

What's the Truth About...Duchening?

By Ari Z. Zivotofsky

Misconception: During *duchening* (when the *Kohanim* bless the congregation), one should not look at the *Kohanim* mainly because it can lead to losing one's vision. Ways to avoid this include covering oneself with a *tallit* or turning around and facing sideways or backwards.

Fact: According to most opinions, nowadays, one should not look at the *Kohanim* while they are *duchening* in order to avoid becoming distracted. Furthermore, one should not turn away from the *Kohanim* while they are reciting the blessing; rather one should face forward and look downwards.

Background: The longstanding tradition of *Birkat Kohanim* (Priestly Blessing) is rooted in *parshat Naso*¹ where God commands the *Kohanim* to bless the Jewish people by reciting a three-part benediction.² According to *Seder Olam Rabbah*,³ the very first *Birkat Kohanim* was recited on Rosh Chodesh Nisan, less than a year after the Jews left Egypt; *Kohanim* have been blessing the Jewish people ever since.⁴

In the Talmud, we find an intriguing statement regarding *Birkat Kohanim*. The Gemara in *Chagigah* (16a) cautions that looking at three things can dim a person's eyesight: a rainbow, a *nasi* (lit. prince) and the *Kohanim* when they stood on the *duchan* (platform in the Temple) and blessed Israel with the Tetragrammaton (*Shem*

Hameforash).⁵ According to the Talmud, it would seem that only those who witnessed the Priestly Blessing in the Temple (where the Tetragrammaton⁶ was used) were at risk of losing their vision.

This, in fact, is the view of most commentators. Only a small minority, among them Rashi, maintain that nowadays—in the post-Temple period—the Talmud's warning is still in effect and looking at the *Kohanim* may result in the dimming of one's vision.

While losing one's sight may no longer be a concern, all commentators agree that one should not look at the *Kohanim* while they *duchen*. Why the prohibition? According to the Rosh,⁷ this is because of the presence of the *Shechinah*. The Rosh brings a beautiful *midrash*⁸ on a verse in *Shir HaShirim* (2:9) that suggests that irrespective of where and when the *Kohanim* bless the Jewish people, God's spirit is present (although God's presence was more evident during the *duchening* in the Temple). The verse reads: "There He [God] stands behind our wall, gazing through the window, peering through the lattice. My beloved spoke thus to me." The *midrash* comments: "There he stands behind our wall," behind the walls of synagogues and houses of study; "gazing through the window," over the priests' shoulders; "peering through the lattice," through the priests' fingers; "My beloved spoke thus to me" and what did He say? May the Lord bless you and protect you (the text of *Birkat Kohanim*). The

Rosh explains that one is forbidden to look at the priests because the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is peering between their fingers, as it says, "Gazing through the window, peering through the lattice."

This mystical notion of the *Shechinah* being present during *duchening* is found in the *Zohar* as well. The Kaf Hachaim,⁹ who, similar to the Rosh rules that one should not look because of the Divine spirit, bases his interpretation on the *Zohar*.

Taking an entirely different approach, Tosafot¹⁰ explains that looking at the *Kohanim* during *duchening* is forbidden because it distracts one from paying attention to the blessing. More recent halachic authorities such as the Beit Yosef and the Magen Avraham agree with the Tosafot. The Magen Avraham, in fact, goes so far as to say that the actual prohibition is not against mere "looking" but against staring since staring can lead to *hesech hada'at* (a loss of concentration and focus) whereas an occasional glance would not.¹¹ However, the Magen Avraham concludes that the custom today is not to even glance at the *Kohanim* since in the Temple, glancing was forbidden. Thus, we refrain from any kind of looking because of *zecher l'Churban* (in remembrance of the destruction of the Temple).

How then are we to act during *Birkat Kohanim*? Many worshippers mistakenly turn around even though the Talmud¹² states that a blessing must be given face-to-face. Clearly a

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widespread misconception in his day as well, the Yaavetz wrote in the 1700s that “one should not do like the *amei ha'aretz* [the ignoramuses] who turn their backs on the *Kohanim* because they are afraid of the Talmudic dictum regarding losing vision. There is no blindness of intellect greater than this.”¹³ He then goes on to condemn the custom of covering one’s face with a *tallit*¹⁴ during *duchening*, a practice which prevents one from receiving a blessing face-to-face.¹⁵ The proper response is to face in the direction of the *Kohanim*, look down, and concentrate on the words.¹⁶

Furthermore, worshippers standing to the side of the *Kohanim* should be sure to face them rather than the front of the *shul*.

