

IN THE WILDERNESS

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Parshios Naso & Shavuot

In the Wilderness

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Today's Learning:
Zevachim 12:3-4
O.C. 151:4-6
Daf Yomi (Bavli): Sotah 14
Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Ketubot 22

This coming week, we will celebrate the holiday of Shavuot, the anniversary of the Giving of the Torah. The Torah reading for Shavuot begins with the verse (Shmot 19:1), *"In the third month from the Exodus of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the Wilderness of Sinai."* Our Sages say, "Why was the Torah given in a wilderness? Because just as a wilderness is ownerless and available to everyone, so the Torah is not the domain of an elite few but rather is available for anyone who wishes to come and partake of it."

R' Shlomo Goldman shlita (the Zhvil-Sanz-Klausenberg Rebbe in Union City, New Jersey) offered another reason why the Torah was given in a wilderness. When one gives a gift, the quality of the wrapping paper and other trappings that are required is inversely proportional to the quality or value of the gift itself. A truly valuable gift speaks for itself. Likewise, the amount of spice that a dish of food needs is inversely proportional to the quality of the food itself. The Torah is the greatest gift; thus, no trappings were needed when the Torah was given and the Torah was given in a wilderness.

R' Goldman added: In one sense, it may be easier for us to re-accept the Torah each Shavuot than it was for our ancestors to accept it the first time. As anyone who has been at a Hachnassat Sefer Torah / the celebration at which a new Torah scroll is brought into shul knows, it is customary to take all of the Torah scrolls out of the aron kodesh and to dance with them to meet the new Sefer Torah. Likewise, we have the ability to "welcome" the Torah on Shavuot through the Torah that we have already studied, whereas our ancestors did not have that ability when they received the Torah for the first time. (Heard from R' Goldman on Rosh Chodesh Sivan 5768).

"Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying, 'So shall you bless Bnei Yisrael, saying to them'." (6:23)

R' Moshe Isserles z"l (Rema; 1525-1572) writes that a non-Kohen who recites Birkat Kohanim transgresses the mitzvah of this verse, which implies that Kohanim should recite the blessing, but not others. [Ed. Note: It is not prohibited for a non-Kohen to recite the verses of Birkat Kohanim after the Birchot Ha'Torah in the morning. In that context, the verses are read as a form of Torah study, not as blessings.]

R' Yisrael Meir Hakohen z"l (the Chafetz Chaim; 1838-1933) comments on the above statement of the Rema: In this light, we have to wonder at the widespread practice that people - whether they are Kohanim or not - bless each other by reciting the words of Birkat Kohanim when they take leave from travelers. How is this permitted?

The Chafetz Chaim explains: At first glance, one might argue that since the blessings are recited outside the context of the prayers - in other words, they are not recited the way a Kohen would recite them - there is no prohibition. However, this cannot be correct, since it is only a rabbinic ordinance to recite Birkat Kohanim during prayer. The Torah had no such thing in mind. Thus, when the Torah implicitly prohibited a non-Kohen from blessing others using this formula, it must have meant that the prohibition should apply all of the time.

Rather, says the Chafetz Chaim, the widespread practice may be justified as follows: There is a dispute, beginning in the Talmud and continuing in the later authorities, about whether one fulfills a mitzvah if he does the act of the mitzvah but has no thought of performing that mitzvah. [For example, does one fulfill a mitzvah if he plays music on a shofar on Rosh Hashanah and happens to emit a Tekiah-Shevarim-Teruah-Tekiah, even though he had no thought of doing a mitzvah?] Says the Chafetz Chaim: The existence of the widespread practice mentioned above is proof that we hold that fulfillment of a mitzvah does require proper intentions ("mitzvot zerichot kavanah"). Because that is that we hold, a non-Kohen would transgress the prohibition on blessing others with the Birkat Kohanim only if he had in mind to fulfill the mitzvah of Birkat Kohanim thereby. Without such an intention, he is not attempting to usurp the mitzvah of the Kohanim and thus commits no transgression.

Alternatively, the Chafetz Chaim writes, perhaps the general populace accepts the opinion of R' Yoel

Sirkes (the Bach; 1560-1640) that non-Kohanim are prohibited from using the Birkat Kohanim only if they recite the blessings with their two hands outstretched like the Kohanim do. Thus, when friends Part along the road, they may bless each other with the Birkat Kohanim. (Be'ur Halachah 128:1)

According to the foregoing, the question arises: When one blesses his children on Shabbat night using the verses of the Birkat Kohanim, may one place two hands on each child's head or should one stretch out only one hand?

