

**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**  
**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY**

**By: Rav Moshe Taragin**

**Prompting Kohanim during Birkat Kohanim**

Parshat Naso describes Birkat Kohanim - the mitzva for the kohanim to deliver berakhot to Am Yisrael. When the Temple stood, this mitzva was performed immediately after the avoda; after the Temple's destruction, it was incorporated into certain tefillot. Today, Jews in Eretz Yisrael perform this mitzva on a daily basis, while in chutz la-aretz the mitzva is reserved solely for chagim.

The gemara in Sota (38a) cites Abayei's ruling that if only a single kohen ascends to deliver the blessing, no introduction is necessary. If, however, two or more kohanim ascend, they must be formally introduced with the pronouncement, "Kohanim." Abayei derives this halakha from the pasuk in Naso (perek 6) which prefaces Birkat Kohanim with the term, "amor lahem" (speak to them), but he does not explain the function of this "introduction." The most obvious approach would be to view this introduction from a purely technical perspective. Inasmuch as several kohanim may ascend to bless, calling them serves to coordinate their recitals so that they issue the berakhot simultaneously and unanimously. If only one kohen ascends, no coordination is necessary, and no introduction is required.

Similar attitudes may explain another feature of Birkat kohanim requiring interaction - reading the pasuk to the kohen as he recites each word. Tosafot in Berakhot (34a) cite a midrash (known as Midrash Chaseirot Ve-yeteirot – a midrashic tract which explores various unique conjugations throughout the Torah) which

determines that the chazan (either the shaliach tzibur or some other individual involved in the synagogue procedure) must pronounce each word prior to the kohen's recital. On first glance, this process might also be attributed to purely technical motives. In order to ensure that the kohanim themselves do not become confused and lose track of the pesukim, the words are read aloud. This process might be reminiscent of the minhag to announce the various shofar sounds before they are actually emitted. Presumably, these announcements possess purely practical functions - to avoid confusion and mistakes.

Indeed, the Rambam appears to have viewed this second process - the pre-announcement of each word - in a purely practical light. He claims (Hilkhos Tefilla 14:3) that the announcements commence with the second word of the first pasuk – "Hashem." The first word of Birkat Kohanim – "yivarekhikha" – requires no prior pronouncement; according to the Rambam, the kohanim may recite it independently. He perhaps felt that the pronouncements are required to avoid confusion, and since confusion is less likely with regard to the first word, it requires no pre-announcement.

This view – that the introductory call to the kohanim and the pre-announcement of pesukim are purely practical measures – gives rise to the following question: why would purely practical measures require a Biblical source? If these practices are derived from the term "amor lahem," wouldn't we assume that they play some fundamental role?

Rashi seems to have been aware of this potential problem. In his commentary to the Torah, he cites a midrash which interprets the term "amor" (which is written here in the "maleh" form - with the letter vav) as alluding to the requirement that the kohanim issue their blessing patiently and thoughtfully, rather than in a hurried and confused fashion. Perhaps the pasuk itself informs us that we should enact measures to ensure a meticulous and careful delivery of the berakhot. Without a pasuk, we certainly would not have invited confusion, but we may not have consciously acted to prevent it. The pasuk itself demands measures to absolutely ensure a focused and attentive delivery.

A different demand about this prompting of kohanim does, however, suggest a more structural role for introduction and pre-announcement. The Yerushalmi in Berakhot 5:4 cites Rav Chisda who requires that the introduction and pre-announcement be performed specifically by a non-kohen. The command, "Amor lahem" - speak to THEM (the Kohanim) - indicates that the speaker himself is not a kohen. The Rambam indeed codifies this requirement (Hilkhos Tefilla 14:13). Had these measures been purely practical in nature, why would we insist that they be conducted specifically a non-kohen?

Evidently, a more fundamental purpose is served by these measures. The Hafla'a (Rav Pinchas Ha-levi Horowitz, the Rebbe of the Chatam Sofer), in his commentary to Ketuvot (24b), claims that non-kohanim are also obligated in the mitzva of Birkat Kohanim. Just as the kohanim are commanded to deliver the berakha, so are the non-kohanim obligated to receive it.

This startling revelation challenges us to find some 'role' for non-kohanim in the performance of this mitzva. If they are included in the mitzva, then evidently they play some role in the process of Birkat Kohanim. At the very least, they contribute to the successful performance of the mitzva by listening quietly to the kohanim's recital. The Rambam emphasizes – and the Shulchan Arukh in turn cites – that the tzibbur should quietly face the kohanim during the recital of the berakha. This is clearly the most basic way to participate in this mitzva. However, we might view the introduction and pre-announcements as the manner by which non-kohanim participate. Non-kohanim must solicit or request the berakha (by calling 'kohanim'), as well as symbolically guide the kohen to deliver a suitable berakha (pre-announcing each word), so that the berakha is not unilateral or arbitrary, but rather mutual and symbiotic. The introduction of the kohanim and the pre-announcement are not merely functional; they are also the manner by which the audience solicits and shapes the berakha. It is for this very reason that the introducer and announcer must specifically be non-kohanim - because these tasks are uniquely designated to non-kohanim.

The phrase "amor lahem" thus obligates non-kohanim to actively participate in the delivery of the berakha. In fact, the gemara in Sota (38a) establishes two other halakhot based on this expression, each of which reflects this concept of mutual participation in the delivery of berakhot. The gemara first determines that the recipients must face the deliverers "as a person speaks with his friend." This demand of face-to-face delivery of the berakhot might suggest a conversational nature to the berakhot, rather than a frontal delivery. In addition, the same gemara requires that the berakhot be recited in a loud tone ("kol ram") "as a person converses with his friend." These two conditions – face-to-face communication, and a discernible tone – which the gemara derives from "amor lahem," might confirm this concept, of the mutual experience required by the mitzva of Birkat Kohanim.

Having established this dual nature to Birkat Kohanim and the role of the introducer and announcer in capturing the audience's participation in this delivery, we can better understand an intriguing gemara. The gemara in Sota (39b) describes the required orderly sequencing of the various stages of Birkat Kohanim: 1) The introducer and/or announcer may not commence until the audience has completed their refrain of "Amen." 2) The kohanim may not begin the berakha until the introducer/announcer concludes. 3) The tzibbur, in turn, may not answer, "Amen" until the kohen has completely finished his berakha. 4) The kohen may not begin a berakha until the audience has completed its answer of "Amen" to the previous one.

This overt sequencing seems a bit overstated. If the introducer and announcer played merely a functional role, it would be unnecessary for the gemara to explicitly demand that the kohen not begin until the conclusion of the introduction or pre-announcement. It might be the courteous practice, but would not require explicit mention and such elaborate detail. Perhaps the gemara senses a structural role played by the introducer and announcer in the delivery of the berakhot and choreographs this three-person ceremony such that each role is fully realized. The kohanim are the overt deliverers of the berakha, while the audience is its recipient. The introducer and announcer solicit and guide the berakhot, and their role must be integrated within the

overall ceremony. In fact, the same gemara in Sota provides a striking analogy to another three-person event: keriat ha-Torah. In this instance, too, three people participate in the reading: the reader, the audience and the interpreter (who interprets and elaborates upon the text which had just been read). Obviously, the interpreter does not merely prompt the reader, but provides an interpretive complement to the written text (basically complementing Torah she-bikhtav with Torah she-be'al peh). By juxtaposing these two ceremonies, the gemara might be casting them as parallel and confirming the structural role of the introducer of the kohanim and the person who pre-announces the berakha.