

Who Authored "Birkat Kohanim"?

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According to some Biblical commentators,^{1[1]} the first time that "Birkat Kohanim"^{2[2]}/"Nesi'at Kapayim"^{3[3]} (lit. the blessing of the Priests; the lifting of the hands, whose actual script appears much later, in BaMidbar 6:24-26^{4[4]}) takes place, is in Parshat Shmini.^{5[5]}

VaYikra 9:22

And Aharon lifted his hands to the people and **he blessed them**, and he descended from performing the sin offering, the whole burnt offering and the peace offering.

Sifra, "Milu'im" #30

"And he blessed them"—This is an unspecific blessing that you do not know its contents. The verses return at a later point and clarify: (BaMidbar 6:24-26) "Let God Bless you and Keep you" until "...And Grant you peace".

1[1] The idea appears to have been originally expressed in the Midrash Halacha and the Talmud (the combination of Mishna and Gemora) cited below, and then incorporated into the Biblical commentaries of the likes of RaShI, RaMBaN, Meshech Chachma and R. S.R. Hirsch.

2[2] The term "Birkat Kohanim" specifically relates to the blessings that the Kohanim used to bestow upon the people, and it is commemorated in Ashkenazic prayers in the Diaspora by a paragraph that is inserted in the repetition of the Silent Devotion on all days with the exception of communal prayers on Yom Tov.

Kol Bo

The reason why we (specifically it is the "Shliach Tzibbur" who inserts this **paragraph** (beginning "Elokeinu VElokei Avoteinu Barcheinu BiVeracha HaMeshuleshet...") in his repetition of the "Amida"; however since he is the congregation's surrogate, by our listening to his recitation, it is as if each of us is actually reciting the paragraph as well) say "Birkat Kohanim" after "Hoda'ah" (thanksgiving; the blessing of the Silent Devotion that begins with the phrase "Modim Anachnu Lach" [we give thanks to You]) this is because in their days (the days of the Temple and its Service) they (the Kohanim) would ascend the platform each day, and corresponding to this, we usually summarize this practice.

3[3] The term "Nesi'at Kapayim" refers to the literal extending of the hands of the Kohanim when they are bestowing the blessings upon the people. While this is done daily by those praying in Israel, it is enacted only on Yom Tov by Ashkenazic congregations in the Diaspora.

RaMA on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 128:44

...It is the custom in all of these countries (of Ashkenaz) that the "hands are not raised" other than on Yom Tov, because only then are they immersed in the joy of Yom Tov and goodness of heart, allowing for the blessings to be properly bestowed. This is not the case on other days, including even Shabbat, when people are troubled by thoughts of how they are going to obtain their livelihoods and the fact that they had to interrupt their work.

And even on Yom Tov, the "hands are raised" only during the repetition of Musaf (in Israel, "Nesi'at Kapayim" takes place at both Shacharit and Musaf) because people are then anticipating leaving the synagogue and rejoicing in the joy of the holiday...

4[4] "Let God Bless you and Keep you.

God should Shine His Face towards you and be Gracious to you.

Let God Lift His Face towards you and Grant you peace."

5[5] NeTzIV on VaYikra 9:23 ("And Moshe and Aharon came to the Tent of Meeting and they went out and **blessed the people**, and the Glory of HaShem Appeared to the entire people") suggests that "Birkat Kohanim" was pronounced a second time in this verse. However, Moshe's participation and the omission of any mention of the lifting of hands causes commentators like RaShI, Ohr HaChayim and HaKetav VeHaKabbala to understand the blessing as a prayer that HaShem should Reveal Himself upon the Tabernacle, which at the end of this verse He Does.

Mishna Sota 7:6 (38a)

How is "Birkat Kohanim" to be performed?

Outside of the Temple, it is stated as three blessings, while within the Temple it is recited as a single blessing.^{6[6]}

Within the Temple, the Tetragrammaton is pronounced as it is written, while outside the Temple a substitute name is recited (for each of the three instances where the Name of God is invoked).

