

FUNCTIONAL PARAMETERS IN THE BLESSINGS OF KOHANIM

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In memory of my parents, R' Shaul Zelig HaKohen and Elka Balbin, Zikhronom Livrakha.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Midrash¹, as cited by the Ramban² in his commentary on Parshas Beha'alosecha, offers a profound reassurance given by Hashem to Aharon HaKohen. In response to Aharon's sense of diminished role following the dedication of the Mishkan, Hashem tells Moshe:

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה לך אמר לו לאהרן אל תתירא לגדולה מזו אתה מתקן. לך נאמר: דבר אל אהרן ואמרת אליו בהעלתך את הנרת. הקרבנות, כל זמן שבית המקדש קיים הם נוהגים, אבל הנרות לעולם (במדבר ח, ב): אל מול פני המנורה יאירו, וכל הברכות שנתתי לך לברך את בני, אינן בטלין לעולם

“Go and say to Aharon: Do not fear. A greater honour has been designated for you. Therefore, it says, ‘Daber el Aharon ve’amarta elav: Beha’alokha es haNeiros’ (Bamidbar 8:2). The korbanos are only offered while the Beis HaMikdash stands, but the lighting of the Menorah is eternal—‘el mul penei haMenorah ya’iru.’ Likewise, all the blessings I have granted you to bestow upon My children **shall never be nullified.**”

According to the Midrash, Hashem assures Aharon that while the service of korbanos is bound to the physical presence of the Mikdash, his role in lighting the Menorah—symbolic of spiritual illumination—and his privilege to recite Birkas Kohanim, *transcend* the limitations of time and place. The divine berachos conferred through the Kohanim remain operative eternally, serving as a perpetual conduit of spiritual transmission to Klal Yisrael³.

One impetus for composing this essay stems from personal experience at a Pidyon HaBen ceremony. Following the conclusion, the officiating Rabbi—who was also the Kohen that performed the redemption—invited any other Kohanim present to join in bestowing Birkas Kohanim upon the infant. There were two Kohanim present: the Rabbi and me. As we recited the pesukim of Birkas Kohanim, I observed that the Rabbi raised both his hands over the head of the baby, while I, following my customary practice in such informal contexts, extended only one hand. This practice was consistent with how I have traditionally

¹ במדבר רבה טו:1 (https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/1_טו_במדבר_רבה)

² רמב"ן על התורה, במדבר ח:ב

³ See a noteworthy explanation in אם הבנים שמחה (https://www.sefaria.org/Em_HaBanim_Semecha%2C_Fourth_Chapter.10.1?vhe=hebrew|Budapest,_1943&lang=bi), where R' Yissachar Shlomo Teichtal די"ד explains that the Mikdash and Menorah depend upon pervasive Shalom among all segments of Klal Yisroel, and that its destruction symbolises the urgent need to reconstitute that Shalom. Accordingly, the promise that the Jewish people will ultimately abandon שנאת חינם and embrace Shalom is eternal, entrusted to the progenitor of peace—Aharon HaKohen—and his descendants. This is emphasised by the phrase לך שלום וישם, which served to allay Aharon's concerns.

conducted such berakhos outside of the formal dukhening that occurs during Musaf on Yom Tov in the Diaspora⁴ or daily in Eretz Yisrael.

Afterwards, I inquired why he had chosen to use both hands. He responded that while he was unsure of the halakhic reasoning, he was simply following the custom of his father, who was a respected Posek⁵. In contrast, my own practice—what might be termed “halakhic intuition”—led me to use a single hand. Although I could not recall the exact source or rationale at that moment, I had evidently internalised a precedent or explanation that once guided this choice. This essay, then, charts a journey leading to that choice.

2. FORMAL BIRKAS KOHANIM/DUKHENING

2.1. ORIGINS

The first instance of dukhening is described on the eighth day of the dedication of the Mishkan. After offering the korbanos, the Torah states⁶:

וַיִּשָּׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרֶכֶם וַיֵּרֶד מֵעֵשֶׂת מִעֻשֵׂת הַחֹטָאֹת וְהָעֹלָה וְהַשְּׁלָמִים

Aharon lifted his hands towards the people and blessed them; and he stepped down after offering the sin offering, the burnt offering, and the peace offering.

The Midrash Sifra adds⁷

וַיִּשָּׂא אַהֲרֹן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וַיְבָרֶכֶם – “בְּאוֹתָהּ שָׁעָה זָכָה בְּמִתְנֻת כְּהוֹנָה וּזְכָה בְּנִשְׂיָאֵת כְּפִים לוֹ וּלְדוֹרוֹתָיו עַד שִׁיחִיו הַמֵּתִים”

At that moment, Aharon and his sons merited the special gifts of the Kohanim and were granted the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim, a privilege that would extend to Aharon and his descendants until the resurrection of the dead

Interestingly, according to the Sifra, Birkas Kohanim will continue after the arrival of Mashiah.

2.2. IN THE MIKDASH

During the time of the Beis Hamikdash, the Kohanim stood on a raised platform—known as a dukhen, as the Mishna in Midos⁸ relates

רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר בֶּן יַעֲקֹב אוֹמֵר, מֵעֹלָה הִיתָה שָׁם, וּגְבוּהָהּ אֲמָה, וְהָדוּכָן נָתַן עָלֶיהָ, וּבָהּ שְׁלֹשׁ מַעְלֹת שֶׁל חֲצִי חֲצִי אֲמָה

Rabbi Eliezer ben Jacob says: there was a step a cubit high on which a platform was placed, and it had three steps each of half a cubit in height

⁴ To be sure, as noted by the Maharil— the practice among German Jewry has always been to dukhen at Shaḥaris as well as Musaf. The Maharil is puzzled why certain diaspora communities do not also dukhen at Shaḥaris. (סוף הלכות יום טוב) <https://hebrewbooks.org/8918>

⁵ and happened to be my Sandek.

⁶ ויקרא ט:כ"ב

⁷ אות י"ז שם (https://www.sefaria.org/Sifra%2C_Shemini%2C_Mekhilta_DeMiluim_II.17?ven=hebrew|Venice_1545&lang=bi)

⁸ משנה מדות ב:ו

The Torah prescribes⁹

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר
דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם.
יברכך ה' וישמרך
יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך
ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום
ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל ואני אברכם

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying,
Speak to Aharon and to his sons, saying, This is how you shall bless the Children of Israel. You shall tell them,
Hashem bless you, and keep you.
Hashem make his face to shine on you, and be gracious to you.
Hashem lifts his face toward you and gives you peace.
So they shall put my name on the Children of Israel, and I will bless them.

The Sefer HaHinuch states¹⁰

מצות ברכת כהנים בכל יום – שנצטוו הכהנים שיברכו ישראל בכל יום, שנאמר (במדבר ו כג) כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם

The commandment of the priestly blessing **every day**—that the priests were commanded that they should bless Israel **every day**, as it is stated (Bamidbar 6:23), “**Thus** shall you bless the Children of Israel; say to them.”

R' Yosef Babad, the Minḥas Ḥinuch,¹¹ (ibid) explains that there is a מצוה חיובית—an imperative—obligating the Kohanim to recite the berakha at least once every day¹². If a Kohen recites it more than once in a day (for example, if he is called upon to do so in another minyan), he fulfils the mitzvah again, gaining an additional merit.

2.3. SYMBOLISM AND CONDUIT

Why does Hashem transmit His berakhos *through* the Kohanim? The Midrash¹³ states

והיה ברכה, מה עשה אברהם היו לו שני בנים אחד צדיק ואחד רשע, יצחק וישמעאל, אמר אברהם אם מברך אני את יצחק הרי ישמעאל מבקש להתברך והוא רשע, אלא עבד אני, בשר ודם אני, למחר אפטר מן העולם ומה שהקדוש ברוך הוא חפץ לעשות בעולמו, יעשה. כשנפטר אברהם נגלה הקדוש ברוך הוא על יצחק וברכו, שנאמר (בראשית כה, א): ויהי אחרי מות אברהם וגו', ויצחק ברך את יעקב, ויעקב ברך לשנים עשר שבטים, שנאמר (בראשית מט, כח): כל אלה שבטי ישראל שנים עשר וזאת אשר דבר להם אביהם ויברך אותם. מכאן ואילך אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא הרי הברכות מסורות לכם, הכהנים יהיו מברכים את בני, כשם שאמרתי לאברהם אביהם והיה ברכה, לכך נאמר: כה תברכו וגו'.

⁹ במדבר ו:כג-כו

¹⁰ ספר החינוך, מצוה שע"ח

¹¹ https://www.sefaria.org/Minchat_Chinukh.378.1?lang=bi

¹² According to Tosfos, the Kohanim also dukhened at the Tamid Shel Bein Ha'arbaim Korbanos.

¹³ במדבר רבה י"ב:ב (https://www.sefaria.org/Bamidbar_Rabbah.11.2?vhe=Midrash_Rabbah_--_TE&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

And be a blessing'—What did Avraham do? He had two sons: one righteous and one wicked—Yitzhak and Yishmael. Avraham said, 'If I bless Yitzhak, then Yishmael will also seek to be blessed, though he is wicked. I am but a mortal servant; tomorrow I will depart from this world. Let whatever Hashem desires to do in His world be done.' When Avraham passed away, Hashem appeared to Yitzhak and blessed him, as it is written (Bereishis 25:1): 'And it was after the death of Avraham...' Then Yitzhak blessed Ya'akov, and Ya'akov blessed the twelve tribes, as it is written (Bereishis 49:28): 'All these are the tribes of Israel, twelve, and this is what their father spoke to them and blessed them.' From that point forward, Hashem declared, 'Behold, the blessings are entrusted to you. The Kohanim shall bless My children, just as I said to Avraham their father, "And be a blessing."' Therefore, it is written: 'So shall you bless [using the three verses of Birkas Kohanim]' ...

The Midrash reveals that when Avraham faced the dilemma of blessing his sons—knowing that blessing the righteous Yitzhak would prompt the wicked Yishmael to seek a berakha as well—he deferred to Hashem's judgment. After Avraham's passing, a chain of berakhos was established: Hashem blessed Yitzhak, who blessed Ya'akov, who in turn blessed the twelve tribes. This pattern established the precedent for the Kohanim to serve as Hashem's agents in blessing the Jewish people, continuing the sacred tradition that began with our forefathers.

Do Kohanim have a license to bless the people *whenever* they were inclined to do so¹⁴ or is this license limited to the context of formal Tefillah?

In the Beis Hamikdash, dukhening was specifically instituted in the morning to follow immediately after the offering of the Korban Tamid¹⁵.

The Midrash Sifrei¹⁶ indicates that the positive *Torah* command¹⁷ remains applicable in the *absence* of the Beis Hamikdash

לשום את שמו שם - נאמר כאן לשום את שמו ונאמר להלן (במדבר ו) ושמו את שמי, מה שמי האמור, ומה שמי האמור להלן - ברכת כהנים, אף שמי האמור כאן - ברכת כהנים

אין לי אלא במקדש, בגבולין מניין? ת"ל (שמות כב) בכל המקום אשר אזכיר את שמי אבוא אליך וברכתיך. אם כן למה נאמר לשום את שמו שם, לשכנו תדרשו? במקדש אתה אומר בכתבו, ובמדינה בכניו

'To place His name there'—It is stated here 'to place His name,' and it is stated elsewhere (Bamidbar 6) 'and they shall place My name.' Just as 'My name' mentioned there refers to Birkas Kohanim, so too 'My name' mentioned here refers to Birkas Kohanim.

How do we know this applies outside the Beis Hamikdash? From the verse (Shemos 20:21): 'In every place where I cause My name to be mentioned, I will come to you and bless you.' If so, why does the verse specify 'to place His name there, His dwelling shall you seek'? This teaches us that in the Beis Hamikdash, we pronounce Hashem's ineffable name as written, while elsewhere we use the name as commonly pronounced in prayer.

¹⁴ Halakhically, a Kohen must be in a state of emotional composure and relative joy in order to perform Birkas Kohanim. This requirement underpins the restrictions placed upon a Kohen who is an aveil, particularly during the initial stages of mourning. The aveil's compromised emotional state is considered incompatible with the spiritual posture required for bestowing the priestly blessing. For a fuller discussion of this topic, see my analyses on the pitputim blog—<https://pitputim.me/2013/09/22/can-or-should-an-aveil-perform-bircas-cohanim/> and <https://pitputim.me/2013/11/10/can-or-should-an-aveil-perform-bircas-cohanim-part-2/>.

¹⁵ משנה תמיד ז:ב

¹⁶ Devarim 62:4

¹⁷ Many Rishonim describe Birkas Kohanim as comprising *three* distinct positive commandments (mitzvos aseh), corresponding to the three individual berakhos articulated in the verses themselves.

In other words, although today's Kohen does not pronounce Hashem's ineffable four-letter name (Y-H-V-H) as was done in the Beis Hamikdash, the obligation to dukhen remains a Torah commandment. This may also be inferred contextually from the Rambam¹⁸ who does not differentiate between the times of the Beis Hamikdash and thereafter

כל כהן שאינו עולה לדוכן אף על פי שבטל מצות עשה אחת הרי זה כעובר על שלש עשה שנאמר (במדבר ו כג) "כה תברכו את בני ישראל" (במדבר ו כג) "אמור להם" (במדבר ו כז) "ושמו את שמי..."

Any Kohen who does not ascend the platform¹⁹ to dukhen—even though he neglects one commandment—it is considered as if he violated **three** positive commandments—as (Bamidbar 6:23-27) states: [1] "This is how you shall bless the children of Israel," [2] "Say to them," and [3] "And you shall set My name..."

2.4. HALAKHIC STATUS: TORAH VS. RABBINIC COMMAND

There is some discussion from R' Chaim Binyamin Pontremoli²⁰ about the view of R' Sa'adia Gaon²¹ as analysed by R' Yerucham Fishel Perlow²² and R' Ya'akov Emden²³, who held that the Mitzvah outside of the Beis Hamikdash is Rabbinic²⁴. Notwithstanding these opinions, the majority view of the Rishonim and Aḥaronim is that it is a Torah command, even today. This is evidenced by R' Yosef Karo in the Shulḥan Arukh²⁵

כל כהן שאין בו אחד מהדברים המעכבים אם אינו עולה לדוכן אע"פ שבטל מצות עשה אחת הרי זה כעובר בג' עשה אם היה בב"ה כשקורא כהנים או אם אמרו לו לעלות או ליטול ידיו

Any Kohen who does not have one of the things that prevent him [from performing Birkas Kohanim²⁶] — if he does not go to dukhen, even though he has forfeited **one positive Mitzvah**, it is as if he has violated three positive Mitzvahs if he was in the Shule when they called "Kohanim" or if they told him to go up or to wash his hands.

and echoed by a range of Aḥaronim²⁷, including R' Avraham Gombiner in the Magen Avraham²⁸

¹⁸ רמב"ם, הלכות תפילה ונשיאת כפים טו:יב

¹⁹ Ideally, each Shule should be equipped with an elevated platform from which the Kohanim perform the dukhening, reflecting the practice in the Beis HaMikdash, where the Kohanim ascended a dachan to bless the people. This architectural feature is commonly found in larger or more traditional Shules, where steps typically lead up to the Aron HaKodesh. In contrast, in smaller or more informal prayer settings—such as shtieblach—the Kohanim often recite Birkas Kohanim while standing at floor level (on a carpet).

²⁰ פתח הדביר קכ"ח:ד (<https://hebrewbooks.org/7974>)

²¹ מצוה קנ"ה

²² ביאור על ספר המצוות לרס"ג (https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_Hamitzvot_of_Rasag_Positive_Commandments.155?lang=bi&with=Commentary_on_Sefer_Hamitzvot_of_Rasag&lang2=he)

²³ R' Ya'akov Emden expresses this view in his מור וקציעה (https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=7920&st=&pgnum=110&chilite=) on the טור, אורח חיים קכ"ח. However, his position appears somewhat ambiguous because in the נ"ד א, חלק א, שאילת יעב"ץ חלק א, נ"ד א, he seems to maintain that the mitzvah is indeed a Torah law.

²⁴ Though R' Sa'adya Gaon *does* count it in his Minyan Hamitzvos. See also a rebuttal in פתח הדביר קכ"ח:ג (<https://hebrewbooks.org/7974>)

²⁵ אורח חיים קכ"ח:ב (https://www.sefaria.org/Magen_Avraham.128.41?lang=bi&with=Commentary_ConnectionsList&lang2=en)

²⁶ For example, a Kohen who has disfiguring physical blemishes (mumim) or one who is physically unable to stand and recite the berakhs may be disqualified from performing Birkas Kohanim, in accordance with the halakhic requirements governing the presentation and posture of the Kohen during the ritual.

²⁷ ערוך השלחן קכ"ח:ד, חיי אדם לב:א

²⁸ מגן אברהם, אורח חיים קכ"ח:מ"א

ונ"ל דאם יראה שאם יעלה לדוכן יעבור זמן תפלה ילך חוץ לבי"ה ויתפלל אבל אם א"ל צריך לעלות כמ"ש
ס"ך דהוי דאורייתא ותפלה דרבנן וכ"מ בתוס' סוטה דף ל"ח בשם הירושלמי ואם יראה שיעבור זמן ק"ש
יקרא פסוק ראשון כמ"ש ס"ס מ"ו:

... he needs to go up because saying the Birkas Kohanim is a **biblical commandment** while
[interrupting his] davening is only a rabbinic requirement ...

and the Ḥafetz Ḥaim²⁹, himself a Kohen

ודע דנשיאת כפים בחוץ לארץ הוא גם כן דאורייתא

Know that dukhening in the Diaspora is also a **Torah command**

and where he concludes (ibid)

"ולברך בשמו עד היום הזה" (דברים ד:ח), משמע שנוהג תמיד

"And to bless in his name (Devarim 4:8)" implies that [the Mitzvah of a Kohen to bless] is
pertinent at all times.

This is echoed by R' Naftali Tzvi Yehuda in the Ha'amek Davar³⁰. It is also the opinion of the Alter Rebbe
in the Shulchan Arukh HaRav³¹, R' Yosef Teomim, the Pri Megadim,³² and others³³.

3. PARAMETERS OF THE MITZVAH

We have established that Birkas Kohanim, specifically reciting the three prescribed berakhs from
Bamidbar³⁴ during the davening, is generally considered a Torah commandment that applies even without
the Beis HaMikdash and is not limited to the Land of Israel³⁵.

3.1. FREQUENCY AND GEOGRAPHY OF PRACTICE

The Ramo rules³⁶ that Ashkenazim do not dukhen daily outside of Israel. On the other hand,
Rabbeinu Simḥa, a Talmid of Rashi, records in his Maḥzor Vitri³⁷

²⁹ או"ח קכ"ח, שער הציון בסוף הסימן

³⁰ <https://www.sefaria.org/Deuteronomy.18.5?lang=en&with=Haamek%20Davar&lang2=en> העמק דבר י"ח:ה

³¹ https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh_HaRav_Orach_Chayim.128.3?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en שו"ע או"ח קכ"ח:ג

³² משבצות זהב קכ"ח, סק"ג

³³ <https://hebrewbooks.org/1375> רדב"ז חלק ד, סימן א שס"ד

³⁴ במדבר ו:כ"ג

³⁵ A minyan of ten adult men is a halakhic prerequisite for the recitation of Birkas Kohanim. During the COVID-19 pandemic, when many communities resorted to outdoor or balcony minyanim, halakhic uncertainty arose regarding the validity of such minyanim—particularly in cases where visual or spatial separation existed between participants. These questions extended to whether Kohanim could recite Birkas Kohanim under such conditions. Additionally, in instances where no valid minyan was present—or where its halakhic status was in doubt—questions were raised as to whether a Kohen might nevertheless recite Birkas Kohanim while omitting the preliminary berakha.

The Meiri (Sotah 39b), praises an elderly Kohen for consistently reciting the berakha before performing Birkas Kohanim—implying that *omitting* the prior berakha does not constitute a halakhic infraction. Additionally, R' Ḥaim Benveniste in the Kenesses HaGedolah (Orach Ḥaim 128:15) writes that in general we require a minimum of two Kohanim. A solitary Kohen who performs Birkas Kohanim in the repetition of Shemone Esreh should not recite a prior berakha, suggesting that while normative practice may follow the opinion that even a solitary Kohen should recite Birkas Kohanim, the absence of the prior berakha does not inherently invalidate the act.

³⁶ שו"ע אורח חיים קכ"ח:מ"ד

³⁷ https://www.sefaria.org/Machzor_Vitry_Laws_of_Shabbat.130.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en — France, 1000's

Kohanim dukhen, on Yom Tov, Ḥol HaMoed, Rosh Ḥodesh at Shaḥaris and Musaf, and during the weekdays at Shaḥaris

This practice is also recorded in the Siddur Rashi³⁸, and the Maharil wonders why it is no longer observed. Indeed, R' Moshe MiTrani, asserts³⁹ that from a Torah perspective, the correct place to dukhen is at Shaḥaris, as this follows the practice in the Beis HaMikdash after the morning korbanos⁴⁰.

Among Sefardim, however, it remains customary to dukhen either daily or on Shabbos (see, for example, R' Ḥaim Palaggi in the Kaf HaḤaim⁴¹ and R' Yitzhak Yosef in Yalkut Yosef⁴²). The prevailing reason why Ashkenazim in the Diaspora do not dukhen daily—except on Yom Tov—is explained by the Ramo: Jews are often preoccupied and burdened by their efforts to earn a livelihood, a Kohen who is not in a state of joy should refrain from performing Birkas Kohanim⁴³.

It remains unclear why Jews in *Israel* were regarded as less burdened by concerns of livelihood, thereby enabling daily dukhening, while this was not the case in the Diaspora. This disparity led the Vilna Gaon to attempt to reinstitute daily dukhening outside of Israel. His foremost disciple, R' Ḥaim of Volozhin, records that the Vilna Gaon instructed⁴⁴ the Kohanim in his Shule to perform Birkas Kohanim. Yet, on the very day that this decision was made, the Gaon was arrested by government authorities for unrelated reasons. R' Ḥaim himself later endeavoured to introduce dukhening in his own Shule, but that very night the Shule burned down. R' Ḥaim took this as a sign from Heaven that daily dukhening in the Diaspora was not divinely favoured⁴⁵.

The Alter Rebbe of Ḥabad likewise expressed discomfort⁴⁶ with the absence of daily dukhening. The Lubavitcher Rebbe in one of his letters⁴⁷, observes that for reasons unknown, the Alter Rebbe ultimately refrained from instituting daily dukhening in the Diaspora⁴⁸. R' Yechiel Michel Epstein, in the Aruch HaShulḥan, states⁴⁹ that "it is though a Heavenly voice decreed and prohibited Birkas Kohanim daily"

³⁸ https://www.sefaria.org/Siddur_Rashi.506.1?ven=hebrew|Buber_Edition,_Berlin,_1912&lang=he — France, 1000's

³⁹ י"ד פרק (https://hebrewbooks.org/44339) קרית ספר, הלכות תפילה, פרק י"ד

⁴⁰ R' Moshe Sternbuch (סימן מ"ז) שו"ת תשובות והנהגות כרך ג, <https://hebrewbooks.org/49820> seeks to justify the practice of *only* doing so at Musaf.

⁴¹ כף החיים קכ"א:ו' (https://www.sefaria.org/Kaf_HaChayim_on_Shulchan_Arukh%2C_Orach_Chayim.121.5.1?ven=hebrew|Kaf_Hachayim,_Orach_Chayim_vol._I-IV,_Jerusalem_1910-1933&lang=en&lookup=קכ%D7%B4%3A'ו&with=Lexicon&lang2=en)

⁴² ילקוט יוסף, קיצור שלחן ערוך י"ז

⁴³ During my travels in India, I observed that the main shul in Mumbai (Knesset Yehezkel) included dukhening on Shabbos. I surmise that this reflected the custom of the Iraqi Jewish community that settled there in the early nineteenth century.

⁴⁴ שו"ת משיב דבר חלק ב סימן ק"ד (https://hebrewbooks.org/1096)

⁴⁵ That said, some accounts maintain that both R' Ḥayim of Volozhin and the Vilna Gaon continued the practice of private daily Birkhas Kohanim within their own shules, even though the communal shules of Volozhin and Vilna did not adopt the custom. There are also reports that R' Noson Adler—himself a Kohen and the teacher of the Ḥasam Sofer—performed dukhening daily in his private beis midrash.

⁴⁶ שו"ת, אורח קב"ח:נ"ז

⁴⁷ לקוטי שיחות י"ח, עמוד תמ"ח

⁴⁸ A particularly noteworthy account appears in an unofficial record of a discussion with the Lubavitcher Rebbe during the evening of the first day of Sukkos, 5721 (1960). According to the publication ימי מלך, the Rebbe reportedly advanced the converse argument: if the diaspora communities do not experience sufficient joy to warrant dukhening at daily services, then the same limitation should logically apply to communities in Israel. The Rebbe purportedly indicated that were it not for the established minhag in Israel, he would have proposed restricting the practice there to the Musaf service on Yom Tov, thereby aligning it with diaspora practice! By contrast, R' Dov Begon related to me that it is *only* in Eretz Yisrael that a Kohen can feel genuinely joyful on account of feeling spiritually more fulfilled.

⁴⁹ קכ"ח:ס"ד (https://www.sefaria.org/Arukh_HaShulchan%2C_Orach_Chaim.128.16?ven=hebrew|Arukh_HaShulchan,_Orach_Chayim_--_Wikisource&lang=en&sbqs=יום%20בכל&with=SidebarSearch&lang2=en)

outside of Israel. R' Ephraim Zalman Margulies, in his responsa *Beis Ephraim*, adopts a dissenting view⁵⁰, contending that there was never any precedent for daily dukhening in the Diaspora to begin with.

