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Leonard Nimoy's Birkas Kohanim

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Shmini

Leonard Nimoy's Birkas Kohanim

Good Shabbos!

Not everyone knows that the late Leonard Nimoy, who played Mr. Spock on Star Trek, was Jewish. He is more famous for his Vulcan hand sign for peace.

A few years ago, Leonard Nimoy was interviewed and asked why he chose that sign for the Vulcan greeting, and what the history behind it was.

He related how he had been born into an Orthodox family and used to go to synagogue with his father, grandfather and brothers. In shul, he saw five or six men stepping up to the platform at the head of the synagogue, facing the congregation with their talleisim completely covering them, and then start singing some song.

His father warned him not to look at them, which indeed is the custom. All the congregants covered their faces with their talleisim—and then he heard a strange song being sung in a choppy cacophony, as if everyone were singing by themselves.

Then the chazan suddenly called out: “*Yivarechicha!*” The group of Kohanim replied after him, “*Yivarechicha!*” The chazan called out: “*Hashem!*” and again, as before, the Kohanim repeated the word. “*Viyishmirecha!*” And the Kohanim repeated that word, too.

As a child, the ritual frightened him greatly. He understood that something serious was happening here, and curiosity grew in his heart. He could not bear it, and he dared to lift back his father's tallis that was also covering his face to look at the Kohanim. And then he saw the Kohanim's hands spread forth towards the congregants, with their fingers spread out in a special form. The sight engraved itself in his heart.

As the interview continued, Nimoy explained the meaning of the symbol, which evokes the Hebrew letter Shin. The letter is also the first letter of G-d's Name *Shakkai*, which also appears on the back of the mezuzah. The letter Shin is also the first letter of the word Shechina, which peeks through the lattices, and also the first letter of the word Shalom, with which Birkas Kohanim ends.

Years later, Leonard Nimoy learned why his father forbade him to look at the Kohanim: The Shechina, he understood, rests on the Kohanim at the time they recite the blessing, and so one should not be looking at them at the time. We find something similar in the story of Moshe and the Burning Bush: When G-d revealed Himself to Moshe in the bush, the Torah tells us: “And Moshe hid his face because he was afraid of gazing upon G-d” (Shmos 3:6).

Additionally, Rashi writes in the Talmud (Tractate Megillah, 24b): “One who gazes upon the Kohanim while they lift their palms [i.e. recite Birkas Kohanim] will suffer weakened eyes, since the Shechinah rests on their hands.”

The mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim is one of the most beloved mitzvos among Jews.

So let me tell you a related story: In the year 1970, a Jerusalem Jew was seen sitting on a bench at the Kotel, the Western Wall. This was during the time of Israel's War of Attrition, and the man's head was filled with pessimistic thoughts on the difficult situation in which the Jewish Nation found itself in the Land of Israel. And into his head popped the teaching of the Sages: "From the day the Holy Temple was destroyed, there has not been a day without a curse in it."

But then the man remembered the continuation of that teaching in the Midrash, which quotes the Sage, Rabbi Acha: "If so, then in whose merit do we continue to stand? In the merit of Birkas Kohanim" (Midrash Tehilim, Psalm 7).

And those words suddenly inspired him with hope.

At that moment, he thought to himself, "If Birkas Kohanim has such great power, then why not tap into it?"

Indeed, it is also mentioned in Tanach. In Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles, II:30, towards the end), we read about how King Chizkiyahu, who lived over 2,500 years ago in the Land of Israel, organized a mass event in Jerusalem in which a large group of Kohanim assembled to bless the people, and their blessing was accepted in Heaven.

The verse states: "And the Levite Kohanim arose and blessed the people, and their voice was heard, and their prayer came to His holy habitation, to heaven."

And so this Jerusalem Jew thought to himself: "If the 'patent' proved itself in the days of Chizkiyahu, why would it not work again today?" He believed that a mass Birkas Kohanim would move something in Heaven for the good of the Jewish Nation.

So our humble hero here began to spread the idea, and he infected a lot of people with his passion, until he found testimony for his idea in a classic book known as *Sefer Chasidim*.

In that book, written in medieval Germany in the late 1100s or early 1200s by Jewish leader Rabbi Yehudah HaChasid, it mentions that not much earlier in Jewish history, Rabbi Hai Gaon led a procession of Kohanim around the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem with the intent of bringing Moshiach. (Rabbi Hai Gaon was the last leader of the Gaonic period of Jewish history, which ended with his passing in the year 1038.)

