

SHOULD N'SIAT KAPAYIM INCLUDE B'NOT KOHANIM?

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This paper was approved on December 14, 1994, by a vote of nine in favor, eleven opposed, and one abstaining (9-11-1). Voting in favor: Rabbi Stanley Bramnick, Jerome M. Epstein, Samuel Frint, Judah Kogen, Vernon H. Kurtz, Alan B. Lucas, Paul Plotkin, Avram Israel Reisner, and Joel Roth. Voting against: Rabbi Kassel Abelson, Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Arnold M. Goodman, Susan Grossman, Jan Caryl Kaufman, Aaron L. Mackler, Joel E. Rembaum, Gerald Skolnik, Gordon Tucker, and Gerald Zelizer. Abstaining: Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

שאלה

May a **כהן** participate in the ritual of **נשיאת כפים** (the Priestly Benediction)?

תשובה

The ceremony of **נשיאת כפים** in which the kohanim raise their hands and confer the Priestly Benediction upon the assembled Congregation began as part of the Temple worship and is prescribed in the Torah.¹ During the final days of the Temple, the practice had developed to conduct the Priestly Benediction at worship locations away from the Temple.² This provided the historical and theological bridge for including the Priestly Benediction in the revised prayer ritual which took the place of sacrifice after the destruction of the Temple.

In Israel, the Priestly Benediction was meant to be recited by kohanim every day of

¹ וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר. דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמר להם. יברכך ה' וישמרך. יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך. ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום. ושמך את שמי על בני ישראל ואני אברכם.

The Lord spoke to Moses: Speak to Aaron and his Sons – Thus shall you bless the people of Israel, Say to them: The Lord bless you and keep you! The Lord deal kindly and graciously with you! The Lord bestow His favor upon you and grant you peace! Thus shall they link My name with the people of Israel and I will bless them. (Num. 6:22-27)

² M. Tamid 7:2.

the year,³ although in many congregations outside Jerusalem, the practice is limited to Shabbat and major holidays. Outside Israel, it became customary to have kohanim invoke the Priestly Benediction only on major holidays.⁴ Whenever the kohanim do not recite the Priestly Benediction, it becomes a part of the final blessing recited by the Shaliach Tzibur in the repetition of the Amidah.

It should be noted as well that performing the Priestly Benediction is not optional – it is required by every kohen.⁵ Therefore, the question should not be “*May* a **כהן בת** participate,” but rather “*Must* **בנות כהנים** participate?” If male kohanim are *required* to participate, we may rule either that females of Priestly paternal descent are required to as well, or are not permitted to participate.

Historically, the kohen was elevated to a special level. The Torah uses the word **וקדשתו** “sanctify him” (Lev. 21:8), upon which the Talmud Bavli comments: “For all matters of holiness: To begin (reading the Torah) first, to have priority for leading the Grace after meals and to claim priority for a desirable portion.⁶ The Levush further comments: **מצוה על אחרים לקדשו** “It is a requirement that others sanctify him.”⁷ There has been considerable discussion in recent years about the status of the **כהן בת** for purposes of being called to the Torah first like a male kohen.⁸ From the discussions, it should be clear that a **כהן בת** possesses the sanctity of **כהונה** like a male kohen and does not automatically lose her **כהונה** upon her marriage to a non-kohen. For example, if her first born is a male, there is no requirement of pidyon haben. If, following her divorce, she returns to her father’s house, she resumes eating Terumah. By the same token, if she should go astray and become a harlot, she is subject to a special punishment (**שרפה**) for defiling her patrimony. It should also be clear that while the sanctity of a **כהן בת** extends to benefiting from the perquisites due to the descendants of Aaron, there is no indication that a **כהן בת** officiates in the manner of her male brethren in any ritual circumstance.

נשיאת כפיים is arguably the only Temple ritual carried out today by kohanim in the manner prescribed by the Torah. While the primary source in Num. 6 does not necessarily place **נשיאת כפיים** in the Temple, another source does.⁹ If **נשיאת כפיים** is to be regard-

³ The medieval codes treat the Priestly Benediction as a (perhaps theoretical) requirement of the *daily* service. See Maimonides M.T. Hilkhot, Tefilah chs. 14-15, Tur/S.A. Orah Hayyim 128-130. (The contrast between Eretz Yisrael and the Diaspora becomes evident in the comment of RMA to Orah Hayyim 128:44.) The earliest listing of the Priestly Benediction as following Shema and the Amidah in the daily service is in the Mishnah, itself composed in Eretz Yisrael (See, for example, Megillah ch. 3).

⁴ It has been incorrectly assumed in most Diaspora congregations that the exclusion of Shabbatot year-round encompassed festivals occurring on Shabbat as well. The first American rabbi to take issue with that assumption, to our knowledge, was Prof. Saul Lieberman in his capacity as Rabbi of the Synagogue of the Jewish Theological Seminary. In 1969, when several fall holidays occurred on Shabbat, he required the performance of the Priestly Benediction on Shabbat. His explanation was that a misunderstanding had grown up in the Diaspora around the principle that the Priestly Benediction was not to be recited on Shabbat. He noted that in Israel the ceremony routinely took place on Shabbat [personal communication between Judah Kogen and Prof. Lieberman ז"ל Sept. 1969]. Subsequent research, of course, bore him out. See RMA on Orah Hayyim 128:44 for his distinction between Festivals and “year-round” Shabbatot. Note the especially forceful repudiation centuries ago by the Taz (on the same passage, n. 38) of this still widespread mistake.

⁵ Orah Hayyim 128:39.

⁶ B. Moed Katan 28b.

⁷ *Levush*, op. cit.

⁸ See Joel Roth, “The Status of Daughters of Kohanim and Leviyim for Aliyot,” *PCJLS* 86-90, pp. 419-434. Previously written papers are cited there and constitute a lengthy survey of the literature on the subject.

⁹ Lev. 19:22ff. Sotah 38a equates this passage with **נשיאת כפיים**, while 38b describes it as part and parcel

ed as a continuation of a Temple ritual, it should be performed only by the descendants of Aaron who would have been eligible to perform it in the Temple.¹⁰

Conclusion

There is no support in Talmudic or post-Talmudic sources for the inclusion of a **בת כהן** in the ritual of **נשיאת כפים**. As a continuation of a Temple ritual, the Priestly Benediction should be performed by those who were authentically eligible to do so in the Temple. Women of Priestly descent may benefit from the perquisites of **כהונה**, but are excluded by the Torah from performing the rituals of kohanim in the Temple. Therefore, **נשיאת כפים** should be performed only by male kohanim.

of Temple ritual.

¹⁰ Menahot 18b (and the parallel passage in Hullin 132b-133a) lists **נשיאת כפים** as one of fifteen rituals performed by the descendants of Aaron. While this text describes the Priestly Benediction as occurring both within the Temple and outside, it is performed by the *same* kohanim who carry out the other fourteen listed rituals.