

# Mikeitz-Chanuka 5781

BS"D Mikeitz-Chanuka 5781

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## Chanuka, the Holiday of Kohanim

Chanuka is essentially the holiday of Kohanim. The rebellion was started by the Kohanic family of Mattityayu, son of Yochnan the Kohen Gadol and ended with Kohanim restoring the Bet Hamikdash to its purity and to their divine service.

Kohanim more than any single group have played prominent roles in our history. Chazal say that the forefathers were Kohanim. Moshe enlisted the Levi'im from whom came the Kohanim for the unsavory task of punishing the worshipers of the Golden Calf. Pinchas was rewarded with the kehuna when he literally saved the nation from Hashem's wrath at baal pe'or; the Kohanim were the avenue for bringing down the walls of Jericho. And not least Ezra the Scribe and Kohen Gadol began the second Jewish Commonwealth in Eretz Yisrael.

What is there in the Kohanic makeup that projects them to positions of responsibility and leadership? I suggest that the mitzva of Kohanic blessing recited daily in Eretz Yisrael holds the secret of the Kohanic nature.

Several questions regarding the Kohanic blessing:

1) Is there a qualitative difference between Kohanim or is everyone "tuned into the same frequency" and the community

receives a “standard” blessing regardless of the kohen’s religious status?

2) Birkat Kohanim begins with a bracha: “baruch ata...le’varech et amo yisrael **be’ahava**” – ...to bless His nation Israel with love”. Why must we emphasize that this mitzva is fulfilled with a conscious feeling of love? Are we not commanded to do every mitzva with love?!

3) It is unacceptable for one to stand with his back to the holy ark (the chazan and community always face the aron (the holy ark which contains the Torah scrolls)). Why then do the Kohanim stand with their backs to the aron?

4) While reciting the blessing the Kohen’s fingers are opened in the accepted fashion; what does this mean?

5) At the end of the Birkat Kohanim in Parshat Naso the verse says “ve’ani avorchem”, and I shall bless them. Rabbi Akiva explains that Hashem is saying to the Kohanim that they shall bless the nation and then Hashem will bless the Kohanim. Why does the Torah state that Hashem will bless the Kohanim who perform this mitzva, are we not all blessed by Hashem for every mitzva we perform?!

6) There is a mitzva in the Torah obligating the community to give preference to Kohanim in the performance of mitzvot (birkat hazeemun, called to the Torah first, etc.). Why this preferential treatment?

7) At the end of the bracha the Kohanim recite a prayer stating “Master of the universe we have performed that which you have **decreed** upon us, etc. After the opening bracha where the Kohanim are commanded to bless in “love”, this highly emotional act now turns into a “decree”, decrees and love don’t go together!

There are yet many more questions!!

I would like to resolve these questions by sharing an incident which occurred 50 years ago, while I served as the assistant to the Minister for Religious Affairs of the State of Israel, Dr. Zorach Warhaftig zt"l.

One day the head of one of the departments in the ministry requested to urgently see the Minister, I let him in and followed. He told the Minister that a Jew from Moscow had just arrived in Israel (a very rare occurrence at the time) who has a story which the Minister must hear.

Dr. Warhaftig, who was a very serious man replied, "I don't get paid to hear my'selech" (stories), but in the end agreed. There entered a frail looking man with deep set eyes, whose age one could never guess. After his initial feeling of being overwhelmed in the presence of a minister of the Jewish state, he began the following story, which I shall repeat in the first person as I heard it.

*"I organized a cheder in Moscow to teach Jewish children. But since a thing like this cannot be kept secret for very long, I was arrested and sentenced to ten years in deepest Siberia. After several weeks of travel by train, I arrived at the camp in an acute physical condition, emaciated from lack of food and frozen by the cold. Some Jewish prisoners stole sugar cubes which helped me very much. When I finally reached some sort of physical vigor, the chief guard said to me that all must work in the camp, and I will be a painter.*

*When the first Shabbat arrived, I did not go out to work, and when asked by the guard for the reason, I explained that today is Shabbat. A few moments later the chief guard came and said that in the past there were others like me who kept Shabbat but in very short time the "problem" was attended to. The chief said he will not force me to work but will reduce my daily ration to under what the body needs to maintain itself in the cold and I will die a slow*

*painful death.*

*A few days later, I was taken to the house of the camp's commandant to paint. As I entered, I saw that the wife of the commandant had a Jewish face. I took a major chance and spoke to her in Yiddish. At first, she ignored me, but after several minutes she began speaking to me in Yiddish. I then told her of my dilemma, that I am being denied the necessary food ration to remain alive. Now, not only was she Jewish but the commandant himself was a Jew, and they had a 16-year-old daughter. Of course, they were good atheistic communists who didn't believe in anything spiritual.*