In Tzefas, there exists a tradition of refraining from daily dukhening⁵¹. This practice is believed to have originated in response to a series of tragedies that afflicted the city, leaving the Kohanim in a state described as somewhat disheartened. Notably, Shabbetai Tzvi, the so-called false Messiah, reintroduced daily Birkas Kohanim in the Diaspora as part of his broader messianic agenda. However, following his exposure as a charlatan, this practice became closely associated with his innovations. It can therefore be inferred that a general aversion to any measures linked to him contributed to the reluctance to restore daily dukhening. Some scholars further suggest that enduring negative sentiment, together with a perception of jinxed mazel, may have played a role in inhibiting the practice's reestablishment.

3.2. NATURE—MITZVAH ḤIYUVIS OR KIYUMIS

The majority halakhic opinion⁵² characterises dukhening as a mitzvah *kiyumis*—a fulfilment-dependent positive commandment that applies when a Kohen is in a context in which he is expected or called upon to bless the congregation. For instance, if a Kohen is present in Shule during the recitation of Retzeh and hears the Ḥazan⁵³ call out “Kohanim,” but deliberately refrains from ascending to bless the congregation, he is considered to have transgressed the biblical imperative of “Ko Sevarakhu.” Conversely, if he leaves the Shule before Retzeh and does not hear the call to ascend, he is not viewed as having neglected a commandment⁵⁴.

A useful parallel often cited is the mitzvah of *tzitzis*⁵⁵. There is no obligation to actively seek out a four-cornered garment to fulfil the mitzvah; rather, the commandment applies when one is wearing such a garment. In contrast, according to the *Netziv*⁵⁶, a minority of authorities—including Rav Achai Gaon, the Rambam and the Ḥinuch⁵⁷—maintain that dukhening constitutes a mitzvah *ḥiyuvis*—an obligatory positive commandment (*hovas gavra*). Under this framework, a Kohen is personally obligated to *seek out* at least one opportunity each day to fulfil Birkas Kohanim, regardless of circumstance.

A mitzvah *ḥiyuvis* is distinct from a mitzvah *kiyumis* in that it imposes a proactive duty upon the individual to create the conditions necessary for fulfilment. The mitzvah of tefillin exemplifies this: one who lacks a pair is obligated to borrow or acquire them to fulfil the commandment.

⁵⁰ וּפְרִים בֵּית אֶפְרַיִם (https://hebrewbooks.org/642)

⁵¹ R' Moshe Sternbuch in *Hilchos HaGra uMinhagav* 109, writes that in the time of the Arizal the Shelah Hakadosh noted that they did dukhen daily but later, with the Ḥassidic Aliya, they dukhened only during Musaf on Shabbos. (https://hebrewbooks.org/19929)

⁵² The ד"ה 'הרבה דברים יש בברכת כהנים' cites an opinion that considers it a מצוה חיובית but dismisses that opinion. See *חן מאירי* כד: on מאירי (https://shas.alhatorah.org/Full/Megillah/24b.14#e1nf)

⁵³ The משנה ברורה קכ"ח:1 opines that even if someone other than the Ḥazan says “Go and wash your hands [for dukhening]” this is also considered a “calling to dukhen” and the Kohen must dukhen.

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that Rabbeinu Yona (Shaarei Teshuvah, Sha'ar Shelishi, Madrega Shniyah, §22) cautions that one who deliberately avoids the performance of a mitzvah—even passively—may be subject to negative consequences, particularly at a time of divine anger (*be'ida derischa*), as referenced in Menachos 41a.

⁵⁵ Or eating Matzah on all days of Pesah. R' Moshe Feinstein *Igros Moshe* (אבן העזר ק"ב), and R' Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (see פניני הור"ב from R' Hershel Schachter) for example contend that living in Israel is a מצוה קיומית.

⁵⁶ ט: כה:ט (https://www.sefaria.org/Haamek_Sheilah_on_Sheiltot_d'Rav_Achai_Gaon.125.9.1?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en)

⁵⁷ ספר החינוך שע"ח

3.3. SECONDARY QUESTIONS: REPETITION AND PRIVATE BLESSING

Once a Kohen has performed Birkas Kohanim once⁵⁸ in the course of a day, he has discharged his Torah obligation. Nonetheless, if he later encounters another congregation that lacks a Kohen and is invited to dukhen, he may do so again⁵⁹. There is some discussion whether he should recite a new berakha before the second performance⁶⁰. Some hold that, unlike the case of shofar, where one who has already fulfilled the mitzvah does not recite a berakha when sounding it for others, a Kohen who performs Birkas Kohanim for a second congregation should, in fact, recite a new berakha. This is because the obligation to bless is not merely a facilitative role on behalf of the congregation, but a renewed personal obligation upon the Kohen when a qualifying congregation is present. The Ḥasam Sofer, by contrast, appears to maintain⁶¹ that in such a case the Kohen blesses only to *enable* the congregation to receive the berakha and not because of a renewed individual obligation.

One might then wonder whether a Kohen who encounters a friend in the street and sincerely wishes to bless them by reciting the formulaic three Berakhos is fulfilling a Torah command, a Rabbinic command, or no command at all. Alternatively, perhaps he is even forbidden to do so.

4. FUNCTIONAL REQUIREMENTS OF DUKHENING

The Shulḥan Arukh dedicates an entire chapter to the details of how and to whom Birkas Kohanim is to be performed.

4.1. WASHING THE HANDS

From the pasuk⁶² ה' יְדֵיכֶם קֹדֵשׁ וּבְרַכְוּ אֹתָהֶם — ‘When you lift your hands, sanctify them’ — the Gemara⁶³ derives scriptural support for the Rabbinic enactment⁶⁴ that a Kohen must have clean hands before dukhening⁶⁵. The washing upon waking up is insufficient for this purpose⁶⁶. This aligns with the understanding of dukhening as part of the Avoda — the Temple sacrificial service — which is mirrored in the requirements and placement during חזרת הש"צ.

4.2. REMOVING THE SHOES

A Rabbinic enactment of R' Yochanan Ben Zakkai⁶⁷ requires Kohanim to remove their footwear before *ascending the dais* to dukhen prior to Retzeh so that they can commence once the Chazan has issued the call “Kohanim”. This was instituted to prevent a Kohen from missing out on dukhening due to a leather sandal

⁵⁸ See 3:ח"ה:ג (https://www.sefaria.org/Sharai_Teshuvah.3.22?lang=he&with=all&lang2=he)

⁵⁹ See a fascinating discussion of this in שו"ת הר צבי א"ט:א (https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=20947&st=&pgnum=78) in context of a case where a Ḥazan finished Sim Shalom with the Kohanim on the dais, and where unexpectedly he forgot to call the Kohanim for Birkas Kohanim and no dukhening took place. Should the Ḥazan return to Retzeh after which the Kohanim would then dukhen or do we say that since Ḥazaras HaShatz has ended we do not go back and dukhen.

⁶⁰ (https://hebrewbooks.org/1494) תשובות מהר"ם שיק, נ"ב

⁶¹ (https://www.sefaria.org/Responsa_Chatam_Sofer,_Orach_Chayim.22?lang=he) שו"ת חתם סופר א"ח כ"ב

⁶² (https://mg.alhatorah.org/Dual/R._Bachya/Tehillim/134.1#m5e0n6) תהילים קלד

⁶³ סוטה ל"ט.

⁶⁴ פרי מגדים (מש"ז בסוף הסימן), משנה ברורה סעיף קטן י"ט

⁶⁵ Technically, the hands just need to be cleaned as opposed to the thrice pouring to remove a Ruah Ra.

⁶⁶ R' Avraham ben HaRambam, as cited in the introduction to the ספר רוקח על הרמב"ם, contends that the Rambam held that the morning Netilas Yadayim is sufficient. This was apparently also the practice in Egyptian communities.

⁶⁷ there. רש"י and ראש השנה ל"א:

strap becoming dislodged⁶⁸, which could lead to others incorrectly assuming that he is an improper Kohen if he remains in the Shule unable to dukhen because he was delayed and didn't make his move prior to Retzeh. Over time, this practice has been extended by a minority view to include cases where the Kohen wears footwear without straps, non-leather shoes⁶⁹, or when there is no dais to ascend⁷⁰.

4.3. ASCENDING A PLATFORM

In Halakhic discussions on the laws of dukhening, the phrasing⁷¹ consistently refers to a Kohen 'going up' to dukhen—עולים לדוכן. This terminology echoes the practice of the Kohanim in the Beis Hamikdash, who stood on a raised platform. While having a raised platform is preferred⁷², it is not a mandatory requirement for dukhening during davening. R' Ovadia Yosef analyses the question of whether a formal dais is mandatory in his responsa⁷³.

4.4. STANDING

The Mishna Berurah notes⁷⁴ that standing during dukhening is a Torah requirement⁷⁵, as it is considered an act of שירות—formal service⁷⁶. Interestingly, while the inclusion/placement of dukhening *within* the repetition of the Shemoneh Esreh is a Rabbinic enactment, elements of the *manner* in which it is performed remains governed by a Torah-level obligation.

4.5. LANGUAGE

The choice of language is described in an explicit Mishna⁷⁷. The Mishna Berurah states⁷⁸ that, according to most Poskim, a Kohen who recites the berakha in a language other than Lashon Kodesh does not fulfil the mitzvah. This requirement is also a Torah-level condition. In a detailed responsum⁷⁹ to R' Ephraim Greenblatt, R' Moshe Feinstein emphasises that not only must the berakhs be recited in Hebrew, but there can be no deviation from the precise wording specified in the Torah.

⁶⁸ See also https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Berakhot.3.1.26?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

⁶⁹ Some Aḥaronim appear to permit non leather shoes without laces (such as slip ons). See for example, אות י"ב, ערוך השולחן קכ"ח. Whether it is permitted to dukhen in bare feet depends on what is acceptable in a *given* community. In that context, it would be remiss of me not to retell an incident in Mumbai when one of the Kohanim was about to ascend in bare feet and a congregant objected that this was unacceptable. The Rabbi, R' Gavriel Holtzberg דמו יקום ה', was asked his opinion and replied "Nu, if you don't want him to dukhen in bare feet, take off your socks and give them to him"

⁷⁰ לא פלוג

⁷¹ To be sure, this isn't in the language of the משנה and is only employed there with respect to לויים.

⁷² פמ"ג סימן ק"ל, בשב"ז ס"ק ב

⁷³ שו"ת יחוה דעת חלק ב סימן י"ג

⁷⁴ משנה ברורה, קכ"ח:ג

⁷⁵ שולחן ערוך אורח, קכ"ח:יד

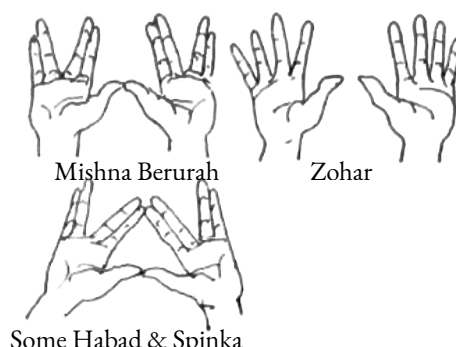
⁷⁶ According to the Noda BiYehuda (מהדו"ק סימן ה) the Rambam held that this is Halakhah LeMoshe MiSinai. ולשרת לעמוד ולשרת

⁷⁷ סוטה פרק ז, משנה א

⁷⁸ אורח קכ"ח:ג

⁷⁹ שו"ת אגרות משה אורח, חלק א, סימן ל"ב

4.6. FORMATION OF FINGERS



Rishonim⁸⁰ note that the Kohen spreads his fingers when he dukhens, after which he makes a fist upon closing. There exists a well-established custom for Kohanim to arrange their fingers during Birkas Kohanim in a manner that creates five distinct spaces⁸¹. This practice, while absent from both the Gemara and the writings of the Rambam, appears in the Rosh⁸² and is later codified in the Shulḥan Arukh. Interestingly, the Zohar appears to suggest⁸³ that the fingers should not be joined together⁸⁴. Nevertheless, R' Eliezer Waldenberg interprets⁸⁵ the Zohar as consistent with the five-gap formation, arguing that even according to kabbalistic sources, the symbolic configuration is preserved.

The hands are raised and spread only following the recitation of the initial berakha and after turning to face the congregation. The fingers are then arranged to create five distinct visual “gaps” or “spaces,” achieved by dividing each hand into three sections, as shown in the illustrations. Two common methods exist for forming the fifth space: one involves separating the thumbs from one another, while the other entails bringing the thumbs together in a “window-like” formation that nonetheless preserves a central gap⁸⁶. Customarily, the right hand is positioned slightly higher than the left.

4.7. VISUAL RESTRICTIONS

Halakhically, a Kohen is prohibited from looking at his own hands during the recitation of the blessing, and the congregation is similarly forbidden from gazing upon the hands of the Kohanim during the dukhening. In the era of the Beis HaMikdash, when the Kohanim invoked the ineffable name of Hashem, the Shekhinah was said to rest upon their hands. R' Haim Palaggi, in the Kaf HaChaim⁸⁷, cites the Zohar as affirming that this principle retains relevance even in the present day. The prevailing custom is for the Kohanim to keep their hands covered beneath their talleisim, thereby preventing the congregation from seeing them. The Kohen himself is likewise expected to close his eyes throughout the dukhening, so as to avoid inadvertently viewing his hands—particularly if they are not fully covered by the tallis.

⁸⁰ Rashi (סוטה ל"ט:) and Rambam ג:ד"ג ונשיאת כפים י"ד

⁸¹ דכתיב מציץ מן החרכים ה' חרכים דהיינו חלונות ע"כ מכוונים לעשות ה' אדירים. Hashem's divinity emanates through the “five windows” of the hands.

⁸² פרק ג' מגילה, סימן כ"א

⁸³ זוהר נשא, טו:קנח (https://www.sefaria.org/Zohar,_Nasso.15.158?vhe=Vocalized_Zohar,_Israel_2013&lang=bi&vside=Hebrew_Translation|he&with=Translation_Open&lang2=en)

⁸⁴ מעשה רב, הלכות יו"ט, אות קס"ג. Reportedly, the Vilna Gaon favoured the Zohar's suggestion.

⁸⁵ שו"ת ציץ אליעזר, יא:ו

⁸⁶ ר' חיים נאה, קצות השולחן כג:ט (<https://hebrewbooks.org/7720>)

⁸⁷ https://www.sefaria.org/Kaf_HaChayim_on_Shulchan_Arukh,_Orach_Chayim.128.143.1?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en

An additional question arises concerning the widespread custom of congregants covering their own heads with their talleisim during Birkas Kohanim, despite the fact that the Kohanim's hands are already concealed⁸⁸.

The Shulḥan Arukh HaRav, amongst others records⁸⁹ the custom⁹⁰ wherein the Kohen extends his hands *outside* of the Tallis during dukhening⁹¹. Although this practice was previously unfamiliar to me, I observed it in an online recording of Birkas Kohanim in a Sefardic synagogue, where two of the Kohanim had their hands visibly extended. When the hands are not covered, the customary practice of congregants drawing their own talleisim over themselves during dukhening assumes a more practical significance..

4.8. ARM HEIGHT

The term נשיאת כפים or נשיאות כפים refers to the raising of the palms⁹² of the hands. Halakhically, and as a Torah requirement of dukhening, the “hands” are to be raised to shoulder height. I place “hands” in quotation marks because the term used in the Shulchan Arukh is yad, which denotes the entire arm. According to the plain reading, it is insufficient for the arms to be bent so that only the palms reach shoulder height; rather, the entire arm should be extended horizontally, with both palms and fingers at shoulder level.⁹³ This interpretation is endorsed by several Aḥaronim, including the Radvaz⁹⁴ and the Mabit⁹⁵. In practice, I follow this method based on what I observed my father do (mesorah).

However, it is noted that some Kohanim position their arms at their sides and raise them from the elbows at approximately a 45-degree angle so that the palms reach shoulder height. The terminology of נשיאת כפים and not נשיאת ידיים might be seen as supporting this approach; though it does not align with the straightforward reading of the Shulḥan Arukh. This discussion does not imply that those who do not fully extend their arms horizontally fail to fulfil the mitzvah or recite a berakha levatalah, but it remains a matter that a Kohen may wish to review with his Rav.

It is customary for the Kohanim to sway in specific directions while reciting the three blessings. The Ba'al HaTurim⁹⁶ understands this practice as analogous to the Kohen's waving of the korbanos in the Beis HaMikdash. In shules that face east, the Kohanim initially face west; accordingly, north is to their right and

⁸⁸ This was the view of the Arizal as mentioned in the קמ"ג אות החיים though this is disputed as the Arizal's view by the Minḥas Elazar שו"ת או"ח. Indeed, it would appear that Munkacz Ḥassidim, as argued by the Minḥas Elazar, may be the only Kohanim who keep their hands *outside* the Tallis.

⁸⁹ שולחן ערוך הרב קכ"ח:ל"ו. In light of the Shulḥan Arukh HaRav's view, (sometimes he qualifies a Psak in his Siddur, in this case, he did not) I consulted three Ḥabad Rabbanim who were Kohanim to inquire whether they followed this practice during dukhening. All three indicated that they did not extend their hands outside the Tallis, suggesting that the recorded custom—though present in the Shulḥan Arukh HaRav—is not universally observed, even within Ḥabad communities. The third Rav I consulted descends from a lineage of early Ḥabad Ḥassidim who had studied in the original Tomchei Temimim Yeshiva in Lubavitch. Given this background, I anticipated that he—and perhaps his forebears—might have followed the practice of keeping the hands outside the Tallis during dukhening. In response, however, each of the three Rabbanim explained that they simply followed the custom as demonstrated by their fathers. This underscores the particularly resilient Masoretic tradition among Kohanim, which appears to be preserved with notable consistency across generations and extends even to fine procedural details.

⁹⁰ https://www.sefaria.org/Teshuvot_HaRadbaz_Volume_4.1080.1?ven=hebrew|Teshuvot_HaRadbaz,_Warsaw_1882&lang=bi

⁹¹ לבוש קכ"ח:כג, חיי אדם כ"ט, שו"ת מנחת אלעזר ג:נו, קיצור שולחן ערוך צ, ועוד

⁹² שולחן ערוך או"ח קכ"ח, בסעיף י"ד

⁹³ שו"ת חתם סופר, או"ח א, קצ"ד

⁹⁴ Some Rishonim do not advise lifting the arms/hands higher than shoulder height (<https://hebrewbooks.org/43020> גאון (סדר ר' עמרם ואון). In the Beis Hamikdash they were raised above head height (משנה תמיד ז:ב)

⁹⁵ קרית ספר, י"ד

⁹⁶ בעל הטורים, פרשת שמני ט, י"א

south to their left. For each of the emphasised words, the Kohanim sway⁹⁷ from left to right⁹⁸. In shules that face north, the Kohanim still sway from left to right.

Each of the three berakhos may be understood as comprising two sub-berakhos⁹⁹, each culminating in a personalised final khaf (ך). The Rema, in his Darkei Moshe, maintains that the Kohen should extend or elongate his melody specifically on these words¹⁰⁰.

יברכך ה' // וישמרך //
יאר ה' פניו אליך // ויחנך //
ישא ה' פניו אליך // וישם לך שלום //

4.9. VOICE VOLUME

The requirement to project one's voice at a defined volume is presented in the Shulḥan Arukh as an essential condition¹⁰¹. Although the expression קול רם—"a loud voice"—appears in the writings of the poskim, it is not understood as an absolute requirement. Rather, it suffices that the voice of the Kohen be audible to at least nine members of the tzibbur¹⁰². The Aḥaronim emphasise¹⁰³ that the appropriate volume is not one of shouting¹⁰⁴, but of measured clarity—קול בינוני¹⁰⁵.

4.10. TIMING

The daytime practice is grounded in a Yerushalmi¹⁰⁶ cited by Rishonim, including the Sefer HaEshkol¹⁰⁷. It also explains why many congregations—excluding certain communities of German origin—refrain from dukhening at Neilah on Yom Kippur, as it may occur after nightfall¹⁰⁸. Generally, there is no dukhening at Mincha, since by that time a Kohen may have consumed wine; an exception is made on fast days. The focus on Neilah as the climactic service provides one reason why dukhening is omitted at Mincha on Yom Kippur.

⁹⁷ שולחן ערוך או"ח קכ"ח, רמ"א, בסעיף מ"ה

⁹⁸ The Rema in Darkei Moshe prefers that they sway from right to left (North to South) in the usual preference of right over left.

⁹⁹ עיין בלבוש שם

¹⁰⁰ His view is that one does so for six words in bold but does not sway for the final לך

¹⁰¹ ספרי נשא ל"ט

¹⁰² ד תשובה (https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=19979&st=&pgnum=99&hilite=)

¹⁰³ See משנה ברורה אות נ"ג, שו"ע הרב כ"ג, פרי מגדים באשל אברהם כ"ג

¹⁰⁴ I retain vivid memories of dukhening as a young man alongside some twenty Holocaust survivors, who appeared almost to compete with one another in projecting the words with maximal intensity.

¹⁰⁵ ירושלמי סוטה ז:ב (https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Sotah.7.2.1?ven=hebrew|The_Jerusalem_Talmud_edition_by_Heinrich_W._Guggenheimer._Berlin,_De_Gruyter,_1999-2015&lang=en)

¹⁰⁶ דתענית (https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Taanit.4.1.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

¹⁰⁷ (https://hebrewbooks.org/9047) ספר האשכול, בהלכות ברכת כהנים, אות ט"ו

¹⁰⁸ This is the view of the Ramo in סימן תרכ"ג, though see the גליוני הש"ס on that ירושלמי who implies that the reason we don't say it at night is because there is no Hāzaras HaShatz at night (מעריב) which would not preclude נעילה even if it's late. The Hāfetz Haim (א"א) permits it during Bein Hashmashos (13 minutes after Shekiah).

I have not encountered discussion suggesting that in Hutz La'aretz, dukhening at Mincha on Yom Kippur might be appropriate, given that Neilah¹⁰⁹ tends to encroach well into Bein Hashmashos.

It might be assumed that, since Birkas Kohanim is performed during the day rather than at night, it constitutes a time-bound Mitzva—מצות עשה שהזמן גרמא—and, according to those who follow the Haredim¹¹⁰, that there is also a mitzvah *to be blessed*¹¹¹, under this analysis women would be exempt from attending and *receiving* the Birkas Kohanim. The Minḥas Hīnuch¹¹² rejects this interpretation asserting that Birkas Kohanim should be seen from a Torah perspective as prayer—תפילה—which is applicable *at all times*, and the link between Birkas Kohanim and the time of the service of Korbanos is only an אסמכתא—a non-binding intimation. R' Moshe Feinstein further argues¹¹³ that even if there is a Mitzvah for a non-Kohen to be blessed, the recipient need not have a specific Kavana for that Mitzvah because the nusach of the berakhah is אשר קדשנו בקדושתו של אהרן and that pertains to the *Kohen*¹¹⁴.

4.11. MINYAN

There is a requirement that there be a minyan¹¹⁵. The Aruch Hashulḥan explains¹¹⁶ that Hashem explicitly promises to bless the Kohanim/Congregation—ואני אברכם—and for Hashem's presence—השקפת השכינה—we always require¹¹⁷ a quorum of ten (which may include Kohanim).

4.12. SEFER TORAH

There is a minority opinion that requires a Sefer Torah to be present¹¹⁸. The majority view is that this is not a requirement¹¹⁹. A full discussion is presented by R' Haim Yehoshua HaKohen Hamtzi¹²⁰.

Rabbinically, a Kohen is directed to dukhen during davening. The Kol Bo¹²¹ claims that it was Shlomo Hamelech who declared that the Birkas Kohanim should take place within the davening. From a pure Torah Law perspective — דאורייתא — if the Kohen recites the Birkas Kohanim outside of davening, we might well ask: has he *nonetheless* fulfilled a Torah command? We will return to this question.

¹⁰⁹ See נושאי כלים (https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Taanit.4.1.2?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en) and the הלכה א שם

¹¹⁰ ספר חרדים (יב, יח). One of the most important Mekubalim in Tzefas in the times of the יוסף and the Arizal.

¹¹¹ See section 5

¹¹² מנחת חינוך שע"ח:ד

¹¹³ אגרות משה או"ח ג סימן י"ז

¹¹⁴ He concedes that the non-Kohanim should not say שמו וברוך שמו, however.

¹¹⁵ רמב"ם תפלה פ"ח ה"ה, טו"ש"ע או"ח קכ"ח א, מגילה כג:

¹¹⁶ (https://www.sefaria.org/Arukh_HaShulchan,_Orach_Chaim.128.8?lang=bi) ערוך השלחן קכ"ח:ח

¹¹⁷ The Ran in the פרק הקורא עומדת, מגילה דפי הרי"ף, contends that it is a Rabbinic requirement.

¹¹⁸ באר היטב קכ"ח:א בשם הכנסת הגדולה

¹¹⁹ משנה ברורה קכ"ח:א, ושער הציון שם

¹²⁰ Rav Haim Yehoshua Elazar HaKohen Hamtzi (1795–1881) was born and educated in Izmir. Around 1860 he relocated to Ottoman Palestine. There he established himself in Haifa, where he was appointed both as Rabbi and as a member of the rabbinical court. R' Hamtzi was a notably prolific author, though the majority of his works appeared posthumously. His first published volume, Ko Sevarakhu devoted to the laws of Birkas Kohanim, was printed in Salonica in the very year of his death and more recently republished.

¹²¹ הלכות תפילה, פרק יא:לא (https://www.sefaria.org/Kol_Bo.11.31?lang=he&with=all&lang2=he)

5. WHOSE MITZVAH IS IT?

At first glance, it is clear that the *Torah* command, even today, is a Mitzvah specifically for Kohanim. There is, however, the well-known view of R' Elazar Azkiri in the Sefer Hareidim¹²², who contends that there is also a Mitzvah on the congregation itself¹²³ *to be blessed*¹²⁴.