R' Eliezer David Gruenwald z"l (died 1928; rabbi of Oyber-Visheve, Hungary and other towns) writes that one should not use two hands. Besides the reason just mentioned, R' Gruenwald states that the custom of the Arizal was to use only one hand. (She'eilot U'teshuvot Keren Le'David No. 24)

The sefer Ma'avar Yabok notes that the fingers of one hand have 15 joints, just as Birkat Kohanim has 15 words. This is another reason to use only one hand when blessing one's child with the words of Birkat Kohanim. (Quoted in Minhag Yisrael Torah)

R' Yaakov Emden z"l (died 1776) strongly defends the custom of using two hands to bless one's children. He writes that this is how one blesses another generously, and the fact that this is what the Kohanim do is proof that it is the right way to bless another. Likewise, Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to bless Yehoshua generously, so he used two hands (see Bemidbar 27:23). When Yaakov Avinu blessed Yosef's children, he used two hands. (Had there been only one grandchild to bless, Yaakov Avinu would have placed both of his hands on that one grandchild, R' Emden asserts.) It is absolutely clear, therefore, that one should use two hands, R' Emden concludes. [Ed. note: R' Emden does not address the fact that in none of the cases he mentions did the individual use two hands while reciting Birkat Kohanim. Thus, there is no proof that a non-Kohen may bless his child with the Birkat Kohanim on Friday night while placing two hands on his or her head.] (Siddur Bet Yaakov: Hanhagat Leil Shabbat)

When the Kohanim bless the congregation, their hands are outstretched and they hold their fingers in such a way that there are three air spaces between the fingers of the two hands. What does this represent?

R' Pinchas Zelig Hakohen Schwartz z"l (pre-WWII Hungarian rabbi) explains: The Midrash says that Bnei Yisrael complained to Hashem, "We do not want the blessing of the Kohanim. We want Your blessing."

Hashem responded: "When they bless you, I am looking over their shoulders." In the words of Shir Hashirim (2:9), "He is standing behind our wall, observing through the windows, peering through the lattices." (Ateret Paz)

Megillat Ruth

"He handed her parched grain, and she ate and was satisfied, and had some left over." (Ruth 2:14)

The midrash says, "If Boaz had known that the prophet would record that 'she ate and was satisfied, and had some left over,' he would have fed her fattened calves." Many commentators ask: Is the midrash suggesting that the tzaddik Boaz was motivated by a desire for honor? R' Shmuel Guntzler z"l (1834-1911; rabbi of Oyber-Visheve, Hungary) explains:

The Gemara (Berachot 20b) teaches that one of the reasons that G-d loves the Jewish People so much is that they recite Birkat Hamazon even when they have eaten only a small quantity of food. According to strict Torah law, one is not obligated to "bentsch" unless he has eating a quantity of food that satisfies him.

Why did Boaz give Ruth a miserly meal of only a few parched grains? R' Guntzler explains that he wanted to test her - was she so pious as to "bentsch" over a small meal, or was she interested only in fulfilling the literal law of the Torah?

However, Boaz's plan failed, since Ruth actually was satisfied with the few grains and therefore was obligated by Torah law to recite Birkat Hamazon. The midrash is informing us that, had Boaz known that his test would fail, he would not have acted in a miserly way and instead would have generously offered Ruth the meat of fattened calves. (Meishiv Nefesh)

"Formerly this was done in Yisrael in cases of redemption and exchange transactions to validate all matters - one would take off his shoe and give it to the other. This was the process of ratification in Yisrael." (Ruth 4:7)

Why did this practice exist? R' Eliezer David Gruenwald z"l (1867-1928; rabbi and rosh yeshiva of Oyber Visheve and other Hungarian towns) suggests:

The nature of a Jew is [or should be] that he does not go back on his word. Even if he sees that a business deal that he made will cause him to go bankrupt, he should not renege.

Our Sages say (Shabbat 129a) that, if necessary, one should sell all of his belongings in order to buy shoes. Shoes, then, are a symbol of poverty. When one takes off his shoe to seal a business transaction, one is in effect saying, "I will never renege on this deal even if I have nothing to my name except a pair of shoes." (Keren Le'Dovid)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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