Finally, we come to the erroneous custom of reciting verses during *Birkat Kohanim*. Both the Mechaber and the Ramah, basing their ruling on the Talmud,¹⁷ state¹⁸ that it is inappropriate to recite these verses. The *Mishnah Berurah*¹⁹ likens those who recite the verses to a person who receives a blessing while distracted. In order to avoid losing one’s concentration, one should not learn or engage in any other activity during the Priestly Blessing. The one exception is reciting the prayer to rectify a bad dream, as discussed in *Brachot* 55b.²⁰ Tosafot²¹ and others opine that reciting this particular prayer is permitted, while according to the *Mishnah Berurah*²² and other *sefarim* even this prayer should only be said during the *Kohanim’s* melodious song, chanted before the end of each verse.²³ Either way, unlike the recitation of the verses, reciting the prayer to annul a bad dream has halachic sanction.²⁴

May we merit to achieve the intimacy with God described by Rav Yehoshua ben Levi (*Sotah* 38b) in the context of *Birkat Kohanim* that “*Aflu mechitzah shel barzel einah mafseket bein Yisrael l’Avihem shebashamayim*” – even an iron curtain cannot separate the people of Israel and their heavenly Father.”^{JA}

Notes

1. Numbers 6:22-23,27.

2. *Ibid.*, 6:24-26.

3. A chronological work ascribed to the second-century *tanna*, Yose ben Chalafta.

4. It is recited daily in Israel and by many *Sephardim* even outside of Israel, and on holidays by *Ashkenazim* outside of Israel.

5. The Rambam and *Shulchan Aruch* do not cite the first two in their legal codes.

6. *Mishnah Sotah* 7:6 lists three differences between the Priestly Blessings that took place in the Temple and those that took place outside of the Temple: 1. The use of the Tetragrammaton 2. In the Temple, the three verses were recited as a single blessing, while outside they were said as three blessings, and 3. In the Temple, the priests (except for the high priest) raised their hands above their heads while outside they raised it to shoulder level. They used to say it as one *brachah* because in the Temple the response was not “Amen” but “*Baruch Shem k’vod malchuto l’olam vaed*” (*Sotah* 40b; Rashi, *ibid*; Rashi, *T’anit* 16b). [An additional response to the *Birkat Kohanim* is that recited by the congregation when the *chazan* recites it in his repetition of the *Shemoneh Esrei*. That response is “*Kein yehi ratzon*” (*Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 127:2). Amen is only appropriate after a *brachah* and when the *sheliach tzibbur* recites it, it is considered a request, not a *brachah* (*Mishnah Berurah* 127:10).]

7. *Megillah* 24b.

8. *Pesikta deRav Kahana, parshat haChodesh*, 8 (Mandelbaum ed., p. 91).

9. 128:140.

10. *Chagigah* 16a.

11. A related custom mentioned by the Rama (*Orech Chaim* 128:23) is that the *Kohanim* do not look at their own hands. The *Mishnah Berurah* 128:90 explains that this is also related to distraction while the Kaf Hachaim (*Orech Chaim* 128:41) relates it to both distraction and the Divine presence.

12. *Sotah* 38a, based on Numbers 6:23.

13. See Moshe Hakohen Gross, *Nesi’at Kapayim K’hilchatah*, 1994, p. 90, note 1 and p. 130 note 14.

14. In this regard, unlike the previous statement, he has many detractors. See also *Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 128:23 and Gross p. 131, note 19*.

15. See Gross, p. 134, note 33.

16. *Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 128:23.

17. *Sotah* 39b-40a.

18. *Orech Chaim* 128:26.

19. 128:102&103.

20. See Maharsha (*Brachot* 55b) who holds that it is only said if one is unsure what the content of the dream was. If one

remembers it, they say *hatavot chalom*. The Chofetz Chaim (*Biur Halacha* 130) was hesitant about saying this prayer on the second day of Yom Tov because it had just been said the previous day. I have not seen any discussion regarding when the *Kohanim* recite this prayer.

21. *Sotah* 40a.

22. 128:172.

23. There may be differences regarding when and who should say this prayer depending on if the local custom is to *duchen* daily or only on holidays. For the laws regarding this prayer, see *Orech Chaim* 130; Gross, Chapter 24 (pages 201-206), and *Biur Halachah* at the end of *Orech Chaim* 128.

24. The *Aruch haShulchan (Orech Chaim* 585:4) mentions another instance of a “pious” reading that in his time often overshadowed the main *mitzvah*. The custom is to recite Psalm 47 seven times before the blowing of the *shofar*. The *Aruch haShulchan* reports that there are those people who do not complete the recitation on time and continue to say it during the actual *shofar* blasts. This is prohibited. He further states that he is aware of places where the psalm is no longer recited because of this problem.