מצוה לברך כהן את ישראל, וישראל העומדים פנים כנגד פני הכהנים בשתיקה ומכוונים לבם לקבל ברכתם כדבר ה', הם נמי בכלל המצוה

It is a Mitzvah for the Kohen to bless the Yisrael. And the **Yisrael** who stands silently, face to face opposite the Kohanim, directing their hearts to receive the Berakha, **they too are included in the Mitzvah**.

The Hasam Sofer¹²⁵ similarly maintains the view that there is a Mitzvah “to be blessed”. He supports this view by noting that a Kohen may go and bless¹²⁶ a different congregation—even if he has already performed dukhening that day—because that congregation possesses an independent mitzvah to be blessed.

R' Moshe Feinstein¹²⁷ concurs with this position, grounded in the view of the Sefer Hareidim, and rules that even a non-Kohen in the midst of davening should pause and move forward in front of the Kohanim to receive the blessing. This, he argues, reflects the mitzvah incumbent upon those being blessed. The Hafetz Haim, in his Mishnah Berurah¹²⁸, similarly cites the opinion of the Sefer Hareidim approvingly, suggesting that it carries weight despite the absence of a clear articulation of this view among the early Rishonim¹²⁹.

The Ritva¹³⁰ regards Birkas Kohanim as a mitzvah incumbent upon the Kohanim, but not upon those being blessed. Nevertheless, the Kovno Rav, R' Avraham Dov Ber Kahana Shapira¹³¹, offers support for the Sefer Hareidim's view. He notes that Yisraelim are enjoined not to gaze upon the hands of the Kohanim during the berakha, lest their concentration be disrupted. If the congregation bore no part in the mitzvah, he asks, why would such a stricture apply at all¹³²?

¹²² ספר חרדים (יב, יח). (<https://hebrewbooks.org/66231>)

¹²³ The Hazon Ish is reported to have disagreed with the view of the Hareidim and held that the non Kohanim are a Hechsher Mitzvah—facilitate the Mitzvah.

¹²⁴ The Siddur Rashi notes in תק"ח that it was customary for the congregation to kneel while the Birkas Kohanim was being recited. Although I have not personally observed this practice, it is reasonable to surmise that it may have been performed in the Beis HaMikdash, when the Kohanim employed the ineffable name of Hashem during the blessing. Over time, as the Kohanim shifted to using the regular name of Hashem in the blessing, this practice appears to have fallen out of common usage. (https://www.sefaria.org/Siddur_Rashi.508.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

¹²⁵ (או"ח סי' כ"ב) (https://www.sefaria.org/Responsa_Chatam_Sofer%2C_Orach_Chayim.25?lang=bi)

¹²⁶ There is some conjecture as to whether the Hasam Sofer held that the Kohen should make another berakha.

¹²⁷ שו"ת אגרות משה או"ח ד:כ"א (<https://hebrewbooks.org/920>)

¹²⁸ קב"ח in ביאור הלכה

¹²⁹ פירוש הראב"ד (סוף מסכת תמיד) בשם ספר המקצועות. It can be argued that this is the opinion also of

¹³⁰ סוכה ל"א ע"ב. See this discussed in מנחת חינוך שעח:ד (https://www.sefaria.org/Minchat_Chinukh.377.1.4?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en)

¹³¹ שו"ת דבר אברהם, או"ח חלק א, סימן ל"א (<https://hebrewbooks.org/695>)

¹³² It is evident that the Kovno Rav did not maintain that, outside the Beis HaMikdash and without the invocation of the ineffable Name of Hashem, the Shekhinah rested upon the hands of the Kohanim—an assumption which might otherwise have provided an independent reason for prohibiting the congregation from looking at the hands..

R' Yehuda Asad¹³³ proposes a compromise view: that the recipients of the berakha are not direct fulfillers of the mitzvah, but rather enablers¹³⁴—participants who facilitate the performance of the mitzvah by the Kohanim. R' Osher Weiss¹³⁵ presents a distinct perspective: while there may not be a formal mitzvah for the Yisraelim to be blessed, their presence in shul constitutes a fulfilment of ratzon Hashem—the Divine will that Birkas Kohanim be actualised within the communal setting¹³⁶.

A related and noteworthy halakhic discussion concerns the status of 'am she-ba-sados'—individuals who are unable to attend Shule due to distance or circumstance, such as being in faraway fields. Ordinarily, only those physically present and standing opposite¹³⁷ the Kohanim¹³⁸ are considered to be included in the berakha of Birkas Kohanim; those situated behind the Kohanim or absent from the Shule are not typically regarded as recipients.

This raises a significant question: what of those who are infirm or otherwise prevented from attending for legitimate reasons—are they excluded from the blessing? Halakhah affirms that such individuals are indeed included. This is evidenced by the ruling that in a Shule comprised entirely of Kohanim, the dukhening is nevertheless performed. For whom, then, is the berakha directed? Precisely for those in the fields and others unable to be present¹³⁹.

There is some discussion as to whether women must be present in shul in order to receive the blessing of Birkhas Kohanim. The Taz maintains¹⁴⁰ that their presence is unnecessary for two reasons. First, the formulation of Birkhas Kohanim is addressed specifically to males. Secondly, women are deemed to be blessed automatically by virtue of their husbands or fathers being blessed.

This leads to a further inquiry: Does the daily Birkas Kohanim performed in Israel extend to those residing in distant locations in Hutz La'aretz? R' Shlomo Zalman Auerbach rules¹⁴¹ that it does not. Even if the Kohen explicitly intends to include those outside of Israel, they are not halakhically encompassed by the blessing.

If one adopts the view of the Haredim¹⁴², the Biur Halakhah, and the Hasam Sofer, the issue becomes more readily intelligible. According to these authorities, there exist two quasi-independent mitzvos: one

¹³³ מ"ו מ"ו תשובות מהר"י אסאד, א"ח, ס"י מ"ו (https://hebrewbooks.org/845)

¹³⁴ A parallel may be drawn to the mitzvah of procreation, which is halakhically incumbent upon males but cannot be fulfilled without the participation of a female. Although she is not formally commanded, her involvement is indispensable for the male to fulfil the mitzvah. In a similar vein, a Kohen requires the presence of recipients in order to fulfil his mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim; without someone to bless, the mitzvah cannot be actualised

¹³⁵ מנחת אשר, פרשת נשא

¹³⁶ R' Osher Weiss applies the conceptual framework of רצון ה' in several contexts. It represents a hiddush and does not appear to reflect a mainstream position. I find this view challenging to fully reconcile, especially given its foundational implications. One might reasonably expect that, if this concept were widely accepted, it would have been articulated—at least in some form—by the Rishonim or Aḥaronim, beyond the conventional categories of mitzvah ḥiyuvis and mitzvah kiyumis.

¹³⁷ R' Hershel Schachter explains that as long as someone on the side of the Shule has a *line of sight*—albeit at an angle—towards the Kohanim, this is considered acceptable.

¹³⁸ In a Shule layout where the Hāzan is positioned “in a horizontal line” with the Kohanim—due to the absence of a recessed Amud or a raised platform—this arrangement may present a practical challenge. To address the issue, some Shules employ a movable Amud on wheels, enabling the Hāzan to jump back before the Kohanim commence their blessing.

¹³⁹ שו"ע א"ח קכ"ח:כ"ח

¹⁴⁰ ט"ז א"ח קכח, ס"ק כ"ב

¹⁴¹ הליכות שלמה פ"ו הערה ז

¹⁴² See also R' Eliyahu David Rabinowitz-Teomim, the Aderes, in חשבונות של מצוה מצוה שע"ח where he initially is skeptical of the view of the Haredim but ultimately supports it.

incumbent upon the Kohen to bless, and another upon the non-Kohen to receive the blessing¹⁴³. Within this framework, it is understandable that a Kohen may fulfil his mitzvah even in the absence of a non-Kohen standing directly before him.

However, if one rejects this dual structure and instead sees the non-Kohen not as the subject of an independent mitzvah, but merely as an enabler of the Kohen's mitzvah, a difficulty arises: how does one "enable" the mitzvah by merely being in a distant field, removed from the dukhening entirely? This question lends support to the position of the Haredim, who maintain a more substantive role for the non-Kohen in the mitzvah structure. This issue is further analysed by R' Yerucham Fishel Perlow in his commentary¹⁴⁴.

A practical difference between the two views pertains to a situation where someone is in the middle of the Amida while the dukhening takes place. If the person has a specific Mitzvah *to be blessed*, then it follows that they should stop their Amida and concentrate on the dukhening. This is the view of R' Moshe Feinstein¹⁴⁵ and R' Vosner¹⁴⁶, and others, and is consonant with the Haredim and the Hasam Sofer. For a full list of opinions, see R' Ovadia Yosef in Yabia Omer¹⁴⁷. R' Moshe (ibid) writes that someone in the middle of קריאת שמע at the time, should answer אמן to the three Berakhos of the Kohanim but not to the Berakhah אשר קדשנו made by the Kohanim prior.

6. THE CASE OF THE NON-KOHEN

Are the three berakhos able to be used at opportune times by anyone? We turn to the Hafetz Haim¹⁴⁸ in his Biur Halakhah, where he discusses the propriety of a non-Kohen who utters the Birkas Kohanim pesukim to others.

The Gemara in Kesubos¹⁴⁹ discusses whether one can *presume* that somebody is an actual Kohen by virtue of the fact that he is seen performing dukhening. In that context, the Talmud notes that a *non-Kohen* would not perform dukhening because *they would be transgressing a positive command* that was exclusive to Kohanim¹⁵⁰. Rashi (ibid) states

כה תברכו – אתם ולא זרים ולא הבא מכלל עשה עשה

This is how you should bless: you [Kohanim] and not strangers [non-Kohanim], and [the transgression of a non-Kohen] emanates from a negative imputation derived from the [exclusive] positive command for a Kohen [only]

¹⁴³Interestingly, some Ashkenazi rabbanim in the Diaspora—where dukhening does not ordinarily take place on Shabbos—are known to seek out a Sefardi shul in which nesi'as kapayim is practised even outside Eretz Yisrael, in order to receive the priestly blessing. R' Dov Begon related to me, for example, that when his wife was undergoing medical treatment in New York, he felt it improper not to dukhen daily, and therefore sought out a Sefardi minyan where this was the established practice.

¹⁴⁴ פירוש על הרס"ג, עשה ט"ו

¹⁴⁵ אגרות משה, או"ח ד:כ"א, אות ב

¹⁴⁶ <https://hebrewbooks.org/1413> שבט הלוי, או"ח ג:ט"ו

¹⁴⁷ שו"ת יביע אומר או"ח, חלק ז, י"ב

¹⁴⁸ ביאור הלכה, קכ"ח:א, בד"ה דור עובר בעשה

¹⁴⁹ כתובות כד:

¹⁵⁰ רש"י כתובות כד:, בד"ה ואיסור עשה

Another relevant source is the Gemara in Shabbos¹⁵¹

וא"ר יוסי מימי לא עברתי על דברי חברי, יודע אני בעצמי שאיני כהן, אם אומרים לי חבירי עלה לדוכן
אני עולה

And Rabbi Yoisi said: In all my days, I never violated the words of my friends. I know about myself that I am not a Kohen, and nevertheless, if my friends say to me: Go up to the platform with the Kohanim, I go up

Plainly, we have a puzzling declaration from R' Yoisi. If he wasn't a Kohen, why would he go up simply because his friends asked him to? Furthermore, why would his friends ask him to do so?

Tosfos¹⁵² explains

לא ידע ר"י מה איסור יש בור העולה לדוכן אם לא משום ברכה לבטלה של כהנים אמרה תורה לברך את
ישראל

R' Yoisi didn't know what the prohibition for a non-Kohen to go up to the platform would be except for saying a Berakhah[which they Kohanim say prior] in vain to bless the people.

According to Tosfos, Rav Yoisi did not merely ascend the platform; he recited the three verses of the Birkas Kohanim, but did not make the berakha 'אשר קדשנו בקדושתו של אהרן' beforehand. From this, one might conclude that reciting the three verses of the berakha itself, publicly and from the platform, is not forbidden to a non-Kohen. The problem is that this understanding seemingly contradicts the Kesubos Gemara cited above.

Several approaches have been suggested to reconcile this problem.

The Yerushalmi in Ta'anis states¹⁵³

מצאנו תפילה בלי נשיאת כפים ולא מצאנו נשיאת כפים בלא תפילה

Could one not dukhen outside the bounds of formal Davening? We find Davening without dukhening; *we do not find dukhening outside of Davening*

and the implication is that it is a Rabbinic direction to formalise the placement of Birkas Kohanim in the Davening¹⁵⁴. One might conclude that, based on this Yerushalmi a Kohen should never say Birkas Kohanim *outside of Davening*. However, that conclusion is difficult to make because the Yerushalmi is discussing *formal* dukhening—it need not preclude the actual three berakhos themselves¹⁵⁵. Furthermore, that Yerushalmi may be discussing the circumstances appropriate for the formal *fulfilment* of Birkas Kohanim as opposed to *forbidding* a Kohen to use the verses of Birkas Kohanim to “informally” bless someone. Indeed, according to most Rishonim, davening itself is a Rabbinic command and not a Torah command¹⁵⁶. On a

¹⁵¹ שבת ק"ח:

¹⁵² תוספות בד"ה אילו

¹⁵³ Ta'anis 4:2 (https://www.sefaria.org/Jerusalem_Talmud_Taanit.4.1.2?ven=hebrew|The_Jerusalem_Talmud_edition_by_Heinrich_W._Guggenheimer._Berlin,_De_Gruyter,_1999-2015&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

¹⁵⁴ R' Haim Palaggi in Kaf HaHaim (ס"ק ד') discusses the case of Yom Tov Sheni when the only Kohen present is a Yerushalmi—who observes only one day of Yom Tov and does not dukhen on the second day. (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=41181&st=&pgnum=167&chilite=>) The question arises: Can this Kohen perform Birkas Kohanim on the second day, even though there is no Musaf for him on that day?

¹⁵⁵ That is, without the Kohen making a berakha, going up to a dais (if there is one), raising his hands, ensuring his voice is heard.

¹⁵⁶ R' Haim Brisker (חידושי הגר"ח על הרמב"ם פרק ד מהלכות תפילה הלכה א') and his grandson Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, amongst others, famously provide explanations as to why Davening can still be seen as a Torah command (the opinion of the Rambam) even according to those who describe it as a Rabbinic imperative (the Ramban). See עמק ברכה (R' Pomeranchik) who brings this explanation from the גר"ח in the name of R' Haim.

Torah level, however, does a Kohen who blesses their friend with the prescribed three verses, *outside* formal Davening, attain a Torah Mitzvah even though the Rabbis enacted that it should be done during davening in *Hazaras HaShatz*¹⁵⁷?

One might then inquire whether it is appropriate for a non-Kohen given the principle *אתם ולא זרים*—that the berakhs are incumbent upon the Kohanim and not upon non-Kohanim — to recite or utilise this Berakha. For example, it is a widespread custom on Erev Yom Kippur for a father to bless his children. May a non-Kohen use **that text**? Similarly, many maintain the custom of blessing their children on Friday night immediately upon returning from Shule. R' Aharon HaKohen MiLunil¹⁵⁸ in the Orḥos Haim even describes a custom to say the verses of Birkas Kohanim when accompanying a guest who leaves one's house!

Nevertheless, R' Yehezkel Landau¹⁵⁹ expresses concern that a non-Kohen who recites the three verses of Birkas Kohanim may be violating the prohibition of uttering Hashem's Name in vain. In contrast, R' Ovadia Yosef¹⁶⁰ challenges the Noda BiYehudah's stringency, noting that it is a well-established custom for any Jew to invoke these verses when blessing others, especially when done informally or outside the context of Shule ritual. In his view, such usage is not only permissible but aligned with the spirit of berakha, provided it is not presented as a fulfilment of the Torah's commandment exclusive to Kohanim.

May a non-Kohen indeed adopt these? Based on the aforementioned Tosfos in Shabbos, one might conclude that it is permitted.

1. R' Avraham of Narbonne in the Sefer HaEshkol¹⁶¹ writes that R' Yoisi did not recite a prior Berakha, and the Gemara in Kesubos was merely concerned with saying such a prior Berakhah in vain. This is also the view of the Magen Avraham.¹⁶² Unlike other Berakhs, this constitutes a positive Torah prohibition rather than a mere regular negative infraction of uttering Hashem's name in vain, because the Berakhah says "אשר קדשנו בקדושתו של אהרן" —that you have commanded **us** [Kohanim]" and R' Yoisi was clearly not a Kohen. For R' Yoisi to say such a Berakhah would be a *lie* and, therefore, a Torah prohibition¹⁶³. The Sefer HaEshkol further explains that not only did R' Yoisi not say a Berakhah, but he also didn't recite the verses of Birkas Kohanim alongside the Kohanim; he merely stood there among them. One might reasonably question why R' Yoisi's conduct warrants explicit mention, given that this seems self-evident.
2. The Ramo¹⁶⁴ suggests that the prohibition for a non-Kohen to recite Birkas Kohanim may apply specifically when the non-Kohen is the *sole* individual performing the blessings. In such a case, he effectively acts as a substitute for a Kohen, which is impermissible. However, if a non-Kohen stands among Kohanim who are actively dukhening and merely recites the verses alongside them, he is not perceived as replacing them, and the act is therefore not prohibited. Based on this distinction, R' Yoisi may be describing a unique circumstance in which no Kohanim were present. At the behest of the congregation, he ascended and recited the three verses—without the accompanying blessing. This raises several questions: Did R' Yoisi raise his hands? Did he perform the ritual hand-washing beforehand?

¹⁵⁷ In *ולא מצאנו נשיאת כפים בלא ירושלמי* on page רצ"ט, he theorises that it is possible to interpret the Yerushalmi as meaning that we don't find that a Kohen should proffer Birkas Kohanim if the Kohen *has not yet davened*. (<https://hebrewbooks.org/7974>)

¹⁵⁸ סימן מז, page 521 in the 1300's (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/8757>)

¹⁵⁹ *תשובות נודע ביהודה קמ"א*, א"י, סימן ו (https://www.sefaria.org/Noda_BiYehudah_I%2C_Orach_Chaim.6?lang=bi)

¹⁶⁰ שו"ת יביע אומר, חלק ג, סימן י"ד, אות ח

¹⁶¹ ספר האשכול, הלכות ברכת כהנים, page 22 (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/9384>)

¹⁶² מגן אברהם (קכ"ח, ס"ק א)

¹⁶³ "את ה' אלקיך תירא". דברים ו:יג

¹⁶⁴ דרכי משה, קכ"ח:א

Did he remove his shoes? Was he viewed by the congregation in a role analogous to the shaliach tzibbur in the diaspora or during Mincha, who recites Birkas Kohanim instead of an actual dukhening? It is plausible that the congregation requested that R' Yoisi recite the verses due to his stature as a respected Torah authority. His compliance may thus reflect a willingness to fulfil the wishes of the community, consistent with the broader principle that a Rabbi should accommodate reasonable requests made by his congregation¹⁶⁵

3. The Bach¹⁶⁶ suggests that R' Yoisi may have merely ascended the platform and stood there, without actually performing the dukhening or reciting the berakha beforehand. In this reading, the only concern would have been the potential for public criticism—namely, that people might speak negatively of him for refusing the congregation's request. However, the Bach ultimately rejects this interpretation. Instead, he maintains that R' Yoisi's actions did not pose a halakhic problem because the Torah prohibition applies only when a non-Kohen both raises his hands in imitation of the Kohanim and recites the three verses. Since R' Yoisi did not raise his hands¹⁶⁷, there was no violation. The Bach further argues that this was not a case of מראית עין, as it was publicly known that R' Yoisi had not lifted his hands. It may be inferred, then, that R' Yoisi's publicising of this practice—and its inclusion in the Talmud as one of his commendable behaviours—was intended to clarify its permissibility. Nevertheless, the Mishnah Berurah¹⁶⁸ notes that the Pri Megadim ultimately rejects the Bach's interpretation.
4. R' Pinhas Horowitz, the Hafla'ah¹⁶⁹, suggests that a non-Kohen who ascends together with the Kohanim forfeits the mitzvah of being blessed, as he is standing among the Kohanim rather than in front of them. He supports this view by quoting the Sefer Haredim. In the case of R' Yoisi, however, his decision to ascend was due to the absence of Kohanim in the shul. As such, he was not missing out on the mitzvah of being blessed, and it is perhaps understandable that the congregation asked him to ascend and recite Birkas Kohanim—presumably without a preceding berakha—in place of the shaliach tzibbur.
5. R' Ya'akov MiLissa, the Nesivos¹⁷⁰, offers a novel interpretation of the Gemara in Kesubos. The Gemara in that context is concerned with the type of evidence required to confirm a person's status as a Kohen, thereby permitting him to perform mitzvos specific to Kohanim. The “non-Kohen” discussed there is not an established non-Kohen, but rather someone whose status as a Kohen is *uncertain*—what we would term a safek Kohen. In such a case of doubt, we are faced with a potential conflict between the Torah obligation of koh sevarakhu and the Rabbinic prohibition against berakha levatalah. According to the Nesivos, the Torah command should override the Rabbinic concern, and thus R' Yoisi is effectively stating: “I see no issue in reciting Birkas Kohanim, aside from the possible concern of a ברכה לבטלה.”

One might be tempted to conclude from this that the Nesivos does not view a non-Kohen reciting Birkas Kohanim as inherently problematic. However, such a conclusion would be unwarranted; the Nesivos is addressing a specific case of uncertain status (safek Kohen), not a confirmed non-Kohen.

¹⁶⁵ It is certainly customary among mekubalim and H̳assidic rebbes—and, more recently, among prominent non-H̳assidic gedolim as well—to offer some form of berakha to those who request it.

I cannot refrain from recounting an illustrative anecdote concerning the Rav, R' Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, a decidedly non-H̳assidic gadol of the modern era. On one occasion, a student approached him seeking a berakha, to which the Rav responded sharply: “What are you—an apple?”

¹⁶⁶ טור אור"ח קכ"ח:א

¹⁶⁷ Was anyone looking?

¹⁶⁸ אור"ח סימן קכ"ח:ה

¹⁶⁹ כתובות, כד: ברש"י ד"ה דאיסור עשה (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/40948>)

¹⁷⁰ "בית יעקב, כתובות כה, ד"ה "בגמ' אבל נשיאות כפים" (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/9290>)

6. R' Yehoshua Falk, in his P'nei Yehoshua, commenting on the statement of Rav Yoisi, explains that the proper Torah-prescribed manner of performing dukhening involves the utterance of Hashem's ineffable Name. This, however, is not practised in the absence of the Beis HaMikdash. The Bach (ibid.) notes that Rav Yoisi lived after the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, and thus this concern did not apply in his case. As such, Rav Yoisi had technically avoided the issue¹⁷¹. R' Avrohom Hirsh Eisenstadt, in his Pishhei Teshuva¹⁷², cites the Yeshuos Ya'akov as making the same distinction as the P'nei Yehoshua.
7. R' Asher Leib Gunzberg, the Sha'agas Aryeh, argues in the Turei Even¹⁷³ that a non-Kohen who recites the verses of Birkas Kohanim has not technically "performed the act of Birkas Kohanim" in a halakhically prohibited manner, since mitzvos tzrichos kavanah—the principle that the fulfilment of a mitzvah requires conscious intent—applies. One could suggest that Rav Yoisi, in this context, certainly did not have the requisite intent to fulfil the mitzvah. Accordingly, since a non-Kohen does not presume to be fulfilling the actual role of a Kohen when reciting the three verses, he has not formally transgressed the prohibition of **אתם ולא זרים**—"you [Kohanim], and not outsiders."

The Shulhan Arukh indeed rules¹⁷⁴ that if one performs a mitzvah without the proper intent, the mitzvah must be repeated. This is one reason why many have the custom to recite a preparatory formula—*hineni mukhan umezuman*—before performing a mitzvah. The Pri Megadim (ad loc.) raises the possibility that, on a Torah level, one who lacks prior intent may nevertheless have fulfilled the mitzvah, and it is only a Rabbinic requirement that necessitates its repetition.

8. R' Yehezkel Landau, in the Noda BiYehudah¹⁷⁵, explains that while there is indeed a specific mitzvah for a Kohen to recite Birkas Kohanim, the mere recitation of the three verses is considered a *reshus*—a permitted, voluntary act—for a non-Kohen, particularly since it is being done outside the context of the Beis HaMikdash.
9. The Mishnah Berurah¹⁷⁶ and other poskim note that when an individual explicitly states that they do not intend to fulfil a mitzvah, they are definitively not *yotzei* (they have not fulfilled the obligation). Accordingly, if a non-Kohen were to recite the Kohanic formula with explicit stated *intent* not to perform Birkas Kohanim, it would appear that they could not be considered in violation of the prohibition of **אתם ולא זרים**.
10. The Maharit maintains¹⁷⁷ that a non-Kohen transgresses only if he recites Birkas Kohanim using the ineffable Name of Hashem, as was done in the Beis HaMikdash. Since, in our times, only substitute names are used in place of the Shem HaMeforash, a non-Kohen would not be in violation. However, R' Haim Yehoshua HaKohen Hamtzi, in his seminal encyclopaedic work Koh Sevarakhu¹⁷⁸, strongly disagrees with this position. He concludes that it is unequivocally forbidden for a non-Kohen to utilise the Birkas Kohanim for *any* form of berakha he wishes to bestow—even *outside* the formal context of davening.

¹⁷¹ He didn't make a Berakha, which would have been a Rabbinic **לבטלה** or according to the Hasam Sofer (חדושי חתם סופר כתובות כד:) a Torah prohibition of **את ד' תירא** because Hashem had specifically commanded only Kohanim.

