught on, and most parents continue to bless their children with both hands, though obviously not with the special openings between their fingers.

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