

Parshat Naso 5776

ברכת כהנים We first come across the Kohanim blessing the people in parshas Shemini in sefer Vayikra. This is in the context of the one-off historical ceremony of הנוכת המזבח (inauguration of the altar). In contrast, parshas Naso is the source for the mitzvah d'oraissa for all time of Bircas Kohanim.

The introductory pesukim to Bircas Kohanim read: *Hashem spoke to Moshe saying "speak to Aharon and to his sons, saying, so shall you bless the children of Israel, say to them...."*

So shall you bless. How are we to understand the word כה in the phrase: כה תברכו את-בני ישראל אמור להם "So shall you bless the children of Israel, say to them"? The Gemara in Taanis understands the word כה as connecting Bircas Kohanim to the topic previously mentioned in our parsha - the topic of **Nazir**. The Gemara mentions several similarities between the Kohen and the Nazir including the following:

- Just as a Nazir is forbidden to drink wine, a Kohen must avoid drinking wine prior to the Avodah and has to be sober when performing Bircas Kohanim.
- Just as tumas meis (contact with a dead body) is forbidden to a Nazir, a Kohen must avoid tumas meis.

Sefas Emes adds, just as the Nazir focuses on raising his spiritual level, by limiting his own physical self-indulgence, in terms of not drinking wine and not cutting hair, similarly Kohanim do not have their own land, have modest material benefits and are supposed to focus on spiritual matters.

The Mishna in Sotah learns that the word כה comes to teach us that, in contrast to davening which can theoretically be said in any language, Bircas Kohanim can only be said in lashon hakodesh. Interestingly, the gematria of the word כה is 25, which is the number of privileges of the kohanim, the 24 matnos kahuna (priestly gifts given to the kohanim) plus Bircas Kohanim.

וישמרך The first of the three parts of Bircas Kohanim is יברכך ה' וישמרך - "may Hashem bless you and guard you" Rashi comments on the word יברכך - "that your possessions should be blessed" i.e. the bracha relates to material prosperity. On the word וישמרך - "may Hashem guard you" - Rashi comments: "that thieves should not come against you to take your property"

Ohr Ha'chayim has the following fascinating interpretation of the word וישמרך The Kohanim bless us that Hashem should grant us material prosperity in terms of assets, talents and success. However, it is easy to misuse these assets by becoming arrogant and focusing on material rather than spiritual pursuits. Material blessings can dull our sensitivities towards Hashem. The irony is that when we have most to thank Hashem for, we often thank Him least. We tend to remember Hashem more in times of crisis than in times of prosperity and peace. Therefore, the Kohanim bless us that Hashem should guard us that we do not misuse our assets and talents; we need *shemira* in order to properly benefit from the bracha. In the secular and materialistic world in which we live, too much material success can lead to spiritual failure.

With love Before saying Bircas Kohanim, the Kohanim make the bracha "*levarech es amo yisrael b'ahava*" – "to bless His people Israel **with love**". Rashi quotes the midrash saying אמור is written full i.e. with a vav, which alludes to the fact that Moshe instructs the Kohanim that they are not to bless the people in haste and confusion but with an attentive heart i.e. with love. Why is it important that the Kohanim say their bracha **with love**?

We can answer this question by referring to the following Gemara in Sota. The Gemara states that, to make the bracha over a cup of wine (eg for Kiddush or Havdalah), you should only choose someone who is described as "*tov ayin*" – a generous person. This is derived from the pasuk in Mishlei: "*tov ayin hu yevorach*" – "*the generous man will be blessed*"; the Gemara learns: do not read it as *yevorach* (*will be blessed*) but as *yevarech* (*he will bless*). The bracha is somehow dependent on the feelings and intentions of the one who blesses. This is what is behind the "love" mentioned in the bracha preceding Bircas Kohanim. The Kohanim are to bless Israel with a feeling of generosity. The Kohanim had no share in the land; they were therefore dependent on the welfare of others. They were able to bless the people with a full heart because if others were favoured, so too would they be.

During Bircas Kohanim, the Kohanim must face the people. This can be compared to the two Keruvim, above the Aron Hakodesh in the Mishkan, which faced each other as a sign of love when the Jewish People fulfilled the will of Hashem. Interestingly, Bircas Kohanim contains 15 words which correspond to the gematria of the word באהבה.