¹⁷² https://www.sefaria.org/Pitchei_Teshuva_on_Shulchan_Arukh_Even_HaEzer.3.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

¹⁷³ <https://hebrewbooks.org/14028> טורי אבן ראש השנה כח.

¹⁷⁴ שולחן ערוך, אורח חיים, סימן ס'

¹⁷⁵ <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/1497> שו"ת נודע ביהודה, או"ח, מהדורה קמא, סימן ז

¹⁷⁶ סימן תע"ה, סעיף קטן ל"ו

¹⁷⁷ <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/1385> שו"ת מהרי"ט ח"א, קמט ד"ה ותמה

¹⁷⁸ <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/38774> ס' תברכו, מערכת הבי"ת, סימן ד

11. The approach of R' Avraham HaLevi in the *Ginas Veradim*¹⁷⁹ and R' Haim Hizkiyah Medini¹⁸⁰ in the *S'dei Hemed* is that since *Ḥazal* instituted that the chosen place for Torah level of Birkas Kohanim is during davening (which is the time of *Korbanos* when there is no *Beis Hamikdash*), then a non-Kohen *cannot* be seen to be pretending to perform Birkas Kohanim—this is "not how it's done"; it's mandated Rabbinically these days to be done during Davening¹⁸¹.
12. Another approach suggests that to perform the Birkas Kohanim, it is not simply a matter of saying the three berakhos. There are other actions which are required by the Kohen, including standing upright and placing outstretched hands at shoulder height using a Masoretic formation of fingers¹⁸².
13. R' Mordechai Carlebach¹⁸³, utilising the Brisker formulation, posits that there exist *tzvei dinim*—two distinct halakhic components—in the obligation of Birkas Kohanim. The first pertains to the mere recitation of the three berakhos themselves, while the second involves the requirement to recite these berakhos as a formal act of *avodah*¹⁸⁴. According to this framework, the articulation of the three berakhos as an isolated act—whether outside the context of the *Beis HaMikdash* or not in the course of *dukhening* during *tefillah*—is permissible both for a non-Kohen and for a Kohen.

However, when the berakha is integrated into *Nesi'as Kapayim* in the *Mikdash*, it assumes the status of an *avodah de'Oraysa*, a biblically mandated ritual act. During *tefillah*, it is categorised as a *mitzvah de'Rabbanan*. Based on this distinction, it may be suggested that since a non-Kohen neither performs nor wishes to perform the specific hand configuration associated with *Nesi'as Kapayim*, his recitation of the text is not construed as the fulfilment of the *mitzvah* of Birkas Kohanim¹⁸⁵. Rather, such an individual is merely *employing the textual formula* of Birkas Kohanim without engaging in its halakhically significant performance

14. The *Ḥazon Ish* articulates¹⁸⁶ that there exists a positive commandment incumbent upon non-Kohanim, derived from the verse וקדשתו, obligating them to accord honour to Kohanim. This imperative is typically expressed through practices such as granting a Kohen the first *Aliya* to the Torah and refraining from directing a Kohen to perform tasks on one's behalf.¹⁸⁷

According to the *Ḥazon Ish*, an extension of this *mitzvah* entails recognising that *only* a Kohen possesses the prerogative to utilise the *specific* berakhos of Birkas Kohanim for the purpose of bestowing a blessing. A non-Kohen, therefore, must defer to the Kohen's unique role in this regard as a fulfilment of וקדשתו. Consequently, should a non-Kohen perform Birkas Kohanim in a context that encroaches upon the Kohen's exclusive religious function, he violates the prohibition of אתם ולא זרים—"you and not outsiders."

¹⁷⁹ *https://hebrewbooks.org/22340* שו"ת גינת וורדים, חלק א"ח, כלל א, סימן י"ג

¹⁸⁰ *https://hebrewbooks.org/14153* שדי חמד, מערכת ג, כלל ל"ט

¹⁸¹ Interestingly, the *Ginas Veradim* (ibid) allows a Kohen from Israel to *dukhen* on the second days of the diaspora for a diaspora minyan although he is uncertain about making a prior berakha.

¹⁸² There are a number variations of this view though all are similar.

¹⁸³ ספר חבצלת השרון על התורה, פרשת נשא, עמוד רי-רכ

¹⁸⁴ As implied in the גמרא מנחות י"ח: where נשיאת כפים is listed as one of the עבודות of a Kohen. (note that the גמרא ביהודה *https://www.hebrewbooks.org/1497* does not find any proof from this Gemara, עיין שם)

¹⁸⁵ I will argue in the conclusion that it is more appropriate that one hand and not two are used.

¹⁸⁶ *https://www.hebrewbooks.org/14331* חזון איש, אבן העזר סימן ב, אות ט"ז

¹⁸⁷ unless the Kohen is מוחל.

However, the Hazon Ish qualifies this assertion by noting that in cases where a non-Kohen does not usurp the specific privileges assigned to a Kohen—i.e., duties that are inherently tied to the Kohanic role—there is no prohibition. Since offering a general berakha is not intrinsically reserved for Kohanim, the mere use of the *formulaic language* of Birkas Kohanim by a non-Kohen, absent the context of Nesi'as Kapayim or an act of avodah, does not constitute an issur for a zar.

Notwithstanding these mitigating reasons, it is curious that our tradition vis-à-vis Erev Yom Kippur¹⁸⁸ or the Minhag to bless children on Shabbos night utilises the specific verses belonging to a Kohanic formulation. Are there *no other* candidate berakchos from the Tanach? Of course, we know there are different formulations of berakchos throughout the Tanach with perhaps the most famous one being ישימך אלקים כפריים וכמנשה¹⁸⁹ for males often together with¹⁹⁰

המלאך הגואל אותי מכל רע יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי ושם אבותי אברהם ויצחק וידגו לרוב
בקרב הארץ

The angel who redeems me from all evil will bless the boys and call on them my name and the
name of my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, and they will become many in the midst of the land.

and the non-Tanach based one¹⁹¹ for females ושרה רבקה רחל ולאה. There is a Berakhah for females mentioned in Megillas Rus וכלאה וכלאה, and, interestingly, both שרה and רבקה were added to the list with differing wording. This could be based on the גמרא¹⁹²

נשים באהל מאן נינהו? שרה רבקה רחל ולאה

“The women in the tent,” who are they? They are Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine the full range of candidate berakchos.

Of particular relevance to this discussion is the observation that *appropriating* the text used by *Kohanim*—specifically as part of their Torah command to bless all Jews—appears somewhat anomalous. This raises the question of whether it is appropriate for a Kohen to employ the Kohanic formulation *outside* of its Rabbinically prescribed context during Hāzarat HaShatz after the section dealing with Korbanos.

As a Kohen, may one approach a friend and choose to bless them using the formulation of Birkas Kohanim, or might this constitute a potential violation of Bal Tosif—the prohibition against adding to the Torah—at least on a biblical¹⁹³ level? One might presume that the actual prohibition of employing the formulation is restricted to a non-Kohen ascending the duchan and joining the Kohanim, as discussed above

7. INAPPROPRIATELY ADDING TO A MITZVA

The prohibition of Bal Tosif¹⁹⁴ can be violated in several ways. A person transgresses this commandment if he performs a mitzvah at a time other than that which the Torah prescribes, if he adds

¹⁸⁸ יהי כפריים וכמנשה (סי' תרי"ט ס"ב) (https://www.sefaria.org/Mateh_Efrayim.619.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en) see also the additional meaningful formulation by the ח"י אדם in 144:19 (https://www.sefaria.org/Chayei_Adam,_Shabbat_and_Festivals.144.19?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

¹⁸⁹ בראשית מ"ב:כ

¹⁹⁰ בראשית מ"ב:טז

¹⁹¹ The formulation for females does not appear in the Tanach, Talmud or Rishonim.

¹⁹² סנהדרין ק"ה:

¹⁹³ Rabbinically we know when it is prescribed to be done, but it isn't clear that doing so “outside” of that time constitutes a Rabbinic **infraction**. It could well be a רשות—a permitted discretionary act rather than a formal mitzvah.

¹⁹⁴ R' Shlomo HaKohen of Vilna ז"ל סימן י' (https://hebrewbooks.org/1866) explains that a reason why each word of Birkas Kohanim is read out first by the hāzan and then repeated by the Kohen is to ensure the Kohen doesn't add another berakha.

quantitatively to a Torah mitzvah (such as inserting five parshiyos into tefillin instead of four, or taking five species on Sukkos instead of four), or if he introduces an entirely new mitzvah into the corpus of Torah law¹⁹⁵.

Classically, one might assume that the prohibition of adding to Birkas Kohanim refers specifically to the act of appending an additional berakha to the existing three during the designated time of their recitation. This would be analogous to the prohibition of adding a new species to the arba minim—for instance, including a plant not prescribed by Halakhah alongside the hadasim and aravos in the lulav bundle¹⁹⁶. In the case of Birkas Kohanim, there is a unique stricture not to add Berakhos¹⁹⁷.

The definition of “the time” (zeman) of Birkas Kohanim constitutes a nuanced halakhic consideration, as discussed in the Gemara¹⁹⁸. The prevailing view is that the zeman ha-mitzvah encompasses the entire day¹⁹⁹ during which a Kohen *may* potentially perform nesias kapayim, since it is possible²⁰⁰ for a Kohen to dukhen more than once in a single day²⁰¹. For instance, should he be present at an additional minyan where no other Kohen is present, he is entitled to dukhen again²⁰² and thereby fulfil another instance of the mitzvah. In such a case, the Ḥazan does not call out “Kohanim”, as there is only a single Kohen present. The Levush²⁰³ questions whether a Kohen performing the Birkas Kohanim a second time should precede it with a Berakha. On the one hand, it could be viewed like Lulav over which we only make a Berakhah once. On the other hand, it can be looked at like Tzitzis in the sense that if he were to remove his Tzitzis and later put them on again, he would make another Berakha. R’ Mordekhai Karmi²⁰⁴ inclines towards it being like Tzitzis. This position is buttressed by the opinion of the Ḥaredim and others that the non-Kohen has a Mitzvah to be blessed; accordingly the Kohen would be performing a new and separate Mitzvah for *others*, thus justifying the recitation of another berakha..

Rabbeinu Tam²⁰⁵ and Rabbeinu Peretz²⁰⁶ maintain that the mitzvah de’Oraysa of Birkas Kohanim applies only when at least two Kohanim — אמור להם — are participating in the blessing²⁰⁷. R’ Mordekhai Karmi,

¹⁹⁵ רמב"ם הלכות ממרים ב:ט. In contrast, the ראב"ד (ibid) and others hold that these prohibitions are not transgressed by adding or subtracting *entire* mitzvos.

¹⁹⁶ As opposed to adding more of the same מין, viz the custom of some to add extra Hadasim as an expression of beautifying the Mitzvah.

¹⁹⁷ רמב"ן דברים ג:ב, מאירי ראש השנה כח:

¹⁹⁸ ראש השנה כח:

¹⁹⁹ Not the night

²⁰⁰ The Magen Avraham (OC 623:3), along with some Aharonim, suggests that a Kohen should ideally only dukhen once per day. However, the Meiri on Megillah 27a provides a contrasting perspective. He discusses the Tanna who was praised for meriting longevity because he would recite a berakha even when dukhening a second time on the same day—implying that such repetition is permitted and even commendable. This suggests that a Kohen may indeed recite Birkas Kohanim multiple times a day, each time preceded by the berakha of אהרן של אהרן (albeit miderabbanan). This practice parallels other mitzvos like sukkah, where each act of eating warrants its own leishev basukkah berakha.

²⁰¹ משנה ברורה, קכ"ח:ק"ו

²⁰² א"ח, סימן קכ"ח:ג holds that there is no prohibition of Ba'al Tosif though he disagrees with the Ḥaredim about there being a Mitzvah on *others* to be blessed.

²⁰³ א"ח, סימן קכ"ח:ג

²⁰⁴ מאמר מרדכי קכ"ח:ו (<https://hebrewbooks.org/19324>)

²⁰⁵ תוספות מנחות מ"ד. בד"ה כל כהן

²⁰⁶ ריש קכ"ח (https://www.sefaria.org/Tur,_Orach_Chayim.128.1?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

²⁰⁷ If there are two Kohanim and one is a minor, the Mishna Berurah concludes that they should not be summoned with the plural “Kohanim”. (א"ח סימן קכח, ס"ק ל"ח)

however, drawing support from the Meiri²⁰⁸, argues persuasively²⁰⁹ that the Mitzvah remains a de'Oraysa with a single Kohen, with the distinction that we don't call "Kohanim" in such cases. In either formulation, the nature of the mitzvah is not that of a mitzvah *hiyuv*—a binding obligation incumbent upon the Kohen that must be discharged at all costs—but rather a mitzvah *kiyumi*, a mitzvah that the Kohen has the opportunity to fulfil *when the circumstances arise*. Consequently, once he has performed Birkas Kohanim on a given day, he bears no further obligation, although he may accrue the mitzvah again by performing it anew.

The Gemara in Rosh Hashanah (ibid.) concludes that the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim applies throughout the entire day. This leads to an interesting question: what is the halakhic status of a Kohen who "casually" offers a berakha to a friend or acquaintance in the street after returning home from Shule? This scenario is addressed by the Sefas Emes²¹⁰, who writes that the prohibition of Bal Tosif only applies during the moments that a Kohen is formally performing the Mitzva.

In his comprehensive Ko Sevarakhu²¹¹, R' Yehoshua Elazar HaKohen Hamtzi suggests that there is a makhlokes between Tosafos and most Rishonim regarding the framework and obligation of repeated Birkas Kohanim.

Citing Tosafos²¹² on Rosh Hashanah 28b, he writes:

משמע מכאן דכיון דעלה לדוכן פעם אחת ביום שוב אינו עובר בעשה ד"אמור להם"
(במדבר ו) כל היום, דהא קאמר אי בעי לא מברך

From here he infers that once a Kohen has ascended the duchan and blessed the congregation once on that day, he no longer transgresses the positive commandment of "אמור להם"—"Say to them, so shall you bless the B'nei Yisrael"²¹³—even if he refrains from blessing again later that same day. Tosafos explains that since the Kohen may choose not to bless again ("אי בעי לא מברך"), the commandment is fulfilled with the initial act²¹⁴.

R' Hamtzi notes that, unlike most Rishonim²¹⁵, Tosafos does not qualify this permission by restricting it to a scenario in which the Kohen chooses not to bless *during a subsequent tefillah or minyan*. Rather, Tosafos seems to hold that the Kohen may bless again *even outside the context of a formal Hazaras HaShatz*—in other words, the act of blessing is not necessarily tethered to the specific framework of a second tefillah²¹⁶. This would imply that the mitzvah can potentially recur during the day, *independent of the standard liturgical setting*, a view not generally shared by other Rishonim. As we discuss later, R' Hamtzi himself does not pasken like Tosafos and makes a strong argument that *a Kohen may not perform Birkas Kohanim outside of a formal davening setting*.

²⁰⁸ מאירי סוטה לח: (https://www.sefaria.org/Meiri_on_Sotah.38b.1?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en)

²⁰⁹ מאמר מרדכי קכ"ח:ה (<https://hebrewbooks.org/20376>),

²¹⁰ שפת אמת on ראש השנה כ"ח: (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14522&st=&pgnum=73&chilite=>)

²¹¹ מערכת הרי סימן א (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/38774>)

²¹² תוספות ראש השנה כ"ח: בד"ה והכא

²¹³ במדבר ו

²¹⁴ Rabbeinu Tam (<https://www.sefaria.org/Menachot.44a.18?lang=bi&with=Tosafot&lang2=en>) derives from the use of the plural להם that it is a de'Oraysa for a Kohen to dukhen only when there are two Kohanim. One Kohen still has to dukhen but according to this view it is a de'Rabbanan. That difference becomes relevant when dealing with questions about a Kohen interrupting his davening when called to dukhen. Since according to the accepted opinion davening is de'Rabbanan, when there are two Kohanim dukhening as opposed to one, the Mitzvah to dukhen is definitely de'Oraysa and takes precedence over the dinim regarding davening priorities and interruption.

²¹⁵ רמב"ם בפרק ט"ו מהלכות תפילה ה"א, טור או"ח קכ"ח, סמ"ג עשין כ, וכי

²¹⁶ In another Shule or in another minyan in that Shule.

An interesting question arises regarding a Kohen who was somewhat inebriated²¹⁷ at the time of Birkas Kohanim, but sobered up sufficiently after davening to be in a fit state to dukhen. Do we say that there is a concept of tashlumin—compensatory performance—such that he now has a positive obligation to recite the berakhos even outside the formal liturgical setting? Or do we maintain that, since Birkas Kohanim is intrinsically tied to Hazaras HaShatz, the opportunity has simply passed, and he has missed the mitzvah altogether?

R' Yosef Teomim in the Pri Megadim²¹⁸, maintains that a Kohen should recite Birkas Kohanim even after davening—either because he aligns with the view of Tosafos, or because he holds that an exception is made in a case of tashlumin, as opposed to a Kohen simply choosing to perform Birkas Kohanim outside the context of tefillah

Consider a case in which the Kohen does not recite the prescribed pesukim of Birkas Kohanim, but instead offers a more general expression, such as, “May you derive much naḥas from your children,” or even simply, “Shalom Aleichem.”²¹⁹ Although these words do constitute a *berakha* offered by a Kohen, they fall outside the specific liturgical framework of the three Torah-mandated berakhos.

The Gemara concludes that in such a context, there is no concern of Bal Tosif—the prohibition of adding to the commandments—provided the Kohen does not simultaneously perform the other ritual elements associated with Birkas Kohanim, such as spreading his arms or ascending the duchan. It is thus the confluence of text, gesture, and context that defines the act as a fulfilment of Birkas Kohanim, and absent those elements, a general berakha offered informally by a Kohen is not subject to the restrictions imposed upon the formal mitzvah.

When does Birkas Kohanim formally conclude? One might intuitively assume that it ends when the Kohanim turn their faces back toward the Aron HaKodesh at the conclusion of the blessing. However, R' Tzvi Pesah Frank famously²²⁰ raised concern regarding the commonplace post-dukhening exchange between the Kohanim and the congregation—namely, when the congregation says “Sh’koyach Kohen” and the Kohen responds “*Barukh* Tihyeh.”

R' Frank was troubled by the possibility that the Kohen’s reply—“Baruch Tihyeh,” a form of blessing—could constitute an infringement of the prohibition of Bal Tosif, since it may appear as though the Kohen is adding an unauthorised berakha to the divinely mandated formulation of Birkas Kohanim. Is this not, then, a clear instance of Bal Tosif?

A well-known response to this concern is brought by the Bi’ur Halakhah, citing the Shulḥan Arukh HaRav²²¹. According to this view, a Kohen is only in danger of violating Bal Tosif when he performs Birkas Kohanim in the prescribed and halakhically recognised manner. This includes raising his hands to shoulder height in the traditional formation²²², facing the congregation directly²²³, pronouncing the blessing in lashon ha-kodesh, and doing so in a manner that audibly connects the Kohen with those receiving the blessing—panim el panim²²⁴ (face to face).

²¹⁷ Through drinking wine. According to some Rishonim it’s only though wine, ואכמ”ל

²¹⁸ משבצות זהב קכ”ח אות ל”ה (<https://hebrewbooks.org/41250>)

²¹⁹ This is an example from the שפת אמת (ibid)

²²⁰ שו”ת הר צבי חלק א, ס”ב (<https://hebrewbooks.org/20947>)

²²¹ שו”ע הרב סימן קכ”ח סעיף מ quoting the ביאור הלכה קכ”ח:כו

²²² עיין ברשב”א סוכה כ”א בד”ה מאי

²²³ נודע ביהודה סימן ה

²²⁴ In general, there is a disagreement whether Bal Tosif requires Kavana—intention. This is linked to the question of whether a person fulfils a Mitzvah with or without intention, see: עירובין צ”ה and צ”ו, and Rashi there.

Absent these formal elements, a berakha uttered by a Kohen—even using religious language— perhaps does not qualify as an act of Birkas Kohanim in the halakhic sense and therefore does not fall within the ambit of Bal Tosif. Accordingly, the conventional exchange of “Barukh Tihyeh” is not halakhically problematic, as it lacks the liturgical and ritual structure required to constitute an addition to the biblical mitzvah.

The Bi’ur Halakhah expresses difficulty with the position of the Rambam²²⁵, who rules that even if a Kohen blesses in a whisper, he may *still* violate Bal Tosif. This seems to suggest that, according to the Rambam, a Kohen need **not** perform the full set of formal requirements associated with Birkas Kohanim to be considered as fulfilling the mitzvah—and thus capable of transgressing Bal Tosif by adding to it. This interpretation raises a significant halakhic concern, as it appears to lower the threshold for what constitutes a halakhically valid performance of Birkas Kohanim.

However, it is crucial to examine why the Rambam singles out the lack of kol ram—a loud voice—as the relevant deficiency, rather than referencing *other* integral aspects of Birkas Kohanim, such as the lifting of the hands. The answer may lie in a conceptual distinction, clarified by the Beis HaLevi and further developed by R’ Hershel Schachter in Nefesh HaRav²²⁶. According to this approach, Kol Ram is not an *intrinsic* requirement of the mitzvah in the same way that the physical elevation of the hands is. Rather, the fundamental requirement is that there be an *auditory connection* between the Kohen and the congregation—that is, that the berakha be heard.

Thus, in a setting such as the Kosel, where the Kohanim are often at some distance from the congregation, a full and resonant voice is required to fulfil this criterion. Conversely, in a small, enclosed setting where the Kohanim are standing immediately before the people, an ordinary, audible voice suffices²²⁷.

Accordingly, the Rambam is not arguing that the absence of a kol ram *disqualifies* the mitzvah per se. Rather, he is stating that if the Kohen blesses in a way that still meets the functional requirement—that is, the recipients can hear the blessing, even if it is whispered—then halakhically it is considered a valid act of Birkas Kohanim. Therefore, should the Kohen append an additional berakha in that moment, he would indeed violate Bal Tosif, *despite* not having employed a loud voice. The key factor, then, is not the volume itself, but the effective communicative link established between the Kohen and the congregation.

An intriguing explanation is offered by R’ Elazar Rokeach²²⁸, grounded in a Sifri, which appears to introduce an additional, unique stricture specifically concerning Kohanim. According to this Sifri, there exists a distinct commandment directed at Kohanim prohibiting them from reciting any additional berakha—whether in a loud voice, a whisper, or any other mode of speech—beyond the three pesukim of Birkas Kohanim mandated by the Torah.

It is based on this Sifri, R’ Elazar Rokeach suggests, that the Rambam was particularly explicit in codifying this additional prohibition. The Rambam’s formulation, then, is not merely a *general* application of Bal Tosif—the prohibition against adding to a mitzvah—but rather reflects a distinct prohibition uniquely incumbent upon Kohanim, forbidding them from extending the berakha text even in subtle or informal ways. This would account for the Rambam’s emphasis on the case of whispering: to underscore that the prohibition applies irrespective of the mode of delivery, and is rooted in a separate commandment rather than in the standard halakhic criteria that define a formal Birkas Kohanim²²⁹.

²²⁵ הלכות תפילה י"ב

²²⁶ פרשת בהעלותך

²²⁷ Indeed, in ק"כ"ג the שו"ע הרב based on the ס"ק כ"ח describes the volume as “בינוני”

²²⁸ מעשה רקח על רמב"ם הלכות תפילה וברכת כהנים י"ב (https://hebrewbooks.org/22726)

²²⁹ For a fascinating discussion of קול רם see the Rogatchover Shiur of R’ Shea Hecht at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OQG42vE5wFw

Another possible resolution is that outside the formal context and designated time of Birkas Kohanim²³⁰, any berakha a Kohen offers is not halakhically classified as part of the mitzvah—unless he has explicit kavanah to fulfil the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim. In the absence of such intent, the berakha is simply understood as a general expression of goodwill or blessing, and not an extension of the Torah-mandated rite.

Accordingly, such a berakha cannot be construed as an addition to the mitzvah and therefore does not fall within the prohibition of bal tosif. This distinction turns on the central role of kavanah in determining whether a given act is halakhically classified as a performance of a mitzvah. In the absence of such intent, the act lacks the formal character of Birkas Kohanim, and any supplementary berakha recited by the Kohen—even where it mirrors, or closely tracks, the language of the Torah's blessing—is not regarded as a prohibited addition within the framework of the mitzvah.

Nonetheless, one might contend that a concern of bal tosif could still arise, insofar as the act may be perceived as a ma'aseh mitzvah, even if no kiyum mitzvah is attributed to the individual. On this view, although the Kohen is not technically yotzei, he might nevertheless transgress bal tosif by having performed a ritual act that bears the external form of a mitzvah but lacks a valid kiyum. This concern would not apply in a case such as eating matzah after Pesah, which is universally understood as a *mundane* act of consumption rather than a performative ritual analogous to a kohanic blessing.

Though the Sefas Emes (ibid.) asks rhetorically whether a seemingly innocuous phrase such as "Shalom Aleichem" might theoretically constitute a violation of Bal Tosif when uttered by a Kohen in a blessing context, and R' Tzvi Pesah Frank raises concern regarding the common response of "Shkoyach Kohen" followed by "Baruch Tihyeh", others have pointed to mitigating textual evidence within Hāzal.

Specifically, the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah itself brings as an example a berakha explicitly cited in the Torah²³¹:

ה' אלקי אבותיכם יסף עליכם ככם אלף פעמים ויברך אתכם כאשר דבר לכם

“May Hashem, the Hashem of your fathers, increase your numbers a thousandfold, and bless you as He promised”

This example is instructive. The Gemara does not appear to treat the use of this verse—or berakhos modelled on it—as a halakhic problem, even when recited by Kohanim. This implies that not every berakha uttered by a Kohen outside the formal structure of Birkas Kohanim necessarily falls under the rubric of Bal Tosif, especially when the berakha is independently rooted in other pesukim of the Torah and not framed as an extension of the three pesukim of Birkas Kohanim.

