ON THE ASHKENAZI PRACTICE OF LIMITING ברכות כהנים (THE PRIESTLY BLESSING) TO HOLIDAYS

By Rabbi Noah Gradofsky

Note: Most of the texts referenced appear in an appendix below. This post originally posted 3/5/17. Slight edits were entered on 4/3/18.

This thought follows on a recent conversation with Hakham Isasac Sassoon and his thoughts are shared with his permission.

During our conversation I noted the very funny comment in the recent OU responsum on ordination of women referencing “the universally accepted Ashkenazic practice that kohanim only recite ברכה כהנים on Yom Tov” (footnote 6). Although we agreed on the irony of the phrase, Hakham Sasson indicated approval of the Ashkenazi practice, arguing that ברכה כהנים should not be done regularly since the requisite כוונה (intent) could not/would not be achieved on a regular basis.

I asked Hakham Sassoon whether there was a basis in חז”ל (the rabbis of the Talmudic era) for an intent requirement for ברכה כהנים. Hakham referenced BT Sota 39a, which prescribes the mitzvah blessing recited by the Kohanim prior to delivering the priestly blessing (“Who has . . . commanded us to bless His nation Israel with love”). Interestingly, when Rabbi Moses Isserless, in his gloss on Shulchan Arukh, explains the common Ashkenazi practice of limiting ברכה כהנים to holidays, he mentions a lack of requisite happiness, rather than a lack of love. I am not aware of any חז”ל source requiring happiness as an element of performing ברכה כהנים, so perhaps a lack of capacity for love might be a better explanation of the Ashkenazi practice, as discussed further below, in which case perhaps one could go as far as to argue that a lack of joy diminishes one’s capacity to deliver the blessing lovingly. On the other hand, communal sadness might inspire a level of compassion that, if anything, would make the blessing both more loving and more needed. Hakham Sassoon suggests that perhaps the homiletical understanding that טוב עין, generosity of spirit, is helpful for blessing may also help explain bridge the gap between the Talmud’s requirement of love and the later suggestion that happiness is required.

The source basis for a requirement of love in performing ברכה כהנים is fairly thin but probably adequate. The Talmud does not explain the text of the blessing mitzvah blessing “to bless His nation Israel with love” or discuss a source for such a requirement. However, this does not undermine the clear implication that the blessing has an emotional requirement. Furthermore, there is a midrash, found only in compendia of aggadic midrashim, that supports the emotional requirement as well:

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1. Was the irony intentional? And how did they discount Israel, where Ashkenazim regularly do ברכה כהנים or the fact that many later Ashkenazi authorities strongly decried the practice of not doing ברכה כהנים? See Arukh haShulkahn OCH 128:64, although admittedly the Arukh haShulkahn resigns himself to the practice
2. See gloss on Orah Hayim 128:44.
3. See סימן מג custom, not law as it is viewed as “fitting” for a person to be happy when doing ברכה כהנים.
4. I am not certain that this argument would be convincing.
5. See verse of Proverbs quoted in the Zohar text below, text accompanying footnote 9.
6. It is not particularly surprising that the Talmud would not explain the rationale behind the text of a blessing.
7. Giving credit where credit is due, I found this reference in the Art Scroll Talmud on BT Sotah 39a. The association of these texts with the blessing for ברכה כהנים is found in the ארא שבעת commentary in the appendix.
“Thus shall you bless the Children of Israel, say to them” (Num. 6:23) – The Holy One, blessed is He said to the Kohanim: Just because I commanded you does not mean you should bless them reluctantly and with agitation, rather you should bless them with sincerity of heart so that your blessing be fulfilled in them. Therefore “say (אמר)” is written full (i.e. with the vav) (in other books the text reads “say” is written full and punctuated with a patah to say that a person must give peace, i.e. bless, his fellow with a full mouth, i.e. unreservedly). 8

The Zohar also indicates a tradition requiring a certain level of intent for ברכת כהנים:

It is taught: Any Kohen who is not liked by the community should not spread his hands, i.e. perform the priestly blessing . . . Any Kohen who does not like the community or the community doesn’t like him should not spread his hands to bless the people, as it is written (Proverbs 22:9), “The generous person (lit. “one of good eye”) will be blessed,” read not “will be blessed,” but rather “will bless.” 9

The above sources support a requirement of positive intent on the part of a Kohen when doing ברכת כהנים. In subsequent email discussion, I questioned Hakham Sassoon as to whether this requirement is really a justification for reducing the frequency with which Kohanim in Ashkenazi communities fulfill the mitzvah of the priestly blessing.

