

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

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**TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY**

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**THE ROLE OF THE RECIPIENT IN BIRKAT KOHANIM**

In Parashat Naso, the Torah commands the kohanim to bless the Jewish people (Bamidbar 6:22-27), a mitzva known as birkat kohanim. The gemara on Sota 38b remarks that a kohen who refuses to bless violates three different commandments. It would seem that the "Yisra'el," i.e., the non-kohen, is merely the recipient of the berakha which the kohen is commanded to dispense. This article will explore if the Yisra'el enjoys a more active role and possibly possesses some sort of mitzva to receive the berakha of the kohen.

The gemara in Sota 38a cites the opening of this section in Parashat Naso. "Emor lahem," God commands in v. 23, "Say to them." Literally, this means that the kohanim must use the following text for their berakha; the gemara, however, interprets this verse in the following way: speak to them as two friends talk, face to face. The gemara obligates the Yisra'el to face the kohen during the delivery of the berakha. This halakha suggests an active role for the Yisra'el in receiving the berakha.

It should be noted that a second gemara throws this idea into question. Below on the same page, the gemara cites a statement of Rabbi Zeira that the kohen's berakha is intended for those busy at work in the fields. The gemara suggests that as they are victims of circumstance, the berakha can be received even though they are not directly facing the kohanim. This latter halakha suggests that the face-to-face posture cited earlier by the gemara is not absolutely necessary. The degree to which a face to face posture is necessary might reflect whether the congregation plays a role in receiving the berakha.

A second halakha which might indicate a more active role for the erstwhile recipients of the berakha can be found in the Yerushalmi Megilla (4:8), which maintains that the congregation may not look at the kohanim during the recital of

the berakha since the community itself might lose concentration. If the Yisra'el were merely the object of the berakha, it would be unnecessary for the congregation to concentrate. Evidently the Yisra'elim also participate in the delivery of the berakha by focusing upon its meaning; thus, any diversion which might distract them from this concentration is forbidden.

Interestingly enough, the gemara in Chagiga (15b) attributes the prohibition of looking at the kohanim to the fact that the Shekhina, the Divine Presence, resides upon their hands and glancing at the Shekhina will weaken eyesight. Tosafot *ibid.* discusses the difference between the Yerushalmi's reason and the one provided by the gemara. Based in part upon the Yerushalmi, the Rambam describes the posture of the Yisra'elim while they receive the berakha from the kohanim: the congregation should have intent to listen to the berakha and maintain a face-to-face stance, while at the same time not looking directly at them. Though the Rambam does not cite the issue of disruption of concentration - he interprets the Yerushalmi to mean the reverse, that by looking at those who pronounce the berakha, the congregation may ruin the concentration of the kohanim. In a general sense, though, by demanding concentration on the part of the tzibbur the Rambam indicates an active role in receiving the berakha.

A third indication of some active function of the Yisra'el in receiving the berakha can be inferred from the gemara on Sota 39b, which describes the response which the Yisra'el should offer after being blessed. The gemara provides a list of verses which the congregation recites after hearing birkat kohanim. The gemara explains this with a rhetorical question: after all, is it conceivable that a person would receive a blessing without acknowledging and thanking the agent for the berakha? This practice accentuates the need for the recipient to actively accept the berakha and show gratitude for the delivery.

A final example of the role for the congregation can be viewed in the need for the kohen to offer the berakha only after he has been specifically requested to do so. Recall that the Torah prefaces the text of birkat kohanim with the term "Emor lahem," "Say to them." The gemara in Sota 38a establishes the rule that a kohen must wait to be invited before proceeding with the actual berakha. The cantor declares "Kohanim!" and in response they begin their berakha. In

fact, when reciting the actual text of birkat kohanim, the kohanim must be prompted by the cantor so that their berakha is seen as a response to the invitation and prodding of the Yisra'el (or their representative, the cantor). These sources all indicate a more active function for the Yisra'el than merely receiving the berakha. They must face the kohen, pay attention, and indeed invite the berakha and respond to its delivery by reciting verses of their own.

The most extreme formulation of this role of the Yisra'el can be seen in the commentary of the Hafla'a to Ketubot 24. The gemara announced a prohibition for a non-kohen to ascend the "dukhan" (platform) and deliver the berakha with the kohanim. This prohibition is contradicted by the gemara in Shabbat (118b), which cites Rabbi Yossi, a non-kohen, who prided himself in never having abstained from an invitation to ascend the dukhan and offer birkat kohanim; even though Rabbi Yossi was not a kohen, he still assumed a kohen's role by delivering the berakha. The Hafla'a explains that there is no formal prohibition for a Yisra'el to participate in the berakha of the kohanim. Instead each Yisra'el has an actual mitzva to receive the berakha of the kohanim (he cites the Sefer Chareidim who also asserts this mitzva). By demanding the face-to-face posture, the gemara reminds us that the Yisra'el has a formal mitzva to receive the berakha. By ascending the platform and delivering a berakha along with kohanim, the Yisra'el ignores his mitzva to receive the berakha of the kohanim, as no person can deliver and receive a berakha simultaneously. If there are no kohanim in the beit keneseh, and thus no birkat kohanim will be recited, the Yisra'el is excused from the mitzva of receiving a berakha (since no berakha is anticipated). Under these circumstances the Yisra'el can actually ascend and deliver a berakha, since this ascent is not coming at the cost of the expected role of receiving a berakha. Rabbi Yossi would only ascend and deliver a berakha when there were no kohanim in the beit keneseh prepared to give their berakha; excused from his obligation to receive their berakha, he was allowed to offer his own berakha.

Based on the above sources, we see that the Yisra'el is not necessarily only a vessel to receive the berakha of the kohanim; the role of the recipient in birkat kohanim may be far more complex than our initial impression.