Outside the Temple, the Kohanim raise their hands no higher than the level of their shoulders, while within the Temple, they raise their hands up to the level of their heads, with the exception of the High Priest, who raises his hands no higher than the "Tzitz" (band of gold that is worn on the High Priest's forehead [see Shemot 28:36] and upon which the Tetragrammaton is written). R. Yehuda said: Even the High Priest raised his hands higher than the "Tzitz" **as it is said, (VaYikra 9:22) "And Aharon lifted his hands^{7[7]} to the people and he blessed them."**

RaShI on VaYikra 9:22

"And he blessed them"—With the priestly benediction...

Since both in the Midrash as well as in the Talmud an identity is made between the two passages of VaYikra and BaMidbar, and laws regarding the manner in which "Birkat Kohanim" are to be carried out are based upon the description of Aharon's blessing the people in Parshat Shmini, the Oral Tradition understands the Biblical passages to be in the form of a "Kellal U'Perat" (a general statement followed by specifics and details) relationship, whereby originally we are told no more than that an act of blessing has taken place and only apprised of its actual contents many chapters later. Additionally, although the impression is given that the text of "Birkat Kohanim" is first presented to Moshe by HaShem in BaMidbar, in fact it actually was already Commanded in VaYikra, if Aharon was to have invoked these same blessings in Parshat Shmini.

It is probably due to the unlikelihood of "Birkat Kohanim" being presented in such a protracted and illogical manner that causes RaMBaN to offer three alternate interpretations, once he acknowledges the standard traditional position advanced by RaShI.

RaMBaN on VaYikra 9:22

"With the priestly benediction..."—this is the commentary of **RaShI**.

But if so, the section of (BaMidbar 6:24-26) "Speak unto Aharon and his sons saying, 'So you will bless the children of Israel' in the book of BaMidbar takes chronological precedence over this section.^{8[8]}

Perhaps it is so, since it (BaMidbar 6:24-26) is placed near to that which is said there (BaMidbar 7:1) "And it came to pass on the day

^{6[6]} The practical difference between whether the words are to be treated as a single blessing or as three separate ones is whether or not the Kohanim stop at the end of each verse in order to allow the people to respond, "Amen".

^{7[7]} Apparently, according to R. Yehuda, if the Kohen Gadol were to lift his hands no higher than the level of the "Tzitz" on his forehead, he would be "extending" his hands rather than lifting them.

^{8[8]} RaMBaN suggests that RaShI and the sources upon which he bases his commentary are all relying on the principle "Ein Mukdam U'Me'uchar BaTora" (that one cannot assume that the order of the sections of the Tora reflect the chronological order in which they were originally presented).

that Moshe had finished setting up the Tabernacle",9[9] (which was on the first of Nissan—the 8th day therein discussed.)

1) It is possible to say that Aharon spread forth his hands towards Heaven and blessed the people, just as Shlomo did, as it is said, (I Melachim 8:22) "And Shlomo stood before the altar of HaShem in the presence of the congregation of Israel and **spread forth his hands towards Heaven**", and there it is said, "And he stood and **blessed all of the congregation of Israel**, saying..." Therefore the text does not state that Moshe commanded him (Aharon) to do so (in VaYikra 9:22, although in BaMidbar 6:23 it does state that Moshe commands Aharon to bless the people with the text contained in v. 24-26) (since it—"Birkat Kohanim"—had not yet been given!)

2) In the "Baraita" (the Midrash Halacha stated above) of the section of the "Milu'im" (the consecration of the Tabernacle) I have seen it said:

Sifra, "Milu'im" #30

"And he blessed them"—This is an unspecific blessing that you do not know its contents. The verses return at a later point and clarify: (BaMidbar 6:24-26) "God should Bless you and Keep you" until "...And Grant you peace" (which appears to substantiate RaShI's interpretation).

Nevertheless I could still say that the Rabbis of this "Baraita" were saying as follows: This blessing with which Aharon blessed the people **on his own accord is unspecified** (in VaYikra) **and the text did not explain to us what it was**. But the blessing that the priests were commanded to say in all future generations has been expressly set forth (in BaMidbar), applying to all priests forever.

3) Or it may be that the Rabbis of the "Baraita" are of the opinion that here (in VaYikra) He Commanded him to say the Priestly Blessing for only that day, and later on (in BaMidbar) this blessing was given to Aharon and his sons for the succeeding occasions and generations.