Hakham Sassoon noted that, in fact, there is no Talmudic source requiring the delivery of the priestly blessing on a daily basis (as he put it, to “press [a Kohen] into giving the blessing at every minyan”), although Mishnah Ta’anit 4:1 (BT 26a) indicates it was a daily fixture of the Temple service. Perhaps, Hakham Sassoon argued, daily delivery of ברכת כהנים became commonplace only in some areas. He noted:

[I]t was not only Ashkenazim who limited BK to festivals. Unlike oriental Jews, Western Sephardim have the same practice. It is well documented that in Amsterdam BK was introduced on Shabbath only under Shabbethai Tsevi’s influence. The implication: prior to the 1660’s it was limited to festivals. In fact outside Amsterdam, Sephardim to this day have BK only on Yameem Tobeem (including S&P in NYC!) So despite the comments of the Beth Yosef (who was born in Spain but left at age 4) one must wonder whether Iberian Jews pre-expulsion were doing it daily. I remember trying to research this many years ago but did not find a clear answer.

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8 המדרש הירושה (י”לב) פרשת נשא הפרשה או’י (utzer) פרשת kapsa סמי’ 1 (without the alternate version in the parenthetical at the end). The text of במדבר רבה is reproduced in the appendix.
9 המדרש הירושה פרשת נשא הפרשה או’י (utzer) פרשת kapsa סמי’ 1. Note this play on words is used to other halakhic and homiletic effect in e.g. BT Sotah 38b and פטרה ומנהשים פרשת הברכה טסי’ 8.
Nonetheless, there seems to be general consensus that ברכת כהנים was a fixture of the daily service, and Hakham Sassoon notes that it is telling that none of the people who seek to defend Ashkenazi practice raise the point that there is no explicit source requiring ברכת כהנים on a daily basis. Perhaps, he surmises, the intent requirement played a role here, though it is surprising that this was couched in reference to a lack of happiness rather than a lack of intent/love. Further, it seems to me that to the extent that there was an institution of daily priestly blessing, its elimination because of any emotional deficit would be quite suspect. Presumably, if הוהי instituted ברכת כהנים on a daily basis they took stock of the ability of Kohanim to meet its requirements, including any requirement of intent. 

To argue that future generations became so deficient in their ability to achieve the requisite intent to me relies on the presumption of ירידת הדורות (the concept that our generations are getting progressively worse), which at best lacks sufficient evidence to justify abrogation of a mitzvah. Perhaps there would be some reason to advise Kohanim that if they are in the wrong mindset they should excuse themselves from participating in the blessing. However, I do not think that the intent requirement associated with ברכת כהנים provides adequate support for the Ashkenazi elimination of this mitzvah from regular prayer services.

It seems to me that if daily ברכת כהנים was originally a fixture in all Jewish communities, the more likely scenario for its elimination is the rise of a practice for Kohanim to immerse in a (ritual bath) prior to doing ברכת כהנים, and the difficulty that arose with doing so during cold winters. Although Rabbi Yoseph Karo points out that this is not a good excuse for the limitation of בirkat Kohanim, it is a more than plausible explanation for why the practice might have become limited, especially in the colder climates of Ashkenaz. This would be similar to practices where whereby women would not say halakhically required blessings during their monthly impurity despite the fact that there was no halakhic constraint on making such blessings. Both cases would be examples where cultural mores concerning states of impurity and performance of commandments resulted in people failing to fulfill commandments despite the fact that halakhah clearly did not restrict their performance of those mitzvoth. This would also explain why ברכת כהנים was preserved during holidays, since there was widespread practice for men to go the prior to holidays. Perhaps after some holes were poked in the theory that required ritual immersion, the happiness/love excuse was unearthed to “better” explain the restriction of ברכת כהנים.

10 See e.g. ספר החינוך מצוה שעח (although Rambam does not use the words ”בכל יום” (every day) in his formulation in Mishneh Torah.

11 See e.g. Rambam’s eloquent halakhah on this point:

12 See e.g. Rambam’s eloquent halakhah on this point:

13 See e.g. "The Distancing of Menstruants from the Synagogue and Sacred Rights by Rabbi Diana Villa and Rabbi Monique Susskind Goldberg" available at http://www.responsafortoday.com/images/Lil5-e.pdf, and in particular p. 19 re bib. 40 and following.

14 Thank you to Avi Feldblum for pointing out that this explanation is particularly sensible for colder Ashkenazi climates.

15 See e.g. "The Distancing of Menstruants from the Synagogue and Sacred Rights by Rabbi Diana Villa and Rabbi Monique Susskind Goldberg" available at http://www.responsafortoday.com/images/Lil5-e.pdf, and in particular p. 19 re bib. 40 and following.

16 See e.g. Rabbi Moses Isserless’s glosses at http://www.e-ark.net/rabbi/bk2.pdf.
Appendix – Sources Referenced
שלוחות טורפים אראות חיות הלובות ושארת בפשי ופלילה אפיס טפיכ קפה ספוק מד

(ל) (פלש"ג) שיאן נ"ל אלא ב"ע. ב"ע שמם אנואר בת המעוף להא נ"ל ב"ע ולהמעוף להא נ"ל ב"ע ולהמעוף להא נ"ל ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassination ב"ע ולהמעוף assassinatio

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לבס אויה חיות ספוק הקפת ספוק מ

כף גמל, אם הוא בוחר לשמע את אביו ואמו, הוא נושא את הכף, וכף יפה, ו числе מהכפות השלושה ה"ע"י, והם נוהגים[List of footnotes]