What's more, in the book *Rokeach* (written by Rabbi Elazar of Worms, another German Jewish leader who died in 1238), it's written that "if 300 Kohanim had stood on the Mount of Olives, the Moshiach would have come."

Well, he couldn't do more than that. But the man decided to organize a mass Birkas Kohanim at the Western Wall (close to and visible from the Mount of Olives), and to get 300 Kohanim to join. If the Moshiach wouldn't come, then at least he'd have accomplished something positive for the Jewish Nation.

So, a date was set for Tuesday, the 3rd of Kislev, 5731 (December 1, 1970). And while he was second-guessing himself, thinking that 300 was an overblown number, hundreds of Kohanim eventually showed up, with the masses streaming in to be blessed. The public sentiment was powerful.

Ever since then, a tradition has been kept at the Western Wall that twice a year, on the Intermediate Days of Pesach and the Intermediate Days of Sukkos, a mass Birkas Kohanim is organized—with thousands of people, Kohanim and Leviim, coming to bless and be blessed.

At a recent Chol Hamoed, to the best of my knowledge, tens of thousands of Jews, and several hundred Kohanim, joined at the special event.

Now, the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim appears in the Torah in the Book of Bamidbar, in the Torah portion of Naso. It is also mentioned every morning in the Morning Blessings. G-d commanded Moshe to tell his brother Aharon, “Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel,” and then proceeding to specify the exact words with which to bless the people.

These words consist of three verses, with the first beginning with the word *Yivarechicha*, the second with the word *Ya’er*, and the third with the word *Yisa*. (Bamidbar 6:22-27).

Now, how, exactly, and in what form, do we present this blessing?

For that, we turn to our current Parsha, the Torah portion of Shmini, which tells us about the *Chanukah HaMishkan*, the dedication of the Tabernacle. The Torah says: “And Aharon lifted his hands to the people and blessed them” (Vayikra 15:22). And Rashi immediately adds that he blessed them with “Birkas Kohanim”—from which we learn, Rashi notes, that the Kohain needs to bless the people “by raising the palms.”

This means that the Kohanim stand before the crowd at the head of the synagogue and face everyone.

Normally, the chazan stands facing the *Aron Kodesh*, the Ark, because he is representing the crowd before G-d and praying in their name before G-d. But with Birkas Kohanim, the Kohanim bless the people in the Name of G-d, which is something that needs to be done face to face. And so the Kohanim spread their hands out towards the people and recite the blessings.

As for the spreading forth of the hands towards the people, that, too, appears in our Parshah. What isn’t written, though, is exactly what is meant by “spreading forth the hands”—what do you do? How do you hold your hands?

So the exact posture in which the Kohanim are supposed to hold their hands, meaning, how you position your fingers in relation to each other and in relation to the other hand, is mentioned neither in the Torah or the Talmud. Rather, it is a custom that’s been passed down among the Kohanim from generation to generation, father to son.

The first written source in which it’s mentioned is in the writings of Rabbi Asher ben Yechiel (1250?-1327), known by the acronym “Rosh”. Rabbi Asher was a German rabbi who fled to Spain and became leader of the Jewish community of Toledo.

In his commentary on the Talmud (Tractate Megillah, Chap. III, part 21), Rabbi Asher writes: “As for their separating their fingers, this is based on the Midrash on the verse ‘peering from the lattices’; the Divine Presence is above their heads and peers out from the ‘lattices’ of their fingers. They are supposed to create five spaces between every two fingers, to fulfill the [statement of] the verse, ‘peering from the lattices,’ meaning, five lattice spaces.”

So what Rabbi Asher is saying here is that how the Kohanim hold their hands during the blessing is based on the Midrash commenting on a verse in Shir HaShirim, the Song of Songs, “peering from the lattices.” Namely, when the Kohanim are blessing the Jewish Nation, the Divine Presence is found above their heads and “peeks” out past them through the lattice, which are their separated fingers.

[Hold up hands to show the five spaces created by how the Kohanim hold their hands.]

However, the Rebbe says that you don’t need to be a Kohain to bless the Jewish Nation.

Rather, every Jew can, and must, bless every other Jew—and if a Jew wishes to bless his friend, he does not need to wait until he learns how to split his fingers like the Kohanim do (and which is pretty hard to do) but rather, he can simply say the same words that the Kohanim say when they are on the stage, and in that merit, G-d will bless him, as the verse states, “And I will bless them.” (Hisvaduyos 5744, Vol. I, pg. 317.)

Just like that one famous Jewish actor who taught the whole world that one should always bless the other and who, when making the Vulcan greeting with his hand, would say, “Live long and prosper.”

Good Shabbos!