



Bless the People With Love

What mandate do the Kohen's have to bless the people? Why can't G-d bless us directly?

The Kohen's Blessing

This past week, we celebrated the holiday of Shavuot. One of the differences between the holiday prayers and Shabbos prayers in the synagogue is the Priestly blessing.

Outside of Israel, the Kohanim bless the congregation only on holidays, whereas in Israel it's done every Shabbos and sometimes even every day.

Let's stop for a moment and think about the idea of the Priestly Blessing. In this week's Torah portion, G-d commands the Kohanim to bless the nation, saying: "And He spoke to Aharon 'So shall you bless...'" In simple terms, it is a commandment for the Kohanim to bless the people.

This seems to be a bit perplexing. Why would the Kohanim need to bless the Jews in G-d's name? Couldn't G-d bless us on His own? Why does He send messengers?

This question is expressed in the Midrash (Tanchuma Naso 8): "The Jewish nation asks G-d, 'Master of the Universe, You told the Kohanim to bless us? All we want is to receive Your blessing and to be blessed by Your mouth.'"

Who Is Qualified?

There are instances where it is reasonable to receive a blessing from a human being. For example, going to a Tzaddik to ask for a blessing is understandable. A tzaddik has better “connections” than we do as he’s closer to G-d. Therefore, when a tzaddik blesses someone, he makes G-d agree to the blessing, even if the person may not fully deserve it.

Indeed, we find this practice in the Book of Bereishis. Yaakov buried Rachel—not in the Cave of Machpeila—but on the side of the road, so that she would be a source of comfort to her children who would pray there on their way into exile.

Likewise, when the spies were on their way to Canaan and conspired to bring back bad news about the land, Caleb—the good guy—visited Chevron to pray at the grave of our ancestors for the strength to withstand their pressure. Nowadays, we do the same by going to the Rebbe’s gravesite to pray and receive blessings.

If so, going to a tzaddik for a blessing is accepted and logical. However, a Kohen who goes up to bless his fellow congregants is not a tzaddik, and there is no law that requires a Kohen to do some sort of Teshuva before he ascends to the Bimah.

For example, Jewish law says that a witness of a wedding or divorce ceremony should repent in his heart beforehand, ensuring that he be the most qualified possible witness.

There are only two sins that make a Kohen unfit to give the blessings. The Shulchan Aruch states that a Kohen who killed someone, even by mistake should not recite the priestly blessing, as well as someone who forsake his religion and joined another. Those are the only qualifications; even a Bernie Madoff or a Harvey Weinstein (I don’t know if they are Kohens) could technically recite the priestly blessing.

So why do we need the Kohen's blessing? Why did G-d institute a process in which specifically a Kohen blesses the nation in His name?

When Children Get Along

A story is told from the early days of the Chassidic movement. The Alter Rebbe (the first Chabad Rebbe) and other great students of the Maggid of Mezritch were having a farbrengen, when one of the participants suddenly stood up and, crying, asked those gathered to bless him with a complete and speedy recovery.

A number of the Chassidim began to ridicule his request. Did he think they had the power to give blessings? Only a Rebbe had such ability! But the Alter Rebbe silenced them and reminded them of what the Maggid had taught, "What a Chassidic Farbrengen can accomplish even the Angel Michael cannot accomplish!"

The Alter Rebbe went on to explain that at a farbrengen, there is a special power to bless a fellow Jew. It is comparable to parents who witness their children treating each other nicely. The joy those parents feel is so great that they are willing to give the children whatever they desire, especially if one child asks on behalf of another.

In this same manner, when a Jew loves his fellow and blesses him, it brings tremendous pleasure and joy to G-d. Seeing how His children love each other causes G-d to want to give them all that they ask for.

Bi'ahavah...

This is the idea behind the Priestly Blessing. Certainly, G-d is capable of blessing His children and doesn't need any kind of help from anyone. However, G-d knew that it is possible to create a situation where they would be unworthy of His blessings. Therefore, G-d set up this "system" where everyday, Jews are asking for blessings on behalf of their fellow Jews and this makes G-d want to give those blessings, even if, G-d forbid, we aren't fully worthy.

For this same reason, the blessing must be given with love. The halacha states that if a Kohen hates the congregation, "It is a great danger for him to lift his hands (to bless them) and because of this the words 'to bless His nation Israel with love' were inserted into the blessing." The purpose of these blessings is to arouse in G-d the desire to bless his children and this comes specifically from seeing them be loving towards each other. A Kohen who doesn't love his fellow congregants won't arouse this desire and misses the point of the blessing.

This is why a Kohen does not need to be a Tzaddik and does not even need to repent before he ascends the Bimah to give the blessing.

The only thing asked of him is that he do it out of love.