Thus, the concern about Bal Tosif may be more narrowly focused: it applies when the Kohen intends to formally extend or add to the specific mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim, rather than offering a distinct, non-liturgical blessing—even one addressed in biblical language.

R' Haim Rapoport²³² contends that the Gemara—as well as the Rambam—specifically cites the verse ה' אלקי אבותיכם יסף עליכם ככם אלף פעמים ... to convey that a Kohen can *only* transgress the prohibition of Bal Tosif when he adds a berakha that is itself drawn from the Torah. On this basis, he would presumably downplay concerns raised by the Sefas Emes and R' Tzvi Pesah Frank, who had questioned whether even casual or post-dukhening berakhos such as "Shalom Aleichem" or "Barukh Tihyeh" might constitute additions to the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim.

²³⁰ Where one doesn't have to have formal כונה to do a mitzvah because by virtue of the Kohen standing on the dais with other Kohanim, by definition, they *show* כונה

²³¹ דברים א:יא

²³² ספר כפי חיים, עמוד צ"ן

However, this interpretive approach raises several difficulties. First and foremost, neither the Tur nor the Shulhan Arukh—nor later Aḥaronim, who discuss the formal requirements of Birkas Kohanim in detail—reference this or a similar verse or cite it as a limiting factor in the halakhah. If the principle articulated by R' Rapoport were *fundamental* to delimiting the scope of Bal Tosif in this context, one might reasonably expect these major poskim to mention it explicitly. Their silence arguably weakens the force of his thesis.

Furthermore, the Torah's own phrasing in Parshas Naso—"כֹּה תְבָרְכוּ" ("Thus shall you bless...")—has long been understood by Ḥazal as a term of exclusivity, delimiting the form and content of the berakha. The word "כֹּה" implies that this — and this alone — is the precise formula to be used, and no other. On this basis, one might argue that *any* addition—whether based on a Torah verse or not—constitutes an inappropriate expansion of the mitzvah. A distinction might be drawn between adding a Torah-based text (analogous to adding another species mentioned in the Torah to the arba minim) and a wholly extraneous berakha (like adding a geranium to the arba minim), but from a halakhic standpoint, both fall under the umbrella of Bal Tosif when added to a clearly defined mitzvah act.

It is, therefore, perhaps more straightforward to read the Gemara's citation of the verse as a mere *example* of a berakha that could be improperly appended—rather than as a definitive *limitation* on what constitutes a prohibited addition. The more compelling and textually grounded position would be to maintain that any blessing, whether drawn from Torah or not, that is appended to the act of Birkas Kohanim in a manner that implies it is part of the mitzvah, has the potential to constitute a violation of Bal Tosif. This, indeed, seems to be the plain and natural reading of the Gemara.

The wording of the Gemara—

"הואיל ונתנה לי תורה רשות לברך את ישראל, אוסיף ברכה אחת משלי"

"Since the Torah gave me (as a Kohen) permission to bless the Jewish people, I will add a blessing of my own" —

is central to understanding the contours of the prohibition of Bal Tosif in the context of Birkas Kohanim. The phrase "berakha aḥas misheli" admits of several plausible interpretations. One possibility is that it refers to a berakha of the Kohen's own choosing—that is, not mandated by the Torah. Alternatively, it may mean a berakha which, though found within the text of the Torah, is selected independently by the Kohen and appended to the three prescribed verses.

Each of these interpretations yields different halakhic consequences. If the prohibition of Bal Tosif applies only when the Kohen uses a Torah-sourced berakha as an addition, R' Haim Rapoport's position gains traction. However, if the phrase implies any berakha not explicitly included in the commandment of Birkas Kohanim—whether biblical or personal—then even well-meaning additions, such as "Baruch Tihyeh" or "Shalom Aleichem", may warrant scrutiny when uttered in proximity to the mitzvah.

In the sections that follow, I will argue that in various liturgical and halakhic contexts where Birkas Kohanim or its themes are invoked, one finds both pesukim from elsewhere *in Tanach* as well as personalised berakhos that are *not* drawn from biblical sources. This broader practice suggests that there is precedent—even if extra-formal—for Kohanim offering berakhos outside the strict confines of the dukhening framework. Such evidence may support a more nuanced approach to the application of Bal Tosif, one which is sensitive not only to textual fidelity but also to context, kavanah, and form.

In the posthumously published writings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, specifically from his Reshimos²³³, it is observed that the particular supplementary pasuk cited by the Gemara in Rosh Hashanah and referenced by the Rambam is selected due to its utilisation of the Tetragrammaton—yud, hei, vov, hei—rather than the name Elokim. This distinction is significant, as the Kohanim in the Beis HaMikdash were required to

²³³ https://www.lahak.org/templates/lahak/article_cdo/aid/2967183/jewish/-.htm

employ the former, ineffable Divine Name in its original form during the recitation of the three prescribed berakhs. Consequently, it is argued that the unique transgression of Bal Tosif would only occur if one were to add a pasuk that similarly employs this Divine Name. Conversely, appending a pasuk that does not contain this specific Name would not be considered an addition of a comparable berakha.

Building upon the insight of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, one might inquire why the Shulḥan Arukh does not explicitly designate *this* version of the berakha as the one that constitutes Bal Tosif. The Rebbe suggested that, although adding a different berakha would not constitute a *biblical* prohibition of Bal Tosif, it would nevertheless remain prohibited (presumably by rabbinic decree, as a ke'ein de'Oraysa). This raises the question of a precedent for a *rabbinic* analogue to the prohibition of Bal Tosif.

R' Baruch Halevi Epstein, in his Torah Temima²³⁴, observes that the aforementioned pasuk in Devarim comprises two distinct elements: first, Moshe's berakha that Hashem will increase the people a thousandfold; and second, the assurance that "He will bless you as He has spoken." This dual structure underscores both the magnitude of divine favour and its rootedness in prior divine promise. As such, this verse may be viewed as thematically aligned with Birkas Kohanim, which likewise functions as the conduit through which Hashem bestows His berakhs via the agency of the Kohanim. The thematic resonance between the two texts—both expressing boundless divine beneficence—might explain why this particular pasuk is cited in the Gemara as a candidate for *impermissible* inclusion: it reflects a berakha of similar tenor and theological orientation, thus highlighting the risk of its mistaken integration into a formal rite of Kohanim.

An important question arises in the case of a Kohen including an extra berakha, but having explicit intention not to fulfil Birkas Kohanim²³⁵. The Aḥaronim address the conceptual distinction between a negative kavanah—intention not to fulfil a mitzvah—which is effective in preventing one from being yotzei, yet does not exempt one from transgressing the prohibition of Bal Tosif. R' Haim Soloveitchik, in Kovetz Shiurim II:33 and his grandson R' Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in Igros HaGrid, p. 33, offer an elucidation. They explain that a negative kavanah renders the act akin to a *ma'aseh* mitzvah—a physical performance of the commandment—yet without attributing the *kiyyum* of the mitzvah to the individual. Consequently, in terms of yetziah, the individual is not yotzei; nevertheless, the transgression of Bal Tosif still applies, owing to the performance of the *ma'aseh* mitzvah in the absence of a legitimate kiyum.

8. THE BERAKHS OF BIRKAS KOHANIM AT SHAḤARIS

The development of our siddur is rooted in the tefillos that were said at the time of the Beis Hamkidash. The Gemara in Berakhs²³⁶ records tefillos said before daybreak²³⁷ prior to the offering of the daily Korban Tamid in the time of the Beis HaMikdash and quotes the Mishnah²³⁸

²³⁴ דברים יא:א (https://hebrewbooks.org/14082)

²³⁵ The Amora'im in Rosh Hashana 28b debate whether one transgresses the prohibition of Bal Tosif when performing a mitzvah outside its mandated time without intent to fulfil a commandment. The consensus of the poskim follows the view of Rava in our Gemara, who holds that intent is required to violate Bal Tosif. Accordingly, one who sits in a sukkah at a time of year other than Sukkos does not transgress Bal Tosif unless he does so with the intention of fulfilling a mitzvah. Abaye argues that even according to Rava—who maintains that one may fulfil a mitzvah unintentionally—it follows that one should receive malkos for sitting in a sukkah on the day following Sukkos, even without intent, as the very act might still constitute a prohibited addition to the Torah's commandments.

²³⁶ ברכות יא:א

²³⁷ After עמוד השחר, see יכין ובעוז for a discussion.

²³⁸ תמיד ה:א

תנן התם: אמר להם הממונה: "ברכו ברכה אחת!". והם ברכו. וקראו עשרת הדברות, "שמע", "והיה אם שמוע", "ויאמר". וברכו את העם שלש ברכות, "אמת ויציב", ועבודה, וברכת כהנים

We learn there: The appointed one [Kohen] said to them²³⁹ [the other Kohanim of that watch] "Bless a single Berakha!", and they blessed [Ahava Raba²⁴⁰], recited the Aseres HaDibros, Shema, Vahaya Im Shamo, Yayomer, [In addition] the Kohanim blessed three berachos: "Emes VeYatziv", "Avoda²⁴¹", and **Birkas Kohanim**

Tosfos²⁴² explain that at this stage, the Kohanim would recite the actual words of Birkas Kohanim but without performing Nesi'as Kapayim. In other words, they simply read the three pesukim²⁴³ with their arms down by their sides. Only later—after the burning of the Eimurim of the Korban Tamid—would they perform the full formal Birkas Kohanim with Nesi'as Kapayim.

The Meiri²⁴⁴ adds that this initial recital was done even though the people were not physically standing before them. Immediately afterwards, they would say Sim Shalom, thereby "book-ending" the verses of Birkas Kohanim with a concluding berakha.

The Rosh²⁴⁵ writes that before reciting the three pesukim, the Kohanim say the Nusach that is recited today in Hazaras HaShatz when there is no formal Birkas Kohanim²⁴⁶:

אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו ברכינו בברכה המשולשת בתורה הכתובה על ידי משה עברך האמורה מפי אהרן ובניו עם קדושך כאמור:

Interestingly, the Rosh also notes that the Kohanim didn't have time to say the full Shemoneh Esreh²⁴⁷ and therefore sufficed with Retzeh, as they needed to be ready to be prepared to perform the Korban Tamid proper at HaNetz HaHamah.

²³⁹ After they had commenced the preparation for the Korban Tamid, placing and salting the limbs on the ramp

²⁴⁰ According to Rashi in Berachos (ibid) they said this together with the people

²⁴¹ A berakha like (מאירי שם) רצה in the Shemoneh Esreh without the words "והשב העבודה וכו'" asking that the Korban be accepted. According to the they said: יכין/תפארת ישראל

רצה ה' אלהינו עבודת עמך ישראל ואישי ישראל ותפלתם תקבל ברצון, ותהי לרצון תמיד עבודת ישראל עמך, בא"י המקבל עבודת עמו ישראל ברצון. וי"א שסיימו בא"י שאותך לבדך ביראה נעבוד.

²⁴² תוספות בד"ה וברכת, ברכות יא: This is the view of most Rishonim.

²⁴³ I surmise that they only used the ineffable name in the *formal* Birkas Kohanim that followed

²⁴⁴ שם ברכות יא:

²⁴⁵ <https://hebrewbooks.org/43227>

²⁴⁶ There is considerable discussion whether the phrase should be recited as ... בברכה המשולשת, בתורה or המשולשת בתורה. R' Hershel Schachter in נפש הרב is of the view that the first version—with a pause between המשולשת and בתורה—is correct since the *berakha* has three components but is not mentioned three times in the Torah. He notes a variant reading of התורה כתובה בתורה though this isn't the common Nusach. R' Yosef Dov Soloveitchik suggested saying שבתורה בברכה המשולשת, to avoid any ambiguity.

This discussion may also relate to whether the congregation should respond with either כן יהי רצון or אמן once versus saying it three times—see also משניות תמיד ז:ב, ואכמ"ל

²⁴⁷ This is puzzling. In דג"א, הלכות תפילה א:ג, the Rambam notes that until the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash, each individual prayed in his own words. Following the exile, however, the language of the people became a blend of corrupted Hebrew and the various tongues of their dispersion, making it difficult to articulate prayers clearly. Ezra and his rabbinical court therefore instituted a fixed text for all. In light of this, it is unclear what Shemoneh Esreh the Rosh claims the Kohanim recited at that time. Moreover, our nusach today serves in place of the korbanos, whereas the Kohanim in the Beis HaMikdash were about to offer the korbanos themselves.

The Rambam²⁴⁸, however, does not take this literally. He understands the Mishnah to mean that “Birkas Kohanim” here refers to Sim Shalom, and that the actual Birkas Kohanim was performed later, on the steps of the Ulam, after the Tamid had been sacrificed at daybreak.

Immediately following the Berakhos for Torah study recited each morning²⁴⁹, the text of Birkas Kohanim appears in many contemporary siddurim²⁵⁰. Its inclusion in this context is first attested in the Seder of Rav Amram Gaon²⁵¹. However, the authority of this version is somewhat limited, as the original manuscript is no longer extant and numerous later interpolations are believed to have been introduced over time²⁵². Likutei MaHaRich²⁵³ notes that it is thereafter mentioned by the Rambam, Tosfos and the Tur. Notably, in Rav Amram’s Siddur, the passage *omits*²⁵⁴ both the introductory pesukim—

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר. דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר: כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם

—and the concluding pasuk

ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל, ואני אברכם

This contrasts with the practice reflected in *some* editions of Siddur Nusach Sefard²⁵⁵, Nusach Ashkenaz²⁵⁶, and Eidot HaMizrah²⁵⁷, where both are included to frame the three verses. In general, Nusach Ashkenaz omits these framing verses, presenting only the central tripartite berakha itself. It would appear that the first record of including the introductory and concluding pesukim is in the Sefer Tola’as Ya’akov²⁵⁸ by the Mekubal R’ Meir ibn Gabbay, who preceded the Arizal.

Interestingly, the Siddur of R’ Sa’adya Gaon does *not* include Birkas Kohanim at the beginning of Shaḥaris. The prevailing custom of including these pesukim at the outset of daily prayers is commonly understood as a way to immediately engage with a text of **Torah** following the berakhos over Torah study. The verses of Birkas Kohanim are seen as an appropriate selection due to their universal message—a tripartite berakha conferred upon the entire people of Israel²⁵⁹.

The three components of the berakha have been variously interpreted. A widespread explanation assigns distinct thematic meanings to each verse: “יברכך ה' וישמרך” refers to material prosperity and

²⁴⁸ בפירוש המשניות שם

²⁴⁹ אשר בחר בנו מכל העמים ... ברוך אתה ה' נותן התורה

²⁵⁰ This is described as מנהג הצרפתים which was accepted and appears in the סדר of Rav Amram Gaon. See further discussion in ספר מערכת התפילה (https://www.hebrewbooks.org/21793) on page ט”ט.

²⁵¹ https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/vl/amram/srag02.pdf

²⁵² The first printed version was in Warsaw in 1895 though Rav Amram Gaon died in 875.

²⁵³ https://hebrewbooks.org/33006

²⁵⁴ It is difficult to make *definitive* conclusions from this Siddur as no original manuscript survived and later versions may well have been influenced by other Nuschaos.

²⁵⁵ https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/vl/sidur-sfard/sidur-sfard01.pdf

²⁵⁶ https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sidurim/ashkenaz/hol/shaharit.asp#1

²⁵⁷ https://www.daat.ac.il/daat/sidurim/mizrah/hol/shaharit.htm#1

²⁵⁸ https://hebrewbooks.org/22402

²⁵⁹ The verse that concludes Birkas Kohanim—“ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל, ואני אברכם”—has traditionally been understood as Hashem’s promise to bless the Kohanim in reward for their fulfilment of the mitzvah to bless Israel. However, an alternative interpretation, reflected in the words of the (12:18) ספר חרדים, suggests that the berakha also applies to the congregation, who fulfil a mitzvah by participating in and facilitating the blessing. According to this view, the words “ואני אברכם” may be read as: “I will bless them”—both the Kohanim who bless and the people who are blessed—since the recipients are not merely passive but fulfil a mitzvah by being blessed. This aligns with the broader halakhic principle that one who enables or facilitates a mitzvah, even passively, may share in its spiritual reward.

sustenance (parnasa); "יאר ה' פניו אליך" is understood to denote the divine illumination through Torah, enlightening one's life; and "ישא ה' פניו אליך" pertains to the bestowal of peace, both in this world and the World to Come. Together, these berakhs are viewed as placing the divine Name upon the people²⁶⁰, in fulfilment of the Torah's concluding statement regarding Birkas Kohanim. The Abudraham explains that there are three, five and seven words in the berakhs which allude to the formal communal reading of the Torah—three people are called up to the Torah on a weekday, five on Yom Tov and seven on Shabbos²⁶¹.

This raises a halakhic question: why do all individuals recite *this* berakha daily, despite its designation as a Kohanic function? As we have seen, Rashi²⁶² explicitly states that it is a Torah-level prohibition for a non-Kohen to recite these verses in the manner of a blessing. Although several halakhic responses have been offered above, it could have been simply avoided by stating other Torah pesukim. Summarising, as we stated earlier, the Bach suggests²⁶³ that the prohibition only applies when a non-Kohen raises his hands in the distinctive manner prescribed for Kohanim. R' Haim Hezekiah Medini, in his S'dei Hemed²⁶⁴, argues that the restriction applies exclusively within the context of the Beis HaMikdash²⁶⁵. A third view, advanced by the Hafetz Haim²⁶⁶, maintains that no prohibition is incurred provided the non-Kohen *explicitly* intends not to be fulfilling the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim in its formal sense, but is rather reciting the verses as part of Torah study or prayer.

In the Siddur Tzelosa d'Avraham²⁶⁷, which records the liturgical customs of the Chekhanover Rebbe, R' Avraham Landau, this variation is explicitly addressed. The Chekhanover Rebbe, a contemporary and colleague of the Chidushei HaRim of Ger, was notable among Ḥassidic leaders for maintaining Nusach Ashkenaz, even after assuming the role of Rebbe. It is reputed that R' Akiva Eiger would rise in honour upon hearing Torah insights from him, indicating his esteemed standing in Torah scholarship. His grandson, R' Menachem Mendel Landau—the Biala Rebbe²⁶⁸—explains that the Ashkenazic version, consisting solely of the three central verses, contains precisely sixty Hebrew letters. This number is traditionally associated with the sixty tractates of the Oral Torah (Torah Shebe'al Peh), thus symbolically linking the Birkas Kohanim to the Torah Shebiksav verses recited immediately after the berakhs over Torah. In this reading, the priestly benediction functions not as an act of blessing per se, but as a representation of **Torah study**—hence its placement following Birkos HaTorah, as noted above.

In contrast, Sefardic tradition follows a different rationale. According to this view, when one recites verses of the Torah in a liturgical context, particularly in a way that resembles a berakha²⁶⁹, one is *not* necessarily required to precede it with Birkos HaTorah. In order to clearly signal that these verses are being recited as part of *Torah study* rather than as an actual berakha, Nusach Sefard and some Edot HaMizrach enclose the three verses of Birkas Kohanim with their surrounding contextual verses from Parshas Naso. Interestingly,

²⁶⁰ In the times of the המקדש בית Kohanim employed the ineffable name for this purpose. See: "ומיד זב: וסוטה ל'": See.

²⁶¹ See also the article in המאור by R' David Bashevkin, "בענין ברכת כהנים וברכת התורה"

²⁶² כתובות כד: בד"ה דאיסור עשה

²⁶³ עיין ב"ח אורח חיים קכ"ח:א

²⁶⁴ שדי חמד מערכת הנון, כלל ל"ט, בד"ה וור (https://hebrewbooks.org/14145)

²⁶⁵ This is also the view of the פני יהושע וכו' in פני יהושע (https://hebrewbooks.org/14635)

²⁶⁶ משנה ברורה, אורח חיים קכ"ח:ג

²⁶⁷ https://www.hebrewbooks.org/20312 on page 75

²⁶⁸ ויעש אברהם (ibid)

²⁶⁹ And this may well be what reciting **only the three** Berakhs of Birkas Kohanim satisfies

even though the Chekhanover Rebbe personally followed Nusach Ashkenaz, he adopted the Nusach Sefard formulation for *this* particular passage—evidently in deference to this pedagogical consideration.

The Magen Avraham²⁷⁰, quoting the Maharshal, raises a further concern: since Birkas Kohanim is often recited before sunrise—before the halakhic day has formally begun—it might be problematic to recite these verses at that time²⁷¹. The Mishnah Berurah, in addressing this issue, explains that the Magen Avraham's position hinges on the understanding that the verses are *not* being recited in fulfilment of the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim per se, but as part of the obligation to engage in Torah study immediately following Birkos HaTorah. This reading serves to remove the concern of reciting Birkas Kohanim outside its proper time.

It remains uncertain, however, whether the Magen Avraham himself adhered to the Nusach Ashkenaz formulation of the text, given his well-documented affinity for the teachings of the Arizal, which frequently informed his halakhic decisions. It is therefore entirely plausible that he personally adopted the Nusach Sefard version, inclusive of both the introductory and concluding verses. Nonetheless, the Mishnah Berurah's commentary may be read as a defence of the Nusach Ashkenaz text as well, emphasising that these verses are recited not within the framework of priestly blessing but rather as an act of Torah study

In summary, while all traditions agree that the verses of Birkas Kohanim are not recited in the morning as an actual berakha—since they were intended specifically for Kohanim—the Nusach Sefard tradition reinforces this intent more overtly by surrounding the three central verses with contextual Torah passages. This liturgical framing makes explicit that their function in the morning service is didactic rather than priestly, thereby affirming their role in the fulfilment of the mitzvah of Torah study after the Birkas HaTorah.

9. AT A BRIS MILAH

The Torah²⁷² recounts the berakha of Ya'akov to Ephraim and Menashe

וַיְבָרֶכֶם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר בֶּן יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר יְשׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וּכְמְנַשֶּׁה

So he blessed them that day, saying, “By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying: “May Hashem make you like Ephraim and like Menashe”

Rashi explains that the phrase בֶּן יִשְׂרָאֵל — in/by you shall Israel bless — means that when one wishes to bless his sons, he will do so by invoking this formula, saying, “May Hashem make you like Ephraim and like Menashe.”

The Targum Yerushalmi (Yonasan) associates this with the berakhah recited for a child at his bris milah²⁷³. Similarly, Midrash Lekach Tov²⁷⁴ connects the same blessing to the bris ceremony²⁷⁵

יְשׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וּכְמְנַשֶּׁה. [לְהִיכִן מְצִינוּ שִׁישְׂרָאֵל מִתְבָּרְכִין בְּעֵינֵי הַזֶּה יְשׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וּכְמְנַשֶּׁה — בְּמִלָּה. שִׁישְׂרָאֵל אֹמְרִים—יְחִי הַיֶּלֶד לְאַבְיוֹ וּלְאִמּוֹ — יְהִי אֶחָד לְשִׁבְעָה וְגַם לְשִׁמּוֹנָה. אֱלֹהִים אֹמְרִים וּמְנַשֶּׁה שֶׁהִקְרִיבוּ קֶרֶבֶן נְשִׂאִים בְּשִׁבְעֵי וּבְשִׁמְנֵי

interpreting the verse יְשׁמְךָ אֱלֹהִים כְּאַפְרַיִם וּכְמְנַשֶּׁה as the model for the blessing proclaimed to the newborn and his parents. Accordingly, it is relatively common for the associated berakha of

²⁷⁰ אורח חיים, סי' מ"ז, סק"ח

²⁷¹ I was unable to find this תשובה of the מהרש"ל (<https://beta.hebrewbooks.org/43034>) The only related שאלה I found was 1"1. It would seem to imply that the מהרש"ל wasn't concerned about other aspects that are missing, such as the raising of the hands?

²⁷² בראשית מח:כ

²⁷³ וברכינן ביומא ההוא למימר בך יוסף ברי יברכון בית ישראל ית ינוקא ביומא דמהולתא למימר ישוין ה' כאפרים וכמנשה

²⁷⁴ https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Lekach_Tov%2C_Genesis.48.20.2?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

²⁷⁵ See also תניא רבתי (<https://hebrewbooks.org/8920>)

המלאך הגואל אותי מכל רע יברך את הנערים ויקרא בהם שמי ושם אבותי אברהם ויצחק וידגו לרוב בקרב הארץ

to be said. In contemporary practice, however, it has become increasingly common for the Kohanim present to confer “Birkas Kohanim” upon the newborn as well, despite the fact that the Torah itself and early sources associate the blessing of Ya’akov—rather than the priestly blessing—as the appropriate formula in this context. The precise origin and historical development of this custom, whereby Birkas Kohanim is appended to the bris milah, remains unclear.

10. AT A PIDYON HABEN

A central context in which Birkas Kohanim is recited outside the framework of formal davening is at the Pidyon HaBen ceremony. Those who do not use a Birkas Kohanim formulation, prescribe that the Kohen should say

יהי רצון מלפניך ה' אלקינו ואלקי אבותינו, כשם שזכה הבן הזה לפדיון, כך יזכה לתורה ולמצות ולחפה, ולמעשים טובים בחיי אביו ובחיי אמו, אמן כן יהי רצון.

In certain versions of the Edot HaMizrach liturgy, the Kohen recites this immediately following a standard Shaḥaris-style Birkas Kohanim, prefaced by Vayedaber and concluded with VeSamu, after which the Yehi Ratzon is said. In other editions of the Siddur of the Edot HaMizrach, the formulation mirrors that recited after Birkas HaTorah in Shaḥaris, incorporating both the introductory and concluding verses—Vayedaber and Vesamu es Shemi.

However, a survey of various Siddurim—spanning Edot HaMizrach²⁷⁶, Nusach Sefard²⁷⁷, and Nusach Ashkenaz²⁷⁸—reveals alternative textual traditions, in which Birkas Kohanim is embedded within a more expansive liturgical framework that integrates scriptural verses beyond the core berakhah itself.

