

# Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



*The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital*

**Parashat Nasso**  
**June 18, 2016**

**פרשת נשא**  
**י"ב בסיון תשע"ו**

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 4:21-7:89

In this *parasha*, Hashem describes the service of the Gershonite family of *Levi'im* (Levites); laws relating to the *sotah* (suspected adulteress) and the *nazir* (nazirite) are given; Hashem tells Moshe and Aharon the *Birkat Cohanim* (Priestly Blessing); the heads of tribes bring gifts to the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle).

The Priestly Blessing reads as follows (6:24-26):

בְּרַכֶּה ה', וְיִשְׁמְרֶךָ. יְאֹר ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיַּחַנְדֶּךָ. יֵשֶׁא ה' פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ, וַיִּשֶׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם.

May Hashem bless you, and guard you; May Hashem make His face shine upon you, and be gracious to you; May Hashem lift up His face upon you, and give you peace.

This simple blessing was given by the *Cohanim* (priests) in the *Beit HaMikdash* (Temple) to individuals after someone brought a sacrifice. It is still recited in many diaspora congregations today on the Jewish holidays, and every day in Jerusalem and other parts of Israel during the morning service. It is the last remaining vestige of the Temple service that we still have today. In fact, the oldest known Biblical text are amulets with these verses written on them, which were found in graves dating from the First Temple Period (before the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE) and are now in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

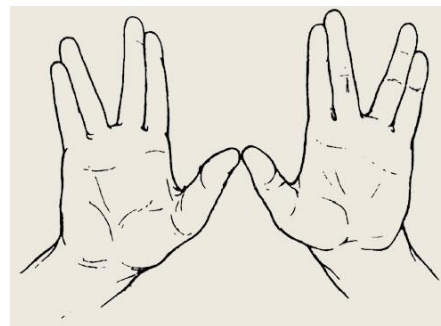
To see a typical *Birkat Cohanim* at the *Kotel* (Western Wall), click on the following link:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOIUJ3yPdQI>

This ritual features a number of interesting aspects.

- Tradition prohibits a *Cohen* from reciting the blessing while under the influence of alcohol, or in the period immediately following the death of a close relative.
- A *Cohen* who is on bad terms with the congregation or who is unwilling to perform the ritual should not perform it.
- It is customary that, once the *Cohanim* are assembled on the platform, the cantor or prayer leader prompts them by reciting each word of the blessing and the *Cohanim* then repeat that word. This custom is especially followed if only one *Cohen* is available to give the blessing. This prompting is done to avoid errors or embarrassment if any of the *Cohanim* should be ignorant of the words of the recitation.
- The *Mishnah* records advice that a person who is troubled by a dream should reflect on it when the *Cohanim* recite their blessing. This practice is still done in many Orthodox communities.
- In many traditional Jewish communities, it is the custom for congregants to spread their *tallitot* over their own heads during the blessing and not look at the *Cohanim*. If a person has children, they will come under their parent's tallit to be blessed, even if they are quite old. The mystics believe that the blessing comes directly from God through the fingers of the *Cohanim* and, therefore looking while receiving such a noble blessing would be presumptuous.
- This blessing is also used by some parents to bless their children on Friday night before the beginning of the Shabbat meal. Some rabbis will say the blessing to a boy at his bar mitzvah or to a girl at her bat mitzvah. It is usually prefaced, for boys, with a request for God to make the child like Ephraim and Menasheh, the two sons of Yosef, who, according to tradition, never fought with one another. For girls, the traditional request is for God to make them like Sarah, Rivka, Rachel and Leah, the matriarchs of the Jewish people.

At the beginning of the ceremony, the *Levi'im* in the congregation wash the hands of the *Cohanim*, who then remove their shoes (if they are unable to remove their shoes without using their hands, the shoes are removed prior to the washing,) and walk up to the platform before the ark at the front of the synagogue. The use of a platform in this context is implied in *Vayikrah* (Leviticus) 9:22. The *Cohanim* cover their heads with their *tallitot*, recite a blessing for performing the mitzvah, turn to face the congregation, and then the cantor or prayer leader slowly and melodiously recites the three-verse blessing, with the *Cohanim* repeating it word by word after the *chazzan*. After each verse, the congregation responds *Amen*.

During the course of the blessing, the hands of the *Cohanim* are spread out over the congregation, with the fingers of both hands separated as illustrated above. Each *Cohen's tallit* is draped over his head and hands so that the congregation cannot see his hands while the blessing is said. Performing the ceremony of the priestly blessing is known in Yiddish as *duchening*, a reference to the "*duchan*" (Hebrew for "platform") on which the blessing is said.



Reform congregations generally do not say *Birkat Cohanim* as it goes against their principle of egalitarianism. At Conservative synagogues, one can find a full range of options. Some do not say the blessing at all, others have only male *Cohanim* recite it, and still others have both genders of offspring of *Cohanim* do the blessing. In Orthodox communities, only male *Cohanim* give the blessing.

One interesting footnote to the discussion of *Birkat Cohanim* is that supposedly, in the mid-1960s, actor Leonard Nimoy, who was raised in a traditional Jewish home, used a single-handed version of the *Birkat Cohanim* gesture to create the Vulcan Hand Salute for his character Spock on *Star Trek*. He explained that, while attending Orthodox services as a child, he peeked from under his father's *tallit* and saw the gesture; many years later, when introducing the character of Mr. Spock, he and series creator Gene Roddenberry thought a physical component should accompany the verbal "Live long and prosper" greeting. The Jewish priestly gesture looked sufficiently alien and mysterious and thus became part of *Star Trek* lore.

While it is understandable that many congregations have dropped the ritual of *Birkat Cohanim*, we also can take pride in maintaining this ancient and inspiring rite.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Does your synagogue recite *Birkat Cohanim*? If you don't know, how might you find out?
- What do you think is the meaning of the hand gesture?
- Why do you think the tradition mandates that a *cohen* should not recite the blessing if he is drunk or is on bad terms with the congregation?