Obviously, RaMBaN's second hypothesis is the most radical of the three that he presents. It is only this position that suggests that Aharon's blessing in VaYikra contained words that were completely chosen by himself, in contrast to the standardized blessing Commanded by God in BaMidbar. The fact that we are not told what Aharon's words actually were might suggest that:

- a)** the language was not terribly articulate and therefore unworthy of preserving for posterity,
- b)** the blessings contained very temporal requests^{10[10]} and would not be appropriate for use in future situations,

9[9] Although there is a "Stuma" (a space within the Tora column which otherwise would contain 9 letters) between the end of the section discussing "Birkat Kohanim" and BaMidbar 7:1, nevertheless RaMBaN feels that the principle of "Semichut HaParshiot" (the juxtaposition next to one another of different topics, suggesting a connection between them) justifies asserting that the text of the Priestly Blessings were given to Aharon much earlier, at the time of the completion of the Tabernacle discussed in VaYikra 9.

10[10] An example of such a limited request is the interpretation given by some commentators to VaYikra 9:23, summarized in fn. 5 above.

or **c)** because Aharon was so holy and spiritual, his own formulation of blessing would be too esoteric for ordinary Kohanim, and they had to be provided with a text that was more accessible so that they could maintain proper intention while imparting the blessings to the Jewish people.

But a fourth possibility presents itself as well, i.e., that the blessings that Aharon employed were exactly the words that are recorded in BaMidbar 6. It then follows that God was so "Impressed" with Aharon's formulation of blessing, that He Codified Aharon's words that were originally spontaneously composed on the spur of the moment, into blessings that would be recited by Kohanim for eternity.

A precedent for suggesting such an approach for understanding the evolution of "Birkat Kohanim" can be found in Abrabanel's introduction to the book of Devarim. As opposed to the preceding four books of the Tora which are not associated with any sort of personal oration or presentation, the last book of the Tora begins with the following words:

Devarim 1:1

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all of Israel on the other side of the Jordan, in the desert, in the plain, opposite Suf, between Paran and Tofel, and Lavan and Chatzeirot and Di Zahav.

While it is clear that the Commandments of the Tora were revealed to Moshe by HaShem, along with the formulations by which such Commandments were first recorded throughout the previous four books of the Tora, Abrabanel not only raises the possibility that Moshe's valedictory address, to which the overwhelming majority of Devarim is devoted, were his own words, but he goes on to explain how one can reconcile giving Moshe credit for these words and still believe that the Tora in its entirety, including Devarim, was Revealed by God.

Abrabanel, Introduction to Devarim

...Certainly, the matter of this book and its truth is that Moshe Rabbeinu said these things and explicated the Commandments that are mentioned here to Israel due to his impending separation from them, **and God Wished, once he (Moshe) had finished saying them to Israel, that they be written in the Sefer Tora in accordance with what/how Moshe had said them.** And it is possible that HaShem Added to them (to Moshe's words) reasons and things at the time of its writing (see Devarim 31:9). If so, the saying of these things were from Moshe, yet their writing in the Sefer Tora was not from him. For behold Moshe did not write these things by himself, because how could he write something of his own in the Tora of God? But rather the entire Tora came from the "Mouth of God" with regard to all the words of Tora **because God Agreed with him (Moshe) and the words of the faithful servant were straight in His Eyes...**

If God is "Open" to recognizing that the words of a human being can have great significance and poignancy to the point that, as it were, HaShem is Ready to Give official recognition to the words of His great Prophet Moshe, on a more limited scale couldn't the same be true with respect to Aharon? To the same extent that Moshe was clearly the Jewish people's leader when it came to rebuking them and teaching them the Commandments of HaShem, making him a worthy source for Devarim's

subject matter, wasn't Aharon's great love and concern for the people the appropriate qualification for formulating the ideal and permanent blessing to be bestowed upon Israel forever? Following such a line of reasoning, BaMidbar 6:24-26 was the original text that Aharon used in VaYikra 9:22; only when he first blessed the people, he was not following a script, but rather composing the blessing then and there!