A similar group of Pesukim is listed in the Abudraham²⁷⁹.

ישמרך אלקים כאפרים וכמנשה. יברכך ה' וישמרך. יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך. ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום. ה' שמרך ה' צלך על יד ימינך. כי אורך ימים ושנות חיים ושלום יוסיפו לך. ה' ישמרך מכל רע, ישמור את נפשך

Given that this practice involves a Kohen standing over the infant—with his hands placed upon the child's head²⁸⁰, as described above—two principal questions naturally arise.

First, who instituted the minhag that *Kohanim* should recite a berakhah outside the formal context of tefillah, and at what point in history did this practice originate? Second, assuming—as discussed earlier—that a Kohen may recite Birkas Kohanim without its accompanying berakhah at any time, why would such a recitation not constitute a transgression of bal tosif, particularly when supplementary verses are appended or prefaced? Moreover, if the intent is *indeed* to perform a Birkas Kohanim, the inclusion of additional scriptural verses beyond the core formulation warrants further explanation.

²⁷⁶ See <https://harav.org/books/brit-eliyae6/> where Rav Mordechai Eliyahu has an even more expansive version

²⁷⁷ Every ספרד סידור נוסח that I was able to find also had this formulation.

²⁷⁸ I examined a range of current Siddurim, from Koren, Artscroll, Beis Tefila and more

²⁷⁹ See אבודרהם, פדיון הבן (https://hebrewbooks.org/58421). Tzohar use the standard Birkas Kohanim but append two Pesukim (https://www.tzohar.org.il/wp-content/uploads/pidion_daf.pdf). This is also the נוסח in the Birenbaum Siddur (https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/הבן/פדיון_עמודים/אשכנזי/בירנבוים/הסידור_השלם_בירנבוים).

²⁸⁰ We examine the issue of one hand versus two hands in the ensuing discussion. Note that in the *פחד יצחק* encyclopaedia from R' Lampronti, he writes (אֵין בִּי יָדַי) that he uses two hands for someone who is married — for the man and his wife — and **one** hand for someone who is single! (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/22679>)

The Sefer HaHinuch²⁸¹ and others state the following:

ומברכו כפי שיודע לברכו, כגון ה' שמרך וגו' (תהלים קכא ה). כי ארך ימים ושנות חיים וגו' (משלי ג ב),
ה' ישמרך מכל רע ישמר את נפשך וגו' (תהלים שם ז)

The Kohen places his hands on the son's head and blesses him, **according to how he knows to bless him, such as** "May Hashem guard you, etc." (Psalms 121:5), or "As length of days and years of life, etc." (Mishlei 3:2) or "Hashem shall protect you from all evil and guard your soul, etc." (Tehillim 121:7)

Regarding Habad practice, I encountered two distinct formulations. The commonly used Siddur²⁸² does not include *any* berakha for the Kohen. This raises the question: Does the absence of a textual berakha imply that the Kohen does not bless the child at a Habad Pidyon HaBen? In practice²⁸³, however, Kohanim do offer a berakha at such ceremonies. Further complicating the matter is the fact that the standard Habad Siddur is based on the original Siddur Torah Ohr of the Alter Rebbe. In one version²⁸⁴ of that Siddur, I found a formulation identical to the one discussed above. Nonetheless, that version does *not* reflect the authentic nusach of the Alter Rebbe.

R' Yehoshua HaKohen Hamtzi cites²⁸⁵ the Ramban, quoting the Sefer HaHinuch²⁸⁶, to the effect that a Kohen should bless the child "*as he knows to bless*, through verses." Notably, since the Ramban does not explicitly mandate the use of Birkas Kohanim, R' Hamtzi infers that, according to the Ramban, an unaltered and formal Birkas Kohanim is **not** appropriate²⁸⁷ in this context.

Similarly, Rabbeinu Hananel writes:²⁸⁸

ונתן הכהן ידו על ראש הבן ומברכו. כגון יברכך ד' וישמרך וגו' ואורך ימים ושנות חיים יוסיפו לך²⁸⁹
וכיוצא באלו

"The Kohen places his **hand** upon the head of the child and blesses him—for example, with Yevarechecha Hashem ve'yishmerecha, ve'orech yamim, ve'shenos chayim yosifu lecha, **and similar berakhos.**"

This provides a clear textual source for the practice of reciting berakhos that incorporate or resemble Birkas Kohanim but are not strictly limited to its canonical form. Note that Rabbeinu Hananel seemingly specifies *one* hand in this version.

R' Hamtzi, though personally opposed to this practice, attempts to justify it by suggesting a technical distinction: since the Kohen is seated, and Birkas Kohanim must be performed standing, this mitigates the concern that he is improperly reciting the berakha outside of formal davening. However, this rationale is problematic in light of common practice. It is not uncommon for multiple Kohanim—not only the one

²⁸¹ מצוה שצ"ב סעיף ה'

²⁸² תהלת ה', על פי נוסח הארי ז"ל

²⁸³ At least as far as what I have witnessed in Melbourne.

²⁸⁴ עם פירוש שי למורא

²⁸⁵ <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/38774> כה תברכו, מערכת הבי"ת אות ד'

²⁸⁶ https://www.sefaria.org/Sefer_HaChinukh.392.5?vhe=Vocalized_Edition&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en

²⁸⁷ Because it's not during the time of תפילה, as mandated by H'azal.

²⁸⁸ see page 42. (<https://hebrewbooks.org/38866>) This is also the language employed by the Abudraham (https://www.sefaria.org/Abudarham,_Laws_of_Blessings,_Ninth_Gate;_Blessings_on_Commandments,_Redeeming_a_Firstborn.6?vhe=Abudarham._Lisbon,_1489.&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

²⁸⁹ משלי ג:ב

officiating at the Pidyon HaBen—to be invited to bless the child, and in practice, they generally stand while doing so. A similar custom is observed at a Bris Mila, where Kohanim are called up and stand while reciting Birkas Kohanim.

Perhaps recognising the practical tension, R' Hamtzi proposes a further solution: instead of reciting Birkas Kohanim in its conventional liturgical form, the Kohanim should chant the verses using the trop²⁹⁰ (cantillation) associated with Torah reading. In doing so, the Kohen is formally *chanting* pesukim from the Torah, rather than performing a “halakhic” act of Birkas Kohanim outside its prescribed context.

It is important to note that, despite the contemporary minhag to include some form of Birkas Kohanim—whether in its unadorned form or framed by additional verses—the Shulḥan Arukh²⁹¹ itself makes **no mention** of Birkas Kohanim in the context of Pidyon HaBen. The Maharil also makes no mention of it. Indeed, the Encyclopaedia Talmudis²⁹², in its treatment of the topic, enumerates a variety of berakhos recited at a Pidyon HaBen, but does not include the formal Birkas Kohanim among them. It also cites Rishonim²⁹³ who appear to allow for a degree of stylistic latitude in the formulation of the nusach ha-berakhos at such ceremonies.

R' Elazar Melamed, in his popular Peninei Halakhah²⁹⁴, writes that the Kohen blesses the child with Birkas Kohanim, attributing the practice to a minhag of the Geonim²⁹⁵. However, I was unable to locate a source among the Minhagei ha-Geonim that directly supports the use of Birkas Kohanim in this context. Rather, the discussion among the Geonim and early poskim centres on whether a distinct or alternative berakha²⁹⁶ should be recited. The Tur ultimately concludes that we do not introduce novel forms of berakhos that are not explicitly mentioned in the Gemara²⁹⁷.

As noted above, there exists a wide range of formulations for the berakha recited by a Kohen immediately following the Pidyon HaBen, including the practice in some communities for the Kohen to omit a berakha altogether. In cases where Birkas Kohanim is included, this may take one of several forms:

²⁹⁰ The technique of singing ta'amei hamikra (cantillation marks) to mitigate a halakhic issue is discussed in the context of reciting devarim shebikdusha outside of a quorum. The Shulḥan Arukh (Orah Haim 565:5) cites a leniency allowing one to recite the Yud-Gimmel Middos HaRaḥamim alone—during selichos, for instance—by chanting them using the ta'amei hamikra. This approach effectively reclassifies the recitation as one of limud Torah rather than tefillah, thereby circumventing the requirement of a minyan. By way of related aside: during the summer months, I attend a minyan that recites Minhag before Plag, followed by an early Ma'ariv. The congregation follows Nusah Ashkenaz, whereas I personally follow Nusah Sefard. I once asked R' Hershel Schachter whether I might recite the Yud-Gimmel Middos with trop, given that although a minyan was present, there was not a quorum of individuals reciting it together. He was not inclined to endorse my solution, and instead preferred that I adopt the Ashkenazi version of Tahhanun, invoking the concern of לא תתגודדו.

²⁹¹ יורה דעה סימן ש"ה

²⁹² https://www.yeshiva.org.il/wiki/index.php/הבן_פדיון_תלמודית:פדיון_הבן#cite_ref-646

²⁹³ Footnote 650 ibid.

²⁹⁴ <https://www.yeshiva.org.il/midrash/1943>

²⁹⁵ טור יורה דעה ש"ה

²⁹⁶ An elaborate, rather unique, Berakhah from the גאונים (see שער תשובה סימן מז) (<https://www.hebrewbooks.org/30774>) was subject to discussion by the Rishonim and rejected (רא"ש מסכת בכורות הלכות פדיון בכור סימן א) because its גוסס did not appear in the Gemara (or Humash).

²⁹⁷ Indeed, R' Eliezer Melamed's interpretation of the Tur's phrase—"ומברך הכהן את הבן ומחזירו לאביו"—suggests that a formal blessing, such as Birkas Kohanim, is acceptable even when extended with additional berakhos before and after. This approach aligns with the Tur's perspective, as Rav Melamed concludes. However, it's noteworthy that the Beis Yosef in the Shulḥan Arukh remains silent on the matter of a subsequent blessing, as does the Darkei Moshe in the Ramo. This silence may imply that they did not address the issue of a subsequent blessing, possibly due to their view that Birkas Kohanim is a mitzvah kiyumis — a commandment that is fulfilled when one is in a situation where it is expected or called upon, rather than a mitzvah hiyuvis. Consequently, the question of a subsequent berakha might not have been pertinent in their halakhic framework.

While Rav Melamed's interpretation offers a plausible understanding of the Tur's phrase, the absence of discussion by the Beis Yosef and the Darkei Moshe leaves room for further exploration and consideration within the broader halakhic discourse.

- (1) the original unadorned text,
- (2) framed by the verses of Vayedaber and Vesamu, or
- (3) accompanied by other berakhos either preceding or following the core verses.

With respect to the physical gesture accompanying the berakha, there are differing views regarding the use of the Kohen's hands. In Sefer Shaarei Teshuvah²⁹⁸ (Siman 47), in a responsum addressed to Rav Hai Gaon, it is recorded that the ancient custom was for the Kohen to raise and place both hands on the head of the child before asking the question²⁹⁹ “אִיזְהוּ חָבִיב עֲלֶיךָ?” Another version of this responsum³⁰⁰, preserved in manuscript form in the Oxford Library, suggests that the Kohen raises and places his two hands on the child at the moment of bestowing the berakha.

Rabbeinu Hananel, a student of Rav Hai Gaon, is cited³⁰¹ as maintaining a different tradition—namely, that the Kohen uses only one hand when blessing the child.

11. SHABBOS AND BIRKAS HABONIM ON EREV YOM KIPPUR

The custom of blessing children on Erev Shabbos is described in Sefer HaHaim³⁰² by R' Haim ben Betzalel, the elder brother of the Maharal of Prague³⁰³, in the late 16th century. While no specific text is prescribed, the practice is presented as a meaningful familial ritual. Around the same period, R' Aharon Berachya ben Moshe of Modena, Italy, records a similar custom in his Ma'avar Yabok³⁰⁴. He notes that the father places *one* hand on the child's head when offering the blessing. Although he does not explicitly mention Birkas Kohanim, it could be suggested that the symbolism of one hand—with its fifteen joints—may allude to the fifteen words of Birkas Kohanim, implying its use through symbolic association.

In the 18th century, R' Ephraim Zalman Margolies, in his Mateh Ephraim³⁰⁵, records a minhag for both father *and mother*³⁰⁶ to bless their children on Erev Yom Kippur. He provides suggested wording for the berakhos, but notably omits any direct reference to Birkas Kohanim as the text in use. Similarly, R' Yitzhak Lampronti, in the Encyclopaedia Paḥad Yitzhak³⁰⁷ (mid-18th century), acknowledges the practice and writes: “והנני רואה מנהג טוב לברך החכמים את הקהל ואבות לבנים עם שתי ידיים”—“I see it as a good custom for scholars to bless the community, and for fathers to bless their children with both hands.” Further discussion of the practice and its evolution can be found in Nesiv Bina by R' Yissachar Jacobson.

The nusach commonly recited when blessing children differs slightly for males and females. For boys, the berakha begins:

²⁹⁸ Not to be confused with the Sefer Mussar from Rabbeinu Yona, this is a set of תשובות from the Geonic era

²⁹⁹ Standard text where the Kohen asks the father if he prefers the money or the boy.

³⁰⁰ Cited in ספר עדות לישראל page קע"ב who also brings support from other places including the הרה

³⁰¹ Cited in ספר עדות לישראל page 42 (https://hebrewbooks.org/38866)

³⁰² From Poznan, Poland.

³⁰³ (https://www.hebrewbooks.org/45029) ספר החיים, בחלק ג-ספר פרנסה וכלכלה, פרק ו

³⁰⁴ ספר מעבר יבוק בחלק שפתי רננות פרק מ"ג ושם מסיים דבריו על המנהג כך “והמשכיל יבין מעצמו כי כנים דברינו” https://beta.hebrewbooks.org/11774

³⁰⁵ https://he.wikisource.org/wiki/תרי"ט_אורים_אורים_חיים_תרי"ט in משה_אפרים_אורים_חיים_תרי"ט

³⁰⁶ I had always thought it was done by the father!

³⁰⁷ https://www.hebrewbooks.org/22679

ישימך אלוקים כאפרים וכמנשה

and for girls³⁰⁸:

ישימך אלוקים כשרה רבקה רחל ולאה

This is typically followed by the full text of Birkas Kohanim:

יברכך ה' וישמרך

יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך

ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום

Following this, some add a Yehi Ratzon³⁰⁹

ויהי רצון מלפני אבינו שבשמים, שיתן בלבך אהבתו ויראתו, ותהא יראת ה' על פניך כל ימי חיך שלא תחטא, ויהא חשקך בתורה ובמצוות, עיניך לנכח יביטו, פיך ידבר חכמות, ולבך יהגה אימות, ידיך תהיינה עוסקות במצוות, רגליך ירוצו לעשות רצון אביך שבשמים, ויתן לך בנים ובנות צדיקים וצדקניות עוסקים בתורה ובמצוות כל ימיהם, ויהי מקורך ברוך, ויזמין לך פרנסתך בהתר ובנחת וברוח מתחת ידו הרחבה, ולא על ידי מתנת בשר ודם, פרנסה שתהא פנוי לעבודת ה', ותכתב ותחתם לחיים טובים וארכים בתוך כל צדיקי ישראל, אמן.

May it be the will of our Father in heaven to place in your heart love and fear of Him, and may the fear of Hashem be upon your face all the days of your life, so that you will not sin. May your desire be for Torah and mitzvos. May your eyes look straightforward, may your mouth speak wisdom, and may your heart meditate with reverence. May your hands be engaged in the performance of mitzvos; may your feet hasten to do the will of your Father in heaven. May He grant you righteous sons and daughters occupying themselves with Torah and mitzvos all their days. May your wellspring be blessed, [May you be blessed with many children]. May He grant that your livelihood come with honesty, ease, and abundance, from His generous hand, and not from the gifts of men; a livelihood that will free you to serve Hashem. May you be inscribed and sealed for a good and long life among all the righteous of Israel. Amein

while others include personalised berakhos, depending on familial custom or individual preference.

In a letter³¹⁰ written on Erev Yom Kippur, the Lubavitcher Rebbe³¹¹ cites the Birkas Kohanim as it appears in Shaḥaris, with the full contextual framing: וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר, דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר, כה תברכו, וישמו את שמי על בני ישראל ואני אברכם and את בני ישראל אמור להם, His father-in-law, the Rebbe Rayatz, apparently **didn't** use this text and used the formulation

דער אויבערשטער זאל מעורר זיין מיט אַ התעוררות [שהקב"ה יעורר בהתעוררות] תשובה אמתית מתוך פנימיות ונקודת הלב.

May Hashem arouse [in you] a genuine, intrinsic, heart felt Teshuva

In this letter, the Rebbe offers a Ḥassidic interpretation of the verses but does not address the halakhic implications of reciting Birkas Kohanim as a non-Kohen. The formulation we use in davening Shaḥaris is

³⁰⁸ As discussed towards the end of Section 6

³⁰⁹ As mentioned in Kitzur Shulchan Arukh (https://www.sefaria.org/Kitzur_Shulchan_Aruk.131?ven=hebrew|Torat_Emet_357&lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

³¹⁰ https://www.lahak.org/templates/lahak/article_cdo/aid/3096593/jewish/-..htm

³¹¹ See also a video, <https://chabad.info/video/90215/>

not an issue for a non-Kohen because that context is one of Limud Torah, and for that purpose, saying Hashem's name is also permitted³¹².

From a halakhic standpoint, the use of Birkas Kohanim by a non-Kohen raised questions as noted in Section 3. It is reported, for example, that the Vilna Gaon³¹³ opposed the recitation of Birkas Kohanim verses by a non-Kohen. However, R' Baruch Halevi Epstein, in *Torah Temima*³¹⁴, records that he heard from a reliable source that the Gaon did, in fact, bless someone using the text of Birkas Kohanim, though he was careful to use only **one** hand—apparently to demonstrate that he was not formally performing Birkas Kohanim in its halakhic sense.

This detail connects to a broader debate. The use of one hand, while sometimes employed to distinguish informal berakhos from the formal priestly rite, is sharply criticised by R' Ya'akov Emden in his *Siddur*³¹⁵. There, he writes that those who bless with only one hand are “ḥasserei da'as”—lacking proper understanding.

12. AT A WEDDING

The practice of inviting Kohanim to bless the ḥasan and kallah under the chuppah appears to be a relatively recent development. Based on personal observation,³¹⁶ this custom has only become widespread within the last decades. Historically, however, there is precedent for related practices. R' Yehoshua Ardit records³¹⁷ that in 19th-century Izmir, it was his custom to recite Birkas Kohanim after the tallis was placed³¹⁸ over the head of the ḥasan.

Nonetheless, this practice has not been universally accepted. R' Binyamin Adler in *HaNissuin KeHilkhasam*³¹⁹, refers to it as a minhag muzar—a “strange custom.” Similarly, R' Yehuda Altuski, writing in *HaParde*³²⁰ in the 1950s, critiques the growing trend in the Bronx of reciting Birkas Kohanim at chuppas, bar mitzvahs, after davening, or whenever an “appropriate” moment was perceived. He objects to this expansion of context, arguing—based on the Rambam's position³²¹—that a Kohen may not perform *nesias kapayim* outside of its prescribed liturgical setting, even for a second minyan or congregation. This view contrasts with the more permissive stance of the *Shulḥan Arukh* and many *Rishonim*, as discussed above.

R' Altuski further draws upon the position of the *Ḥasam Sofer*³²², who permits a second *dukhening* only under circumstances of great need—such as when a congregation lacks any other Kohen. He emphasises that Birkas Kohanim is not merely a blessing, but a component of the *avodah*, which explains why *Ḥazal* restricted its performance to specific *tefilos*, namely *Shaharis* and *Musaf*. This liturgical

³¹² שולחן ערוך סימן מז:ז

³¹³ הנהגות הגר"א אות י, In the name of the Gra's Talmid, R' Sa'adya, מעשה רב החדש

³¹⁴ https://www.sefaria.org/Torah_Temimah_on_Torah%2C_Numbers.6.23.2?vhe=Torah_Temimah,_Vilna,_1904&lang=bi

³¹⁵ <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/42760> עמוד קנ"ז, אות ז

³¹⁶ For many years, I engaged in professional musical performance alongside my primary vocation in Melbourne, Australia.

³¹⁷ עמוד קלח, ספר חינוך וחסדה, <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/6884>

³¹⁸ As per Sefardic custom.

³¹⁹ הנשואין כהלכתם, פרק יב, סעיף ס"ז, בהערה 170

³²⁰ הפרדס חוברת ד, סימן כ

³²¹ רמבם, הלכות תפילה, יד:יב

³²² https://www.sefaria.org/Responsa_Chatam_Sofer,_Orach_Chayim.22?lang=he שו"ת חתם סופר או"ח כב

framework is reinforced by halakhic constraints, such as the prohibition against a Kohen who has consumed a revi'is of wine from dukhening, and the omission of Birkas Kohanim from Mincha³²³ for similar reasons.

While R' Altuski acknowledges that the Hafetz Haim sought to justify the occasional recitation of Birkas Kohanim by non-Kohanim, he insists that such arguments are at best “limud zechus” and not the normative Halakhah. He concludes that a Kohen should not actively create situations that risk transgressing established halakhic boundaries merely because the practice has become popular or fashionable.

In addition, R' Altuski raises a cultural concern, noting that such berakhos have come to be referred to as “Priestly Benedictions” and that their contemporary resurgence may be rooted in the influence of Reform Jewish or non-Jewish ceremonial models. On this basis, he contends that the practice could fall under the biblical prohibition of לא תלכו בחוקותיהם—the injunction against imitating non-Jewish customs.

In response³²⁴, R' Shlomo Zalman Katz—also of the Bronx—argues that this is not a modern innovation. He notes having witnessed the same practice in Europe and rejects the notion that it should be classified as a formal Birkas Kohanim. According to R' Katz, when offered in this context, the berakha is not a fulfilment of the mitzvah of nesias kapayim, which applies only when performed for a tzibbur. Rather, it is to be understood as an ordinary, private berakha. As such, it is not subject to the halakhic limitations imposed on formal dukhening and cannot reasonably be viewed as a foreign imitation.

To reinforce this point, R' Katz cites a Gemara in Shabbos³²⁵, attempting to demonstrate that the act of offering personal berakhos is firmly rooted in Jewish tradition and cannot be construed as mimicking non-Jewish ritual.

“חמרא וחיי לפום רבנן” — אין בו משום דרכי האמורי. מעשה ברבי עקיבא שעשה משתה לבנו, ועל כל כוס וכוס שהביא אמר: “חמרא וחיי לפום רבנן, חיי וחמרא לפום רבנן ולפום תלמידיהון”

One who says while drinking: “Wine and life to the mouth of the Sages”, this does not fall into the category of the ways of the Amorite. There was an incident with Rabbi Akiva who made a banquet for his son, and over each and every cup he brought he said: Wine and life to the mouth of the Sages, wine and life to the mouth of the Sages and to the mouth of their students

Furthermore, R' Katz cites the Mishnah in Berakhos (9:5) as textual support for the permissibility of invoking Hashem's name in the context of private berakhos

והתקינו, שיהא אדם שואל את שלום חברו בשם, שנאמר (רות ב) והנה בעז בא מבית לחם, ויאמר לקוצרים ה' עמכם, ויאמרו לו, יברכך ה'. ואומר (שופטים ו) ה' עמך גבור החיל

The Sages also instituted that one should greet another in the name of Hashem, i.e., one should mention Hashem's name in his greeting, as it is stated: “And presently Boaz came from Bethlehem and said to the harvesters, The Lord is with you, and they said to him, May the Lord bless you” (Ruth 2:4). And it says: “And the angel of Hashem appeared to him and said to him, Hashem is with you, mighty man of valour” (Judges 6:12)

as proof that one may also use Hashem's name as part of an expression of Berakhah, and since the Kohen has not taken off his shoes nor does he spread his hands and fingers in the prescribed fashion, everybody realises that this is an expression of Berakhah and not a formal Birkas Kohanim.

From these sources, R' Katz infers that the use of Hashem's name in a blessing—outside of formal tefillah or ritual context—is both legitimate and historically grounded. He further argues that since the Kohanim in

³²³ Except for a fast day

³²⁴ הפרדס חוברת ו, סימן ל"ג

³²⁵ שבת ס"ז, וברש"י שם

these settings do not remove their shoes, nor do they raise their hands in the halakhically prescribed fashion for nesi'as kapayim (e.g., spreading the fingers and lifting both hands shoulder-height), it is evident to all present that this is not a formal Birkas Kohanim but rather a private expression of blessing.

Nevertheless, several critical observations arise in response to this rationale. First, if these berakhos are truly to be considered private berakhos, one must ask why Kohanim are specifically **invited** to perform them. To the best of my knowledge, there is no halakhic source suggesting that a Kohen possesses a greater intrinsic capacity to bestow effective berakhos than a zar (non-Kohen), *outside* the context of the formal mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim, although this is readily understandable as the Kohen is chosen and practiced in Berakhos.

Moreover, based on practical observation, Kohanim often *do* raise their hands when reciting this blessing, and the act is frequently introduced explicitly as “Birkas Kohanim.” This presentation suggests that the assembled participants perceive the berakha as something more significant than a casual, personal expression of goodwill. It is not merely a private berakha but carries with it the symbolic—and arguably ritual—resonance of Birkas Kohanim, despite not conforming to all halakhic requirements of formal dukhening. This perception is perhaps amplified from the original status of the Kohen as a teacher and authoritative interpreter of Halakhah. The Torah accords the Kohen a significant role beyond the Temple service, as reflected in the verse³²⁶ “כִּי שִׁפְתֵי כֹהֵן יִשְׁמְרוּ דֵּעַת וְתוֹרָה יִבְקְשׁוּ מִפִּיהוּ”. This elevated standing may also have contributed to a residual sense that receiving a berakha from a Kohen is preferable to that of a hedyot³²⁷.