*The following day the wife demanded that her husband save me, to which he replied that it is none of her business what happens in the camp. She then said to him that if he does not help me, he will go to Gehennom. The daughter never heard the word "Gehennom", so her mother explained that there are people, not them of course, who believe in life after death where the righteous go to Gan Eden and the evil to Gehennom.*

*The next day a guard informed me that I had a visitor. "Who could be here in Siberia to visit me?", I wondered. There stood before me a young girl who said that she cannot tell me who she is nor what is happening, but asked me that in the event that she saves me, would I give her half of my Gan Eden?*

*I did not know that this was the daughter of the commandant, and replied that if you help me, I shall give you half of my Gan Eden.*

*She returned home and began a full hunger strike against her father, who fearing for her life restored my food ration and even succeeded in having me returned to Moscow the following month. Before leaving, I was again visited by*

*this young girl who revealed who she was and related to me the details of what happened in the house and the hunger strike.*

*She then said that I shall soon be returning to Moscow, and I must remember my promise to give her half of my Gan Eden.*

*I looked at her and said, "I do not know why you want my Gan Eden when your Gan Eden is far far superior to mine".*

For several minutes after finishing the story, the Minister's room was draped in silence.

Herein are the answers to the Kohanic questions:

When we become bar or bat mitzva an "account" is opened in our names in Olam Haba. And as we keep mitzvot the account keeps growing, so that after 120 we will withdraw the capital together with its accumulated interest of the Shamayim.

When a kohen recites Birkat Kohanim there is no general pool of goodness and blessing to which he connects and retrieves for our benefit. The kohen gives to the community his own personal bank account of Gan Eden, and at the end of the blessing the kohen's "account" is totally depleted.

Now all the questions are resolved.

1) There is a qualitative difference between one kohen and another, for the more righteous the kohen the greater is his Gan Eden and more meaningful his bracha.

2) The beginning bracha of "ahava". Is there a greater expression of love than when one relinquishes and transfers his Gan Eden to another person? This is the ultimate act of love.

3) We face the aron because we are "depositing" our mitzvot

into Olam Haba, but now when the kohen is withdrawing from his Gan Eden he stands with his back to the aron.

4) Prior to the bracha the kohen's hands are closed as a sign "this is mine", but as he turns, he opens his hands as if to say, "I no longer possess that which I had until now".

5) The pasuk says "ve ani avorchem" and I shall bless them. Because Hashem is saying, "Do not worry, empty out your Gan Eden for the sake of my children and I will bless you (the Kohanim) many times over for the loss of your Gan Eden.

6) We give preference to Kohanim in the performance of mitzvot because we, the community, will get the reward of the kohen when he releases his Gan Eden to us.

7) At the end of the bracha, Kohanim recite the prayer "Master of the universe we have performed that which you have **decreed** upon us, etc., recognizing the fact that the kohen has no choice in the matter. He cannot say I will keep my Gan Eden and not bless the people. It is a decree which he must conform to.

The essence of Kohanic service is a duality. Sacrificing of the animal as required by the Torah, but more so the kohen's personal sacrifice for the sinner coming for atonement. When performing his Kohanic duties, a kohen relinquishes his spiritual gains for the good of the nation. When Hashem sees this ultimate act of love of the kohen towards his fellow Jews, He does not stand passively aside but joins in the act of love, in answering the sinner's request and Kohanic intervention for tahara and atonement.

Raising the flag of rebellion against the Greek army was seemingly an act of suicide, but the Kohanim knew that the preparedness to self-sacrifice can change from the midat hadin – the quality of strict justice – to the quality of midat harachamim – the quality of compassion.

But now comes the most interesting part:

Moshe Rabbeinu brought a message from Hashem to the nation.

וְאַתְּ תִּהְיֶה לִּי לְמַדְבָּרָה וְלְקָדְשׁ

**And you shall be for me a Kohanic kingdom and a holy nation**

Meaning the quality of self-sacrifice for Hashem and the Torah became an essential part of all authentic Jews. And it is this readiness to sacrifice the ultimate for Hashem that has brought us to this advanced stage in the geula hashlaima – the final redemption.

Remember:

The three Bs:        B careful    B healthy    B here in Eretz  
Yisrael

JLMM – Jewish Lives Matter More

Chanuka Samai'ach, Chodesh Tov and Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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