Although Aharon as God's Surrogate in terms of being in charge of the Tabernacle worship of HaShem, should understandably be self-effacing^{11[11]} in a manner resembling the extreme humility attributed to Moshe in BaMidbar 12:3, nevertheless, it might be possible to recognize in BaMidbar 6:24-26 reflections of Aharon's experiences and personality, once we assume that he is the author of this blessing. Furthermore, it is clear that the most momentous event with which Aharon was directly associated in terms of the development of the Jewish people subsequent to the Exodus from Egypt, was the sin of the Golden Calf (Shemot 32:1 ff.). Perhaps the contributing factors that led to the creation of this idol, its subsequent destruction and the punishment of those who worshipped it provide the proper lense through which to consider "Birkat Kohanim".

"God should Bless you and Keep you."

BaMidbar Rabba 11:5

"Let God Bless you"—with wealth

(Not unlike the spoils that the Jews took from the Egyptians prior to their departure from Egypt).

"And Keep you"—you should use it to do Mitzvot.

(However, taking precious metals and turning them into idols will lead to the people's downfall. There is an inherent danger in wealth that must be avoided.)

"He should Shine His Face towards you and be Gracious to you."

Midrash Tehillim 119 (cited in Tora Shleima, R. Menachem Kasher, p. 101, #254)

(Tehillim 119:135) "Panecha HaEhr BeEvrecha..." (Cause Your Face to Shine, when You are Angry).

So said David: May it be Your Will that You do not Look upon us in anger, but rather with a Shining Face, as said Moshe, (?) "He should Shine His Face towards you and be Gracious to you." For this reason he (David) said, "Panecha HaEhr BeEvrecha..."

^{11[11]} To the extent that an individual is an egotist, he usually has difficulty with subjugating himself completely to Divine Authority. If maintaining such an attitude is challenging for an ordinary individual, one who is in a leadership position struggles that much more so against allowing the position which he occupies to "go to his head". Even if a person at the outset successfully manages to resist becoming enamored with his power and status, over time, leadership responsibilities can erode one's religious sensibilities. We see this born out even with respect to the most spiritual of kings, e.g., David and Shlomo. While the High Priest Eli appears for the most part to have led a respectable religious life, his sons were apparently unable to do so. Consequently, the humility that Aharon displays over the course of his life stands him in good stead to be Chosen by God to serve as the paradigm of High Priests. And yet some of his sons are also not immune from the temptations of egocentrism as recorded by the deaths of Nadav and Avihu in Parshat Shmini.

(Aharon had first-hand experience in terms of HaShem's Reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf to know that God's Anger can be lethal and extremely destructive.)

BaMidbar Rabba 11:6

"And be Gracious to you"—He should Give you wisdom so that you will be gracious to one another, and be merciful to one another, as it is said, (Devarim 13:18) "...And He will Give you mercy..."

(Aharon was dedicated to peace and unity among the Jews. The infighting among different groups, including the "Eirev Rav [the "Mixed Multitude"] contributed significantly to the sin of the Calf and therefore it would be ideal if such contentiousness could be avoided in the future.)

"Let God Lift His Face towards you and Grant you peace."

BaMidbar Rabba 11:7

"Let God Lift His Face towards you"—Let Him remove His Anger from you, for the term "Yisa" (lift) means removal, as it is said, (Beraishit 40:19) "Pharoah will remove your head..."

"His Face"—this is the face of anger, as it is said, (VaYikra 20:6) "And I will Place My Face against that soul..." i.e., that anger that was meant to be set against you, it should be removed.

(See the comments on Midrash Tehillim 119 above.)

VaYikra Rabba 9:9

"And Grant you peace"—R. Mani D'Sha'av and R. Yehoshua D'Sichnin in the name of R. Levi. Great is peace since all blessings, goodnesses and comfortings that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Brings upon Israel conclude with peace. With regards to the Blessings of the Shema, "Pores Sukat Shalom" (Who Spreads the canopy of peace); with regards to the Silent Devotion, "Oseh Shalom" (Who Makes peace); with regards to "Birkat Kohanim", "VeYasem Lecha Shalom".

(See the comments on BaMidbar Rabba 11:6 above.)

One of the ways in which we can make prayer more meaningful is to make our prayers as personal as possible, as well as understanding the implications of the words that we are pronouncing. To think that Aharon is reaching out to us over the millennia and expressing hopes that we do not repeat the same errors that those of his generation committed provides new scope and dimension to "Birkat Kohanim".

Let us hope that these words come true for us as well as for future generations.