13. IN MOMENTS OF NEED

There are occasions when individuals feel a particular need to receive a berakha from a Kohen, believing it may confer spiritual benefit or support. This sense of spiritual urgency is often mirrored by the Kohanim themselves, who may experience a corresponding sense of *responsibility* or desire to offer such berakhos. A recent, and somewhat tragic, example vividly illustrates this dynamic. During the recent war in Gaza, a message was circulated inviting Kohanim to join a global WhatsApp group³²⁸, in which each participant was asked to record a video of himself reciting Birkas Kohanim on behalf of a named soldier actively serving or preparing to serve on the front lines.

In my own case—caught up, admittedly, in the emotion and spiritual intensity of wartime—I chose to recite the version of Birkas Kohanim found following Birkas HaTorah in the morning tefillah. Preceding this, I composed and articulated a personal Hineni Mukhan uMezuman, explicitly declaring my intention lekayeim mitzvas Birkas Kohanim. I then added be’ad—“on behalf of”—and listed the name of the soldier for whom I intended the berakha. At the time, I sensed that I might be fulfilling a de’Oraysa but without the placement prescribed de’Rabbanan during davening.

Technically, the recipient was not standing directly before me. However, the intent was that the video would subsequently be shown to the soldier, thereby creating a quasi face-to-face encounter.

According to Halakhah, even in a minyan comprised entirely of Kohanim, Birkas Kohanim is still recited. The Gemara explains that it is performed on behalf of the עַם שְׁבִשְׁדוֹת—those unable to be present due to their being in the fields. It struck me that a soldier—particularly one stationed on active duty—might represent the quintessential case of someone unable to attend, notwithstanding R’ Shlomo Zalman Auerbach’s aforementioned view that berakhos do not traverse national borders.

In hindsight, I recognise that my actions reflected a degree of hedging: on the one hand, I surrounded the Birkas Kohanim with the pesukim typically recited during Shaḥaris, thereby casting the act as a form of

³²⁶ מלאכי ב:ז

³²⁷ despite the well-known teaching that one should not belittle the berakha of an ordinary person
מגילה טו. ‘אל תהי ברכת הדיוט קלה בעיניך’

³²⁸ *Kohanim on Call*, <https://tinyurl.com/KohensOnCall> with over 650 members

Torah recitation and somewhat mitigating its formal liturgical status. On the other hand, I recited a full **הַנְּגִי** **מוֹכֵן**, which signalled a more serious halachic intent, likely influenced by the emotion of the time.

I ultimately performed the act only once and was left with a lingering sense of conceptual unease regarding its halachic legitimacy.

Nevertheless, it seems that reciting Birkas Kohanim in this framework—bookended by the pesukim:

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר. דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר ...
ושמו את שמך על בני ישראל ואני אברכם

—could “at worst” be regarded as the mere recitation of pesukim, but perhaps more significantly, as an act that offered emotional strength and spiritual support to soldiers in peril. Was this practice any less desirable than offering a berakha at a Pidyon HaBen, under the chuppah, or on Erev Yom Kippur? The halachic standing of such an act remains open to discussion, but its pastoral and emotive resonance was undoubtedly powerful.

Historical precedent for invoking verses of berakha in times of national distress may be found in the Tashbetz Katan³²⁹, where R' Shimshon ben Tzadok notes that during wartime, the Hashmonaim, who were themselves Kohanim, would say:

ואמרו ז' פעמים ויהי נועם וב' פעמים אורח ימים אשביעהו ונצחו

They recited seven times Vihi No'am and twice Orech Yamim Asbi'eihu—and they were victorious

This source highlights an association between the recitation of Torah verses of berakha and the pursuit of divine favour and protection in times of danger, particularly by Kohanim in their national-religious capacity. That being said, the Hashmonaim, though they were Kohanim, didn't apparently utilise the Birkas Kohanim.

14. AD HOC BASIS

Increasingly, and perhaps this is due to the internet, we come across situations where a Kohen gives or is asked to give “Birkas Kohanim” without connection to any liturgical setting. A person wants a Berakha or feels they need one. It seems natural that, apart from seeking a Tzadik or a Rebbe, people will gravitate to a Kohen. Indeed, there are many stories of people seeking berakhs from the Hafetz Haim, who expressed discomfort on account of claiming that he wasn't a Rebbe and it wasn't his custom. Nonetheless, when pressed, the Hafetz Haim, a Kohen of note, utilised the pesukim of Birkas Kohanim. Any³³⁰ Kohen can theoretically act as the vessel to transmit the Birkas Kohanim. Indeed, when asked whether there is a preference to ask for a non-formal berakha from a Kohen as opposed to a Yisrael or Levi, R' Haim Kanievsky is reported to have answered in the affirmative and that it was similar to giving precedence to a berakha from a Tzadik. R' Haim himself is reported to have often sought the berakhs of R' Simcha HaKohen Kook with the verses from Birkas Kohanim.

15. AT THE MAKOM HAMIKDASH

In recent years—particularly with the inclusion of Otzma Yehudit ministers in the Israeli government—there has been a noticeable increase in the number of Jews ascending certain areas of the Har HaBayis for prayer. Among various video recordings circulated online³³¹, I observed instances where Kohanim

³²⁹ תשב"ץ רנ"ח (https://www.sefaria.org/Tashbetz_Katan.258?lang=bi)

³³⁰ This isn't the place to discuss the question of a Kohen who is a **מחלל שבת בפהרסיא** and whether they should **Dukhen**.

³³¹ For example <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CVdbaQgR42U>

performed Birkas Kohanim. Strikingly, many of them did not don a Tallis³³² to cover their hands, nor did they raise their arms to shoulder height³³³ in the conventional dukhening posture³³⁴. Nonetheless, they recited the berakha beforehand, treating the act as a halakhically significant expression of Birkas Kohanim. In one video, I heard a Yisrael respond with “ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו לעולם ועד”, presumably under the impression that the Divine Name may have been recited in vain.

Separately, I came across a video of a woman—apparently observant, as indicated by her wearing of a tichel—reciting Birkas Kohanim over her adult child. Unusually, she placed both hands on his head in the traditional Kohanic formation. I had not encountered such a practice before. This suggests that Birkas Kohanim, both in its textual form and ritual posture, has in some contemporary circles been adopted more broadly as a general mode of bestowing berakha, independent of its specific halakhic framework and priestly origins.

16. DE'RABBANAN CONDITION INVALIDATING DE'ORAYSA FULFILMENT

One might ask, if a Kohen does perform a type of Birkas Kohanim outside of davening in the knowledge that this is outside of the time prescribed by the Rabbis, then is there a question as to whether he has nonetheless performed a positive Torah command? The Rabbis do have the license³³⁵ to annul a Torah command through a שב ואל תעשה.

This raises a broader conceptual question: can rabbinically imposed conditions (תנאים דרבנן) effectively prevent the fulfilment of a mitzvah on a de'Oraysa level? In other words, if the Torah stipulates condition A as sufficient for the performance of a given mitzvah, and the Rabbis later introduce an additional requirement—condition B—is it conceivable that one who fulfils A but not B would *no longer* satisfy even the Torah obligation? At first glance, such a proposition appears counterintuitive, perhaps even paradoxical.

Nonetheless, if precedent exists for this mechanism, one might argue that a Kohen who recites Birkas Kohanim outside of its rabbinically defined liturgical framework—for example, during a Bris or Pidyon HaBen—may **fail** to fulfil the biblical command altogether. Despite the Torah's commandment for Kohanim to bless Yisrael, the absence of the liturgical setting established מדרבנן could mean that the act lacks halakhic validity as a fulfilment of the de'Oraysa mitzvah. In such a case, the rabbinic framework would not merely regulate the performance of the mitzvah but would serve as a *defining criterion* for its fulfilment.

The Mishna in Sukkah³³⁶ states:

מי שהיה ראשו ורבו בסכה, ושלחנו בתוך הבית, בית שמאי פוסלין, ובית הלל מכשירין. אמרו להן בית הלל לבית שמאי, לא כך היה מעשה, שהלכו זקני בית שמאי וזקני בית הלל לבקר את רבי יוחנן בן החורני, ומצאוהו שהיה יושב ראשו ורבו בסכה, ושלחנו בתוך הבית, ולא אמרו לו דבר. אמרו להן בית שמאי, משם ראייה, אף הם אמרו לו, אם כן היית נוהג, לא קימת מצות סכה מימך

³³² Perhaps they weren't permitted to wear a Tallis there

³³³ I surmise that this was out of ignorance than intention.

³³⁴ In the Beis Hamikdash itself Kohanim had to raise their hands above their heads, though the Kohen Gadol could only raise it as high as the Tzitz itself.

³³⁵ ברכות כ. ברשי"י בד"ה וליגמר מינה שב ואל תעשה שאני

³³⁶ סוכה ב: (https://www.sefaria.org/Mishnah_Sukkah.2.7?lang=bi)

In the case of one whose head and most of his body were in the sukkah and his table was in the house, Beit Shammai deem it unfit, and Beit Hillel deem it fit. Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: And wasn't there an incident where the Elders of Beit Shammai and the Elders of Beit Hillel went to visit Rabbi Yohanan ben HaĤorani, and they found him such that he was sitting with his head and most of his body in the sukkah and his table in the house, and they said nothing to him? Even Beit Shammai did not object. Beit Shammai said to them: Is there proof from there? That is not what happened; rather, they said to him: If you were accustomed to act in this manner, **you have never fulfilled the mitzvah of sukkah in your life**

Rebbi Yohanan HaĤorani³³⁷ is sitting in a minimally sized Sukkah³³⁸ such that the majority of his body and head are within the Sukkah, but the table or tray upon which he is partaking of his meal remains outside the Sukkah.

Beis Shammai maintain that under such circumstances, the individual does not fulfil the mitzvah of eating in the Sukkah, on account of the concern that their proximity to the table located within the house may lead to a gradual repositioning of their body outside the Sukkah. Beis Shammai prohibit such an arrangement. Beis Hillel, by contrast, asserts that the mitzvah is indeed fulfilled, despite the table being situated beyond the confines of the Sukkah proper.

This is one of the six instances in which halakhah accords with the view of Beis Shammai³³⁹, thereby establishing a normative Rabbinic requirement that the table upon which one eats must also be located within the Sukkah. Consequently, it is improper to arrange a meal in a manner whereby the table remains indoors while one's body is within the Sukkah. Rishonim³⁴⁰ explain that Beis Shammai is concerned that since the table is in the house proper, he may inadvertently find himself eating in the house as opposed to the Sukkah.

A further analytical question arises regarding the nature of this dispute: do Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel differ on the level of Torah law, or is their disagreement confined to the Rabbinic domain? That is, might they concur that, *on a Torah level*, such an arrangement suffices for fulfilling the mitzvah, but that the Rabbanan instituted a prohibition against it according to Beis Shammai out of concern that the person might ultimately withdraw the majority of their body from the Sukkah? If so, the case serves to illustrate the authority of a Rabbinic enactment to prevent the performance of a mitzvah in a technically *Torah* valid, yet potentially compromised, fashion. In such a scenario, the Gemara states

If this is how you sit in a Sukkah, you have *never* fulfilled the Mitzvah of Sukkah!

There may be halakhic ramifications to be derived from this sugya regarding the status of a Kohen who performs Birkas Kohanim outside of the prescribed rabbinic framework. Ĥazal instituted that Birkas Kohanim is to be recited specifically during tefillah. One may thus inquire: in a case where a Kohen recites Birkas Kohanim independent of tefillah, is it possible that he has not even fulfilled the Torah obligation of Birkas Kohanim? This appears to be the conclusion of Tosfos³⁴¹.

³³⁷ who was ill at the time.

³³⁸ As explained by Tosfos (ibid), בד"ה דאמר לך,

³³⁹ עירובין 10, ע"פ בתוספות בדף 10. בד"ה שלש

³⁴⁰ For example, the Rif on Sukkah 4a cites the view that a Sukkah lacking internal furnishings may be invalid. The Ba'al haMa'or explains that this is because such a Sukkah cannot be considered a diras keva. Although the Sukkah must be constructed as a diras ara'i, the principle of teishvu ke'ein taduru—that one must dwell in the Sukkah as one would reside in a permanent home—requires that its internal accoutrements reflect the functionality of a stable residence. In his Milkhemos Hashem, the Ramban contests this understanding, maintaining that according to Beis Shammai, the Sukkah is disqualified not due to its lack of permanence per se, but rather because it lacks the practical capacity for habitation. Specifically, if there is insufficient space to accommodate a table, the Sukkah cannot serve as a viable dwelling.

³⁴¹ תוספות בד"ה תוספות ד"ה דאמר לך, סוכה ג.

One possible line of reasoning is that a person who follows the practice of Beis Hillel in defiance of the operative halakhic ruling of Beis Shammai thereby violates *lo sasur*³⁴², the Torah prohibition against deviating from the authoritative rabbinic decision. A second conceptual approach maintains that, once the Rabbanan have ruled a given (small) sukkah invalid, their enactment effectively removes the *heftza* of sukkah from halakhic consideration; accordingly, even on the de'Oraysa level the individual cannot be yotzei the mitzvah, because the requisite *object* no longer exists in the eyes of the Halakhah³⁴³.

As suggested above, and drawing a parallel to the case of the invalid sukkah, one might argue that in the context of Birkas Kohanim as well, a Kohen who disregards the enactment of Ḥazal—that following the destruction of the Beis HaMikdash the berakhs may only be performed within the framework of Ḥazaras HaShatz—may not be yotzei a mitzvah even on a de'Oraysa level. Just as the Rabbanan can, through their authority, remove the shem *heftza* of sukkah from a physical structure, rendering it halakhically unfit even for Torah-level fulfilment, so too they may delimit the valid context for Birkas Kohanim such that performance outside of that framework lacks the status of a biblical mitzvah altogether.

Indeed, R' Ovadia Yosef addresses the case of sukkah³⁴⁴, explaining that in certain instances Ḥazal enacted an issur specifically to *prevent* a situation in which one might inadvertently transgress a de'Oraysa. In *such* a case, Ḥazal—according to Tosafos—possess the authority to declare that the individual is not yotzei the Torah obligation. However, this mechanism is not *universally* applicable. In general, where Ḥazal introduce additional requirements—for example, the requirement that Kiddush on Friday night be accompanied by a se'udah, as opposed to the Torah-level Kiddush, which is fulfilled during tefillah itself—it does not follow that failure to fulfil the rabbinic element *nullifies* the underlying de'Oraysa.

Similarly, one might not hastily conclude that if Birkas Kohanim is recited outside the formal context of tefillah, the mitzvah *kiyumis* of Birkas Kohanim is somehow invalidated. While the Rabbis limited the standard performance of the mitzvah to Ḥazaras HaShatz, it does not necessarily follow that the Torah-level fulfilment is void in cases where that framework is absent—particularly when the act is performed with intent to bless, in a recognisably halakhic form.

The Mishnah in Megillah³⁴⁵ lists Birkas Kohanim among several mitzvos that require a minyan. R' David Ḥaim Corinaldi³⁴⁶ questions the necessity of this inclusion: if Birkas Kohanim is recited only during Ḥazaras HaShatz, which itself presupposes the presence of a quorum, then its requirement for a minyan would seem self-evident. He therefore suggests that the Mishnah refers to a case where Birkas Kohanim is recited *after* Ḥazaras HaShatz, in which case the presence of ten adult males would still be necessary³⁴⁷. Implicit in his interpretation is the notion that Birkas Kohanim may theoretically be performed outside the strict framework of tefillah. This would accord with the aforementioned view of Tosfos.

This issue is addressed by various Aḥaronim, and explicitly discussed by R' Chaim Binyamin Pontremoli in the context of Birkas Kohanim³⁴⁸, where he cites the Geonim in the Meiri³⁴⁹:

³⁴² דברים יז:א

³⁴³ ואין כאן המקום להאריך בזה

³⁴⁴ שו"ת יביע אומר א:טו in the first long footnote

³⁴⁵ מגילה ד:ד

³⁴⁶ בית דוד על המשניות, מגילה ד (<https://hebrewbooks.org/22456>)

³⁴⁷ Clearly with a Berakha

³⁴⁸ פתח הדביר קכ"ח:טו (<https://hebrewbooks.org/7974>)

³⁴⁹ מאירי מגילה, כד:ד (https://www.sefaria.org/Meiri_on_Megillah.24b.4?ven=hebrew|Meiri_on_Shas&lang=bi)

פירשו הגאונים' ששליח צבור ששכח ולא אמר ברכת כהנים בתפלה אם לא השלים את הברכה חוזר
וסודרה ואם השלים את הברכה אינו חוזר ואף בזמן שיש שם נשיאות כפים

The Geonim explained that a Ḥazan who forgot to say Birkas Kohanim in his prayer [before Sim Shalom in Ḥazaras HaShatz] if he hasn't said the [final] Berakhah [in Sim Shalom] he should rewind and say it now [and then continue Sim Shalom again]. [And he should do this] even at a time of [formal] Birkas Kohanim [when Kohanim are actually dukhening]

R' Pontremoli interprets this to refer to a case in which the Kohanim have already ascended and stand prepared to dukhen, but the Shaliaḥ Tzibbur, perhaps due to distraction, proceeds directly to Sim Shalom. Should the Ḥazan complete Sim Shalom³⁵⁰, the opportunity for Birkas Kohanim is lost, and it may no longer be performed retroactively. This appears to support the view that Birkas Kohanim is inextricably linked to its liturgical context, and that failure to observe its rabbinically mandated framework may preclude fulfilment even of the biblical commandment. Again, we effectively have a case where a Rabbinic requirement can preclude the fulfilment of a positive Torah command.

On the other hand, it could be argued that the Geonim permit Birkas Kohanim to be recited *following* Ḥazaras HaShatz, lending weight to the position of R' Corinaldi. Their ruling is only that the Ḥazan should not repeat Sim Shalom³⁵¹ to enable it, not that the Birkas Kohanim itself may not take place afterwards. This interpretation is somewhat strained in the sense that we might expect the Geonim to say so explicitly.

17. CONCLUSIONS

Based on a careful analysis of the relevant issues, it may be argued that a Kohen possesses no formal licence to sequester or re-appropriate his privileged role as the transmitter of Divine Berakhos in contexts lying outside the prescribed liturgical frameworks of Ḥazaras HaShatz and the designated Tefillos. Nonetheless, over time, one observes a societal tendency towards expanding the occasions on which a Kohen is called upon to bestow his Berakhos, often at moments of perceived need or heightened significance.

The incorporation of Birkas Kohanim within the Pidyon haBen ceremony is, at the very least, questionable. Indeed, according to the Ramban, the proper practice is to employ an alternative, personal formula when blessing the child. Likewise, the custom of bestowing Birkas Kohanim upon a Ḥasan and Kallah appears to lack ancient precedent, suggesting that it constitutes a relatively recent innovation unsupported by a firm Mesorah.

The practice of blessing children on Friday evening or on Yom Kippur is, in essence, both appealing and deeply resonant. Yet, a crucial question arises: must such berakhos exclusively utilise the verses of Birkas Kohanim, and are these to be restricted to use by a Kohen alone, or may they equally be employed by a non-Kohen? The Tanach itself records numerous alternative berakhos, raising the possibility that the attraction to employ the Kohanic formula may be as much a product of misplaced reverence as of legitimate tradition.

Ḥassidic Rebbes and Kabbalists are well known for bestowing Berakhos upon request, and these are often tailored to the specific needs of the supplicant. This phenomenon has extended beyond Ḥassidic circles to prominent non-Ḥassidic rabbis as well. In recent times, R' Ḥaim Kanievsky famously set aside daily periods in his modest apartment to receive the multitudes who sought his Berakhos. His preferred formula, however, was not Birkas Kohanim but the succinct “Booha,” an abbreviation of ברכה והצלחה. To the best of my knowledge, it remains unclear whether he ever employed the formal Kohanic verses themselves.

³⁵⁰ One would expect that a Ḥazan who bypasses Birkas Kohanim would be immediately corrected by the congregation, and that such a deviation would elicit strong protest or intervention before the omission could be completed

³⁵¹ As opposed to the ש"ו שאלה חלק ב, who opines that the Ḥazan *should* go back to Retzeh even if עקר רגליו and the Kohanim should then dukhen. (<https://hebrewbooks.org/723>)

This expansion has now reached additional ritual contexts, including the Bris Milah ceremony, and even digital spaces, such as a WhatsApp group of Kohanim dedicated to bestowing Berakhos during the present conflict with Hamas³⁵².

A striking illustration may be drawn from R' Menachem Hacohen, a prominent rabbinic figure who also served in the Israeli Labour movement as head of the Religious Worker faction in the Histadrut, as a member of the Knesset, and as Chief Rabbi of the Moshavim Movement and the Trade Union. In recounting his encounters with the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he recalls:

הרבי שאל אותי אם אני עולה בכל יום לברך ברכת כהנים, וכשהשבתי בחיוב אמר: "זייער צופרידן" –
מאוד מרוצה.
אירע כמה פעמים שבסיום יחידות אמר לי הרבי: "אתה כהן – תברך בברכת כהנים"

The Rebbe asked me whether I dukhened each day. When I replied in the affirmative, he responded, "Zeyer tzufriidn" — very pleased. On a number of occasions, at the conclusion of a private audience, the Rebbe instructed me: "You are a Kohen – bless me with Birkas Kohanim."

What may one infer from this? It is unclear whether the Rebbe's request was contingent upon the fact that R' Hacohen, as an Israeli, performed dukhening *daily*, and whether such status might also grant him licence to bestow Birkas Kohanim outside the formal liturgical setting, including in the Diaspora. It is equally uncertain whether the Lubavitcher Rebbe extended this request to Kohanim who did not observe the practice of daily dukhening. Nonetheless, the incident demonstrates that the Rebbe regarded such an act as intrinsically positive and spiritually valuable.

In contrast, R' Hershel Schachter, a foremost disciple of R' Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik and certainly not aligned with Ḥassidic practice, was recently recorded in a video³⁵³ receiving Birkas Kohanim from a centenarian Holocaust survivor. The latter placed both hands upon R' Schachter's head and pronounced the traditional verses, followed by a spontaneous berakha for success.

R' Yehoshua HaKohen Ḥamtzi in his seminal *Ko Sevarakhu*, notes an interaction between the Sefardic Chief Rabbi, Maharam Ibn Ḥaviv³⁵⁴ and R' Avraham ben Mordechai HaLevi³⁵⁵ in the latter's *Ginas Veradim*.³⁵⁶ R' Halevi explains that when R' Elazar Ben Shamua declared³⁵⁷ that his longevity was because

ולא נשאתי כפי בלא ברכה

I never Dukhened without a Berakha

he meant that he never employed the verses of Birkas Kohanim outside their prescribed liturgical framework, where the accompanying berakha would be properly recited—for example, by placing his hands upon the head of a child and blessing him with the priestly formula.

Maharam ibn Ḥaviv, however, rejects this interpretation. It is self-evident, he argues, that a Kohen would not bless a child in such a manner, employing Birkas Kohanim outside of a minyan and beyond the setting

³⁵² ימח שמם וזכרם, ושם רשעים ירקב

³⁵³ <https://vimeo.com/1159072516?share=copy&fl=sv&fe=ci>

³⁵⁴ Formerly Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman empire in the late 1600's

³⁵⁵ Egypt late 1600's

³⁵⁶ גינת ורדים סימן י"ב (<https://hebrewbooks.org/1640>)

³⁵⁷ מגילה כו:

of formal davening. To do so would constitute a **prohibition**³⁵⁸, and refraining from such an act could hardly be the type of merit that would warrant long life! On this basis, R' Hamtzi notes that both Maharam ibn Haviv and the Ginas Veradim presuppose that Kohanim do not perform “ad hoc” recitations of Birkas Kohanim.

We mentioned earlier that R' Hamtzi situates the question of such “ad hoc” Birkas Kohanim within a broader makhlokes between Tosafos and the majority of other Rishonim. In addressing why the prohibition of Bal Tosif does not apply to repeated shofar-blowing on Rosh Hashanah, Tosafos write³⁵⁹:

תימה הא קעבר משום בל תוסיף וכי תימא כיון דכבר יצא הוה ליה שלא בזמנו דלא עבר הא אמרינן בסוף
ראוהו ב"ד (לקמן ראש השנה דף כח: ושם) גבי ברכת כהנים דאין מוסיף ברכה אחת משלו משום דלא
עבר עליה זמניה כיון דאילו מתרמי ליה צבורא אחרינא הדר מברך להו ה"נ אי מתרמי ליה צבורא הדר
תקע להו

We can ask. Isn't he transgressing Bal Tosif? [when he blows Shofar again during the Hāzaras Hashatz (and silent Shemone Esreh according to some)]. If you want to argue that he has already discharged his Mitzvah [to hear shofar] and therefore [when he blows again for others] and this is outside the time of the Mitzvah proper [and can't be seen as adding to the Mitzvah because the Mitzvah has already ended] haven't we seen in Rosh Hashana 28b regarding Birkas Kohanim that the Kohen **can't add a Berakha of his own** because he hasn't yet discharged [completed] his [Mitzvah of] Birkas Kohanim because if encounters a different Tzibur [that requests his service] then he does bless them³⁶⁰. So here also [with Tekiyas Shofar] if another Tzibbur³⁶¹ requests his services, then he blows again for them [but this should be Bal Tosif because he has done his Mitzvah]

וי"ל דאין שייך בל תוסיף בעשיית מצוה אחת ב' פעמים כגון כהן אם מברך וחוזר ומברך אותו צבור עצמו
או נוטל לולב וחוזר ונוטל וכן תוקע וחוזר ותוקע

We can say that there is no prohibition of Bal Tosif when doing a Mitzvah twice, for example, if a Kohen blesses and then blesses again **that same congregation**, or if one takes the lulav and takes it again, or if one blows the shofar and blows it again

Ordinarily, halakhic discussion concerns whether a Kohen may or must dukhen again for a *different* congregation within the same shul. The central issue is whether, once the Kohen has performed dukhening, he has fully discharged his obligation—so that a subsequent performance would be optional (mitzvah kiyumis) rather than obligatory (hovas gavra). The consensus is that a Kohen may do so again, but if he chooses not to repeat the act he does not transgress, since the mitzvah is not binding upon him in a personal sense.

