

CHANNELING DIVINE LIGHT TO THE ENTIRE WORLD

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God spoke unto Moshe, saying, "Speak to Aharon and unto his sons, saying: 'In this you shall bless the Children of Israel ...' " (Bamidbar 6:22-23)

This week's parshah contains the mitzvah of Birchas Kohanim—the Priestly Blessings—which happens everyday in Eretz Yisroel, but only on holidays in the Diaspora, except in a Sephardic minyan where the tradition is to do it even outside of the Land of Israel. It is just one of the many important distinctions between living in the Holy Land and outside of it.

As most people are probably aware, one is not supposed to look at the fingers of the kohanim while they bless the congregation. They are usually held at head height, and spread in a certain formation under the tallis of the kohen. This is because the Divine light came down into the world and through the kohen, leaving through his fingers onto the people he was blessing.

Of course, it is hard not to cheat sometimes when Birchas Kohanim takes place during the holidays at the Wall. There thousands of kohanim gather to bless a rather large gathering of people, many of whom have come just for that part of the dovening. It is quite an experience, and many either do not know the law, or ignore it to get a glimpse of so many kohanim in action.

Does it really make a difference today? Not like it used to in Temple times, when looking at the hands of the kohanim during the blessing could, in fact, be dangerous for a person. I do not know if a person actually went blind because of it, but there probably was some adverse effect, since it was tantamount to treading in a place in the Temple that non-kohanim were not allowed to go.

On occasion, I have made the mistake of looking up and catching a glimpse of the kohanim's hands a little early, and though my eyesight is worsening, I don't know if that has played a role. That's because today, nothing really works the way it once did. It's been a couple thousand years since we had a Temple, and even longer since the Divine Presence filled it and dwelled on the Jewish people, at least the way it once did.

Indeed, so much of what we do today is just to make sure that we don't forget how to do it, lest the Final Redemption occur, and the Temple return, in our time. Instantly we will have to perform all of the relevant mitzvos, and if we don't remember what they are or how to do them, then it will take even longer to properly fulfill our responsibilities.

It wouldn't be the first time in history that it happened. In fact, after the Purim miracle and the return of many Jews to Eretz Yisroel, thousands of years ago, so many had forgotten so much in 70 short years. As a result, after Ezra finished sorting out just who was Jewish and who wasn't, they had to go about re-educating the Jewish people in the way of Torah. It was a mess, and we probably never really sorted it all out, and probably won't until Moshiach comes and finishes the job.

Just take a look around. The assimilation rate is over 80 percent. 80 percent!! The intermarriage rate is well over 50 percent, and so many conversions take place daily that are halachically invalid. But the converts or their families don't necessarily know that, or even care if they do. As far as they are concerned, they are card-carrying members of the Jewish people, which creates major halachic confusion, especially when they are women and they have children.

It has happened that young men or women, who have grown up believing that they come from Jewish families, have returned to traditional Judaism later on in life. They may go so far as to change their entire lives, completely living and dressing the part, and even going to learn full time in yeshivah or seminary. And then, all of a sudden, one day they find out, after doing a little research that they are 100 percent gentile, shocking them and everyone else around them.

Usually when that happens, I am certain, such people quickly convert officially. It is unlikely that a secular Jew who has voluntarily returned to Torah and mitzvos is going to throw off all their obligations after finding out that he or she is not even obligated to keep them. Unlikely, but not impossible, and you have to wonder if for a moment, the thought doesn't cross such a person's mind.

The point is that the Jewish people is a mess today. True, each faction has splintered off neatly into its own group as if it is a separate religion, after which each group neatly splinters into even small groups, which is not very neat at all. The Orthodox world may look at itself as being a complete unit, as may the Conservative and Reform groups. However, God looks at all of us as one people, and the situation as it really stands.

As a result, the Orthodox world sees itself as the preservers of Torah tradition, which is correct, but not a lot more than that. The Conservative Movement sees itself as the balance between the old and the new, which is really a wish, not a reality. And, the Reform Movement sees itself as almost a new religion, which doesn't bother them since they believe that God never really gave Torah at Mt. Sinai in the first place.