Here, however, Tosafos make a more radical claim: they explicitly liken a second dukhening of the *same congregation* (ומברך אותו צבור עצמו) to taking the lulav a second time. Certainly, one would not recite a berakha upon taking the lulav again, and it is questionable whether a Kohen should recite a berakha if he

³⁵⁸ I was directed to a recording of the first Siyum haRambam organised by Habad in New York in 1985 (available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jnpYuTD3EgQ>). On that occasion, R' Ephraim Yolles, a Kohen, had been designated to confer Birkas Kohanim. R' Yolles served as Chief Rabbi of Philadelphia and as an honorary president of the Agudas haRabbanim of the United States and Canada. Remarkably, R' Yolles prefaced his remarks by stating that Birkas Kohanim ought *not* be pronounced at any “random” time. He then proceeded not with the three scriptural verses of Birkas Kohanim, but instead with a more generalised berakha.

³⁵⁹ ראש השנה ט"ז: תוספות בד"ה ותוקעים

³⁶⁰ In other words the Mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim can extend all day theoretically and as such one could argue that a Kohen cannot add a Berakha *all day* in theory.

³⁶¹ One should not be medayek from the word Tzibbur that to blow a Shofar one needs ten. Rather, as an event, if another minyan has no Bal Tokeya then he can function in this guise once more.

blesses the same congregation a second time³⁶². Yet Tosafos' answer implies that beyond the absence of concern for Bal Tosif, a Kohen appears to possess the licence to dispense additional berakhs (to the same group) even outside of the formal context of davening. This inference follows from the fact that the same congregation has *already* davened; consequently, a second recitation of Birkas Kohanim in that setting cannot be considered *part* of the Hazaras HaShatz.

Tosfos's question has attracted some discussion. R' Akiva Eiger³⁶³ and R' Ya'akov Ettlinger, in his Arukh LaNer³⁶⁴, raise a critical objection to the analogy drawn by Tosafos between the shofar and Birkas Kohanim. They observe that in the case of the shofar, no additional berakha is recited upon a second sounding, since the individual has already discharged his obligation; a subsequent blowing is undertaken only on behalf of others³⁶⁵. By contrast, in the case of Birkas Kohanim, the Kohen would recite a further berakha, because *each* act of blessing constitutes an additional personal fulfilment of the mitzvah.

The Sefas Emes³⁶⁶ notes that because we do not know, from a pure Torah perspective, a precise number of tones to be sounded by the Shofar, and so we Rabbinically double up on different combinations and sounds, the Mitzvah of Tekias Shofar doesn't fall under a rubric of Bal Tosif. How does one add when one doesn't know the original number?

The Rogatchover Gaon observes³⁶⁷ that when Birkas Kohanim was read as part of the Torah reading, it is translated into Aramaic by the Meturgeman, in keeping with the treatment of any other pasuk. By contrast, when it is recited by the Kohanim themselves, no translation is provided, for in this context there is no din of keriah. Rather, the verses function as pure berakha. There is no translation and those who are blessed say Omein (either once at the end or three times).

On this basis, the Rogatchover argues that each time a Kohen pronounces the three verses, he effects a new halos of *berakha* and thereby fulfils the mitzvah anew. In the case of tekias shofar, however, once the ba'al toke'a has blown the prescribed series, the mitzvah has already been discharged, and no further halos of a mitzvah occurs with additional soundings.

Accordingly, Tosafos's comparison between Birkas Kohanim and tekias shofar collapses. One cannot contend that a person may blow the shofar repeatedly without transgressing Bal Tosif, since a Kohen may recite Birkas Kohanim multiple times. In the case of Birkas Kohanim, each recitation constitutes a distinct fulfilment of berakha, whereas with shofar, the mitzvah is completed with the initial performance. Thus, the two cases are not commensurable.

It thus appears that R' Akiva Eiger, the Arukh laNer and the Rogatchover Gaon did not interpret Tosafos' remark as legitimising an *ad hoc* repetition of Birkas Kohanim, but rather as referring to a scenario in which a new tzibbur of ten requests that the Kohen ascend the dukhen once more.

Nonetheless, the apparent position of Tosfos as seen from his answer (וחזור ומברך אותו צבור עצמו) is followed as an explicit Psak Din by R' Avraham Yitzhaki, Chief Sefardi Rabbi in Israel³⁶⁸, in his Zera Avraham³⁶⁹. The case under consideration concerned a Yerushalmi Kohen visiting the Diaspora during Yom

³⁶² See for example לבוש קב"ח:ג (https://hebrewbooks.org/41186)

³⁶³ בחידושי שם

³⁶⁴ שם

³⁶⁵ מדין ערבות

³⁶⁶ חידושים של הש"ס שם

³⁶⁷ צפנת פענח עמ"ס ר"ה טז: (ע' לה-לו) [מכת"י. מכון המאור. ירושלים, תש"פ]

³⁶⁸ 1715-1722

³⁶⁹ זרע אברהם, אורח חיים, שאלה י"ב (https://hebrewbooks.org/843)

Tov Sheni. The Ginas Veradim was uncertain whether such a Kohen should dukhen, and concluded that he ought to dukhen but refrain from reciting the berakha beforehand. The Maharam Ḥaviv likewise permits him to dukhen, but, in light of the concern of the Levush³⁷⁰ regarding the prior berakha, rules that if other Kohanim are present, he should abstain from reciting it, whereas if he is the sole Kohen, he may do so. The Zera Avraham engages these views, cites Tosafos, and then rules unequivocally:

כיון שבידו לברך את ישראל את ישראל בכל שעה שירצה יכול לברכם

Since it lies within his power to bless Israel **whenever he so wishes**, he may bless them

The Zera Avraham proceeds to argue that the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim is analogous to the mitzvah of Tefillin. Just as an individual may don Tefillin multiple times in the course of a single day—reciting a fresh berakha on each occasion, provided that there has been היסח הדעת—so too a Kohen who bestows Birkas Kohanim may do so repeatedly throughout the day, and is obliged to recite a new berakha with each performance.

Is the view of Tosafos accepted? R' Yehoshua HaKohen Ḥamtzi, in his Ko Sevarekhu, is adamant that aside from Tosafos, the position of the other Rishonim is not that a Kohen may bless the *same* tzibbur multiple times in a single day. Rather, their view is that if a *different* tzibbur requests his blessing, he may then bestow it. R' Yitzḥak Alfasi, the Rif,³⁷¹ opines based on the Gemara in Rosh Hashana

ואמרי' התם דאילו מתרמי ליה ציבורא אחרינא הדר מבכר ושמעינן מינה דכהן דפריס ידיה בחדא דוכתא
ואזל לדוכתא אחריתי ואשכח ציבורא דלא מטו לברכת כהנים כד מטו לברכת כהנים פריס להו ידיה
ושפיר דאמי

where he clearly states that the Kohen who dukhens for another congregation is doing so in the course of them reaching formal Birkas Kohanim. Although he mentions דוכתא אחריתי — another place — clearly if it was another (subsequent) minyan in the *same* place, the Rif would express the same view. The Rambam³⁷² employs similarly explicit language

כהן שנשא את כפיו בבית הכנסת והלך לבית הכנסת אחר ומצא צבור שמתפללין ולא הגיעו לברכת
כהנים נושא ידיה להן ומברכן. ואפלו כמה פעמים ביום

The Shulḥan Arukh³⁷³ is similarly explicit

כהן שנשא כפיו ואח"כ הלך לבית הכנסת אחר ומצא צבור שלא הגיעו לברכת כהנים יכול לישא את כפיו
פעם אחרת

and that is the understanding of the Aḥaronim.

In other words, there is no license for a Kohen to pronounce Birkas Kohanim whenever he wishes or whenever he is asked. The permission applies exclusively within the structured framework of tefillah, specifically during Ḥazaras HaShatz, at which point, when summoned, he may pronounce the blessing—according to most authorities, preceded by a berakha.

One possible way to reconcile Tosafos and situate their position within the framework restricting dukhening to formal tefillah is to observe, as noted above in the names of Rashi, the Maharil and others, that it was

³⁷⁰ <https://hebrewbooks.org/41186> (https://hebrewbooks.org/41186) לבוש, ארי"ח קכ"ח:ג

³⁷¹ https://www.sefaria.org/Rif_Megillah.15b.7?ven=hebrew|Vilna_Edition&lang=bi מגילה ט"ו: (https://www.sefaria.org/Rif_Megillah.15b.7?ven=hebrew|Vilna_Edition&lang=bi)

³⁷² https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah_Prayer_and_the_Priestly_Blessing.15.11?lang=bi&with=Commentary_ConnectionsList&lang2=en הלכה י"א (https://www.sefaria.org/Mishneh_Torah_Prayer_and_the_Priestly_Blessing.15.11?lang=bi&with=Commentary_ConnectionsList&lang2=en)

³⁷³ https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh_Orach_Chayim.128.28?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en ארי"ח קכ"ח, כ"ח (https://www.sefaria.org/Shulchan_Arukh_Orach_Chayim.128.28?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en)

customary to dukhen at Shaḥaris and then again at Musaf. This practice remains common in Israel, in contrast to the Diaspora, where dukhening occurs *only* at Musaf. Since the primary dukhening takes place after the morning korbanos, Ḥazal prescribed Shaḥaris as the appropriate time. On what basis, then, does a second dukhening occur at Musaf for the *same* congregation? Moreover, a berakha *is* recited for that second dukhening, and according to some customs, for example, during Neilah on Yom Kippur, this may occur a third time for the very same congregation. Perhaps, then, this is the intended benign meaning of Tosafos when they write **ומברך אותו צבור עצמו**. According to this explanation, Tosafos nevertheless maintain that formal Birkhas Kohanim can only be performed within the context of communal tefillah; they are not, in fact, in conflict with the positions of the other Rishonim.

On the other hand, more plausibly, another Tosfos may shed light on the practice of reciting Birkas Kohanim outside of Tefillah. The Gemara in Berakhos 11b states

תנן התם: אמר להם הממונה: "ברכו ברכה אחת!". והם ברכו. וקראו עשרת הדברות, "שמע", "ויהיה אם שמוע", "ויאמר". וברכו את העם שלש ברכות, "אמת ויציב", ועבודה, וברכת כהנים

We learn in the Mishna (Tamid) the Appointed Kohen told them [the Kohanim on that watch] Bless once, and they blessed. And they read the Ten Commandments, Shema, Vahaya Im Shamo'a, Vayomer, and they blessed the people with three Berakhos of Emes VeYatziv, Avoda and Birkas Kohanim

Tosfos³⁷⁴ and the Tosfos HaRosh³⁷⁵ explain that the Birkhas Kohanim referred to here in the Beis HaMikdash was not the standard Birkhas Kohanim performed with Nesi'as Kapayim, but rather a recitation of the verses without the lifting of the hands. The Rashba writes that this was not truly Birkhas Kohanim at all, but rather the berakha of Sim Shalom. The Rambam³⁷⁶ likewise maintains that what was recited was Sim Shalom rather than Birkhas Kohanim. How, then, is Sim Shalom connected to Birkhas Kohanim? The parallel may be understood as follows:

יברך ה' וישמר	שים שלום טובה וברכה חיים חן וחסד ורחמים עלינו ועל כל ישראל
יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך	ברכנו אבינו כולנו כאחד באור פניך, כי באור פניך נתת לנו תורת חיים ואהבת חסד וצדקה וברכה ורחמים וחיים ושלום
ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום	וטוב יהיה בעיניך לברכנו ולברך את כל עמך ישראל בשלום. ברוך אתה ה' המברך את עמו ישראל בשלום

Tellingly, Tosfos reflects on this practice of the Beis Hamikdash and writes

אלא בלא נשיאות כפים אמרו ברכת כהנים כמו שאנו אומרים

But [they—the Kohanim] said Birkas Kohanim **without lifting the palms**, like we say

We observe that Tosafos in Berakhos maintain that Kohanim may recite the verses of Birkhas Kohanim provided they do not raise their arms in the process. Evidently, they hold that no transgression of bal tosif or improper placement occurs when the act is performed in this incomplete form³⁷⁷. One might interpret the

³⁷⁴ ברכות י"א: בד"ה וברכת כהנים

³⁷⁵ שם

³⁷⁶ הלכה 1 (https://shas.alhatorah.org/Full/Berakhot/11b.20#e0n6)

³⁷⁷ Other Rishonim will contend that they said a pseudo Birkas Kohanim in the guise of Sim Shalom

Tosafos phrase “like we say” as referring to the recitation of these verses following Birkhas HaTorah in Shacharis. However, it appears that Tosafos do not limit this dispensation strictly to the formal context of communal tefillah.

The halakhic ramifications of the commonly understood position of Tosafos on Rosh Hashana—particularly in contrast to that of the other Rishonim—are striking. According to Tosafos, there would seemingly be no intrinsic objection to a Kohen bestowing these blessings outside the established minhag and liturgical framework—for example, at a bris milah, beneath the huppah, or even on Leil Shabbos or Erev Yom Kippur. By contrast, the majority of Rishonim appear to deny the Kohen any such licence, maintaining that Birkhas Kohanim is confined to its formal setting within tefillah. R' Ya'akov Simcha Cohen, in an unpublished responsum³⁷⁸, proposes a mediating position: the verses of Birkhas Kohanim may indeed be recited at any time, provided that no act of *nesias kapayim* occurs, in accordance with the position of Tosafos in Berakhos.

One might seek to justify contemporary practice by contending that when Kohanim are invited to deliver “Birkhas Kohanim” at a Pidyon HaBen, Bris, or Huppah, this does not constitute a technically valid Birkhas Kohanim. I would, however, regard this contention as only partially correct. Certain halakhic features are indeed absent: there is no *duchan*, shoes are not removed, the *tzibbur* looks directly at the Kohanim’s hands, the Kohen himself often observes his own hands, the act may take place at night, *netilas yadayim* is not performed, and in many instances—such as Leil Shabbos or Erev Yom Kippur³⁷⁹—there is not even a *minyan*.

Nevertheless, in practice the Kohanim frequently extend both arms and recite the three biblical verses verbatim; they are often explicitly summoned to deliver “Birkhas Kohanim.” This phenomenon generates ambiguity and, arguably, leads some Kohanim and observers—particularly those less versed in halakhic nuance—to perceive the act as a formally mandated ritual. Indeed, the lifting of both arms strongly reinforces the impression that a *bona fide* mitzvah is being performed. While this does not constitute a concern of *ma'aris ayin*, as there is no technical transgression, it does illustrate how neo-rituals may emerge: practices originating from a benign intention can, over time, evolve into non-masoretic customs.

The absence of raised arms and palms may, however, offer support for the position of Tosfos in Rosh Hashana when read together with their comments in Berakhos: Tosfos consistently maintain that a Kohen may bless the same congregation multiple times, which may reasonably be understood as applying *specifically* to cases where the lifting of the hands is *omitted*. On this basis, we may assert—contra the conclusion of R' Yehoshua HaKohen Hamtzi—that we need not posit a substantive dispute between Tosfos and the other Rishonim. Tosfos agree that the only legitimate locus for Birkas Kohanim is *within* the liturgical framework of Tefillah. Their view is simply that no halakhic *halois* of Birkas Kohanim is generated unless requisite conditions are fulfilled; thus, if the arms and palms are not raised, no formal act of Birkas Kohanim has taken place at all.

This suggests a fundamental distinction: there is a difference between *Birkas Kohanim*—the mitzvah as fixed in the siddur—and *berakhos from Kohanim*—berakhos conferred *by* Kohanim in their capacity as divinely designated conduits of blessing. The former is a Mitzvah Min HaTorah whose timing is determined by the Rabbanan. The latter is simply a meritorious act of one Jew—albeit a Kohen who is a *berakha* specialist—blessing another³⁸⁰.

³⁷⁸ Kindly sent to me by his son R' Yehuda Cohen

³⁷⁹ Another change which I took upon myself a number of years ago was to *sit* when benching my children and grandchildren on ליל שבת in recognition that *formal* Birkas Kohanim is performed while standing.

³⁸⁰ Similar to a Jew seeking a Berakha from a Rebbe or great Rabbi.

It is therefore fitting in my opinion that Kohanim frame these extra-liturgical berakhos in such a manner as to make evident that they are not performing the formal mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim (which, according to most authorities, would also require a prior berakha).

Several adaptations can achieve this.

1. Frame the three verses with their *surrounding pesukim*³⁸¹—as some already do in Shaḥaris:

וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר. דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר: כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם
ושמו את שמי על בני ישראל, ואני אברכם.

By doing so, the act is transformed into a *keri'as ha-Torah* of pesukim, not a formal performance of Birkas Kohanim³⁸². R' Ḥamtzi even recommends reciting the pesukim with their formal ta'amim (trop—cantillation marks).

2. Another—and perhaps the most striking—adaptation is the departure from the full Birkas Kohanim posture through the use of a *single* hand. This gesture serves to indicate that the Kohen is conferring blessing in a symbolic capacity, without in any way fulfilling the formal mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim—even if the assembled mistakenly refer to it as such. Indeed, the Vilna Gaon³⁸³ is reported to have preferred this very practice. While R' Ya'akov Emden³⁸⁴ and later R' Ovadia Yosef³⁸⁵ did not object to the use of two hands³⁸⁶, in my estimation the one-hand adaptation is particularly apposite in contemporary circumstances. Since these berakhos are commonly explicitly introduced as “Birkas Kohanim,” the use of one hand serves pointedly to demarcate the act as something distinct. Even according to R' Ovadia Yosef, one might ask: what, after all, is *lost* by using a single hand? Surely he would concede that our practice does not accord with Tosafos' expansive view but rather constitutes a symbolic adaptation—a meaningful set of berakhos performed by Kohanim, yet decidedly not the formal mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim. Alternatively, one could use no hands.

Interestingly, I recently encountered an account³⁸⁷ describing a visit by R' David Kohn, the Toldos Aharon Rebbe of Me'ah She'arim, to R' Dov Kook of Teveryah. Both figures are Kohanim. In the course of the visit, R' Kohn was observed conferring what was described as “Birkas Kohanim” upon R' Kook, doing so with only one hand. It is legitimate to conclude that the use of one hand was intentional.

3. Where feasible, such as on Friday evening or Erev Yom Kippur, the Kohen should be *seated* while giving the berakhos as opposed to the legislated formal standing mode.
4. Any invitation should be along the lines of “*We invite Kohanim to give a Berakha*” as opposed to using the words “*Birkas Kohanim*”.

³⁸¹ As is the tendency of Ḥabad Ḥassidim

³⁸² As noted above, in the context of a Pidyon HaBen there exists a tradition to ad-lib and append additional berakhos. As previously discussed, the Ramban explicitly preferred that one employ a distinct, *personal* set of berakhos in this setting rather than reciting a formal Birkas Kohanim.

³⁸³ As noted in א"ת קל"א, פסוק כ"ג אות קל"א and תורה תמימה פרק ו, פסוק כ"ג אות קל"א

³⁸⁴ סידור ר' יעקב עמדין

³⁸⁵ שו"ת יחווה דעת, חלק ה, י"ד

³⁸⁶ Interestingly, when Ya'akov bestowed his blessings upon Ephraim and Menashe, he chose to do so with one hand placed on each head. He could, of course, have blessed Ephraim first with both hands and then followed with Menashe in a similar manner. I am not suggesting that this constitutes definitive proof; nevertheless, I have not encountered any source indicating that Ya'akov's use of a single hand was in any way deficient or subject to question.

³⁸⁷ <https://matzav.com/rav-dov-kook-presents-ornate-rebbes-stick-to-toldos-aharon-rebbe-during-visit/>

ובמקומי אני עומד לאסור אם לא על ידי תיקון שיעשו המברכים לקטנים שיברכו אותם בשיבה או שיברכו ברכת כהנים כקורא בתורה כדבר האמור. ועוד יש תיקון אחר, והוא לברך תינוק ביד אחת, דנשיאת כפים כדינו הוא בנשיאת שתי ידיו כאהרן הכהן עליו השלום דכתיב וישא אהרן את ידיו, ואם בירך ביד אחת, לא יצא ידי חובתו. ואחר זמן האיר זורח ספר חיים ומלך להגאון עטרת ראשינו מופת הדור מרן החב"י זצוק"ל, וראיתי שם בסוף הספר הנקרא נפש כל חי במערכת הבי' אות ל"א, שהביא בשם הרב ח"י ז"ל שנהגו כשמברכים הגדולים לקטנים מניחים יד ימין על ראשיהם ומברכים, ובתור הכי הביא דהרב שאילת יעבץ ז"ל דבר עליו קשות וכתב דצריך לברך אותם בשתי ידים, והוא ז"ל החזיק דברי הרב ח"י ז"ל שכתב שיברכו לקטנים ביד אחת. והוא על פי האמור דאם הכהנים מברכים לקטנים ברכת כהנים עבירה היא בידם דאין ברכת כהנים אלא בעשרה, וגם הישראל שהוא זר לא יברך לקטנים נשיאת כפים, והתיקון לזה הוא שיברכו לקטנים ביד אחת דנשיאות כפים גזירת הכתוב.

I am firm in my position to forbid [non formal Birkas Kohanim] unless a corrective measure is observed whereby those bestowing blessings upon children either do so while seated or recite Birkas Kohanim in the manner of a koreh ba-Torah, as noted above. Another corrective practice is to bless the child using one hand only. The full nesias kapayim is performed with both hands, following the precedent of Aharon haKohen, as it is written: "Ve-yisa Aharon es yadav"; if a Kohen blesses with one hand, he does not fulfil the formal obligation.

Subsequently, the Gaon, Ateres Roshenu, the exemplary sage R' Haim Palaggi provides further discussion at the conclusion of his sefer entitled Nefesh Kol Hai³⁸⁹, in subsection 2:31, it is noted that the Hemdas Yamim³⁹⁰ z"l records the custom that when adults bless children, they place the right hand on their heads while reciting the blessing. However, the sefer also cites R' Ya'akov Emden z"l, who raised a stringent objection, arguing that the blessing should be recited with both hands. R' Haim z"l, in turn, maintained that it is appropriate to bless children with one hand.

This aligns with the principle that if Kohanim bless children using Birkas Kohanim, it constitutes a halachic transgression, since the priestly blessing is valid only in the presence of a minyan. Even a non-Kohen is not permitted to perform nesias kapayim for children. The corrective solution, therefore, is to bless children with one hand only, in accordance with the divine decree regarding nesias kapayim.

³⁸⁸ ספר כה תברכו מערכת הבי', סימן ד' 388

³⁸⁹ <https://hebrewbooks.org/21064>

³⁹⁰ Sefer Hemdas Yamim — there has been significant scholarly debate over whether its author adhered to Sabbatean beliefs. For further discussion, see R' Yehiel Goldhaber, "Ta'alumah Ve'ein Koreh Leha" (<https://web.archive.org/web/20140116083145/http://www.datshe.co.il/konditon/2010/06/17/תעלומה-ואין-קורא-לה/> footnote_1_24)

18. POSTSCRIPT

I prepared a two-page set of questions in support of my conclusions, formulating them specifically for contemporary poskim and centring on the discussion of Tosafos in Shabbos, with the aim of eliciting their halakhic assessment. For reasons I do not fully understand, the overwhelming majority of the senior poskim whom I contacted elected not to respond formally. Four, however, did provide written replies, and I summarise their positions below in the order in which their responses were received.

1. Rav Zev Leff, Mara D'Asra of Moshav Matityahu, wrote that Birkhas Kohanim is performed only during formal tefillah, and that perhaps Tosafos were referring to a situation in which there had been an error in the Hazzaras HaShatz requiring the hazzan to repeat the Birkhas Kohanim. Alternatively, it may have involved a second group of mispallelim, resulting in the Kohen dukhening more than once, or perhaps, according to Tosafos, there is no prohibition against repeating it outside of formal tefillah.
2. Rav Yitzchak Breitowitz, Mara D'Asra of Kehilas Ohr Sameach in Israel, wrote “דברי פי חכם חן! Yasher koach for your sweet divrei Torah. Everything you say is Glatt and your Maskonos are Oisgehalten”
3. Rav Yosef Tzvi Rimon, Mara D'Asra of the Gush Etzion region, indicated that he too does not understand how or why it became more common to perform Birkhas Kohanim outside of formal tefillah, and suggested that it may be more appropriate for a non-Kohen to confer such blessings. That being said, since the Kohanim performing these blessings explicitly intend that they are not executing the formal Birkhas Kohanim, the practice does not constitute an issur. In such cases, those who are stringent would be better served by using one hand only.
4. Rav Moshe Bransdorfer, Mara D'Asra of Heichal Hora'ah in Me'ah She'arim, addressed the position of Tosafos in Rosh HaShanah in a manner consistent with the reconciliation proposed above. Namely, he maintained that Tosafos were not referring to an additional ad hoc performance of Birkas Kohanim. Rather, their discussion concerns a case in which the Kohanim dukhen at Shaḥaris and subsequently again at Musaf. He concurred that it is inappropriate for a Kohen to perform Birkas Kohanim outside the framework of formal tefillah. At the same time, as noted above, there exists a separate passage in Tosafos to Berakhos in which Tosafos acknowledge that, in the absence of nesi'as kapayim, a Kohen may recite the three verses of Birkas Kohanim at any time. In light of this distinction, I would suggest that the proposal to utilise a single hand is thereby further reinforced.

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