The results vary from group to group. The Reform Movement has built-in obsolescence; it will disappear by virtue of its own policies regarding conversion and intermarriage. The Conservative Movement is not far behind, but it will last a little longer. And, the Orthodox world (with exceptions at the top), is either passively religious, actively aggressive, or losing its youth to secularism.

Hence, when the kohanim go up to bless the congregation, it is not that big a deal to many. It is a tradition, a break in the service, and a moment to pause, and often rushed because, well, what

difference does it make anyhow? It doesn't really work, does it? "Are you going to tell me that Divine light comes through the fingers of the guy who dovens right next to me," someone might say. "I watch him doven, and, quite frankly, I find that hard to believe."

Interestingly enough, when Ezra came back with the returning exiles, they had the same problem. It was 70 years later since the destruction of the First Temple, and probably few people were alive, if any, who still remembered the miracles that occurred daily at that time. And, they were not repeated in the Second Temple period to be experienced anew. Rather, they performed the Temple service the best they could, with what they had, unable to see the impact down on earth that they were having up in Heaven.

Does that mean there wasn't any? Absolutely not. For, everything we do on earth, for good or for bad, has an impact above, and therefore one below as well. The difference? The difference is that, in earlier generations, there was sufficient merit to see the results of our efforts in everyday life. Creation and history allowed it because, given where man was holding, such a direct revelation of the Heaven-earth interaction did not interfere with man's free-will and therefore the purpose of Creation.

However, after the Jewish people were exiled and history turned a dark corner all that changed. And, when the entire nation did not return from exile with Ezra, and many remained behind in Babylonia, the situation was not fully rectified in spite of the redemption that occurred through Mordechai and Esther. As a result, we lost the ability to see how the Divine light filtered down through man and his actions, such as Birchas Kohanim, in the everyday world.

However, that does not mean that it doesn't. It just means that we are unable to see that it does, or how it does. But, filter down it does, maintaining the Jewish people and the world in general, even causing deserts to bloom and nations to be kept at bay when, according to the laws of nature, they should be able to run the tiny Jewish state into the sea.

Indeed, this is how Rashi will later explain the concept of Hester Panim, or the hiding of God's face (Devarim 31:18). It doesn't mean, as Rashi explains, that God will cease to be involved in the affairs of man, but rather, He will do it in a way that cause and effect will not be so readily discernible. God will bury His trail of involvement by engineering events in such a way that we will have great difficulty locating their official cause.

But involved He is, very much so. And, Divine light comes into our world prompted in various ways, one of which is Birchas Kohanim. And, if looking at the fingers of the kohanim does not directly affect one's eyes, that may be a bigger miracle than when it did, and it may still happen at another time and in another way.

In the meantime, blessing flows through the fingers of the kohanim, even if you happen to notice that they don't take dovening as seriously as they ought to. For the time that they are up before the congregation blessing the people, they are conduits for Divine light. As they function in their role as

blessers of the Jewish people, their own personal lives are pushed aside as they act as human sefiros to receive and pass on the light of God.

This is true not only of the kohanim, but of Mamleches Kohanim as well. That's another name for the Jewish people: a kingdom of priests (Shemos 19:6). This means that, just as the kohanim act as conduits for the Divine light to reach the Jewish people, likewise do the Jewish people act as conduits for the Divine light to reach the rest of the world. This is what it means when it says:

I, the Lord, have called to you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto the nations. (Yeshayahu 42:6)

Perhaps a more accurate expression would be as a conduit for the light of God unto the nations. For, just as the moon reflects the light of the sun to the earth, the Jewish people are meant to reflect the light of God to mankind, and through our mitzvos, channel Divine light to the entire world. If we do not do this, then no one else will, or even can, the result of which is a world of darkness until God Himself is forced to shine His holy light directly on Creation to make up for where we, the Jewish people, fall short.

This week will be the holiday of Shavuot, Zman Masan Toraseinu—the time of the giving of our Torah. It is not only instructions for life, but the spiritual connection we need and depend upon to fulfill our mandate as a nation. We receive it to pass it on, and in doing so, we become a light unto ourselves, the nation, and the entire world.

Text

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Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkafa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! www.thirtysix.org