

WOMEN RAISE YOUR HANDS

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Voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Arnold M. Goodman, Susan Grossman, Jan Caryl Kaufman, Aaron L. Mackler, Mayer Rabinowitz, Joel E. Rembaum, Gerald Skolnik, Gordon Tucker, and Gerald Zelizer.
Voting against: Rabbis Stanley Bramnick, Samuel Frait, Judah Kogen, Alan B. Lucas, Paul Plotkin, Avram Israel Reisner, and Joel Roth. Abstaining: Rabbis Jerome M. Epstein and Vernon H. Kurtz.*

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שאלה

May a **כהן** participate in **נשיאת כפים** – the priestly blessing?

תשובה

For many years, the **נשיאת כפים** service was eliminated from services in most Conservative synagogues for a variety of reasons. Some felt it was too mystical, some did not want to continue a “caste system,” and some did not want to continue a ritual of distinctions between kohanim and Israelites, when that ritual was so closely associated with the Temple Service. But there is a revival of the **נשיאת כפים** service in some of our synagogues, and **בנות כהנים** have asked about their participation in the service.

The source for the commandment for kohanim to bless the people Israel is found in the Torah.

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 they shall link my Name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.¹

¹ Num. 6:22-27.

It is clear from these verses that this ritual is a מצות עשה מדאורייתא, a positive Biblical commandment for kohanim.² In fact, if a kohen is present during נשיאת כפיים, and does not participate, he is guilty of transgressing three positive commandments.³

Because the verse states: **אל אהרן ואל בניו**, it would seem that only the male descendants of Aaron were to take part in the priestly blessing. In addition, the ritual originally took place in the Temple, where women did not participate in it. And after the destruction of the Temple, when the ritual was transferred to the synagogue, it continued to be conducted only by males. Kohanim were afforded special status based upon the biblical verse:

וקדשתו כי את לחם אלקיך הוא מקריב קדש יהיה לך כי קדוש אני ה'
מקדשכם.

“And you must treat them as holy, *since they offer the food of your God*, They shall be holy to you, for I the Lord who sanctify you am holy.”⁴

Later this special status provided for the kohen being granted the first aliyah and leading the ברכת המזון. Today, in addition to performing pidyon haben and נשיאת כפיים, kohanim are granted the first aliyah to the Torah and are asked to lead ברכת המזון because of their special status.

Based on the above, it would seem that only males may participate in נשיאת כפיים. However, a reexamination of the biblical texts and the development of the role of women in public ritual can provide us with a halakhic basis for including בנות כוהנים (the daughters of kohanim) to participate in נשיאת כפיים.

The basis for permitting only males to participate in נשיאת כפיים is the verse: **דבר אל בניו ואל בני בניו** – “Speak unto Aaron and his sons.”⁵ However, we know that there are cases where the Torah uses the masculine form even though women are included, as is the case with pidyon haben. There are instances where the word בניו or variations of it refers to descendants, and not only to sons. In fact, the continuation of this verse is: **כה תברכו את בני ישראל** – “thus shall you bless the people of Israel,” and it is clear that women are included.

Although there are many authorities who would not accept this point of view and would exclude women from this ritual,⁶ nevertheless, in other cases where the masculine form is used, there are authorities who claim that בניו does include women. Based upon the verse in the Torah: **ונתת הכסף לאהרן ולבניו** – “And give the money to Aaron and his sons,”⁷ Maimonides states **כהונה לזכרי הבן** – “And similarly the redemption of the first born is for male priests.”⁸ But the Tosafot, Rashi and the Rosh state that a בת כהן may redeem a first born. Their decision in this case indicates their acceptance of lineal sanctity for the daughters of kohanim. As Rabbi Joel Roth points out: “Surely according to Tosafot and the Rosh in Rashi’s name, pidyon haben is another indication of lineal sanctity for the daughters of Priests even if married. It is equally important to note that Maimonides’ view does not either preclude or deny lineal sanctity to daughters of Priests.

² Rambam, Sefer HaMitzvot – positive commandment no. 26; M.T. Hilkhot T’fillah 15:6.

³ B. Sotah 38b (מאמרו של רבי יהושע בן לוי – כה תברכו אמרו להם ושמו את שמך); Rambam, M.T. Hilkhot T’fillah 15:12.

⁴ Lev. 21:8.

⁵ Num. 6:22.

⁶ נשיאת כפיים בן והכהנים מן המניין – Rambam, M.T. Hilkhot T’fillah 15:1; S.A. Orah Hayyim 128:1.

⁷ Num. 3:48.

⁸ M.T. Hilkhot Bikurim 1:10.

This exclusion from the right to redeem is based on the biblical statement **לֹא־הָרֵן וּלְבָנָיו**.⁹

There is, therefore, sufficient precedent for interpreting **בָּנָיו** as descendants, to allow the interpretation of the verse dealing with **בְּרַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים** to apply to both males and females. As in other cases, **בָּנָיו** can mean children, and indicates a lineal sanctity which applies to all children of kohanim.¹⁰

Another aspect of the ritual of **נְשִׂיאת כַּפִּים** concerns the role that the Priests played in transmitting a blessing to the people of Israel. If we look at this role, as described in the Torah, there are additional grounds for including women in this ritual today.

The commandment for the kohanim to bless the people ends with the words: **וְשָׂמוּ וְאֲנִי אֲבָרַכְכֶם** – “Thus they shall link my Name with the people of Israel, and I will bless them.” The Sifrei states: **וְאֲנִי אֲבָרַכְכֶם שְׂלֵא יְהוּ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲוֹמְרִים בְּרַכּוֹתֵינוּ תְלוּיֹת** – “And I will bless them. Israel should not say that their blessings are dependent on the kohanim, for Scripture states: ‘And I will bless them.’ And the kohanim should not say we bless Israel, for Scripture states: ‘And I will bless them.’”¹¹

A similar statement is found in the Sifrei Zuta¹² indicating that the blessing is not dependent upon the will of the kohanim, but rather upon God’s will because He is the one who will bless them.

And the Rashbam¹³ explains the verses about **נְשִׂיאת כַּפִּים** as follows: “You shall not bless with the blessing of your words but you shall pray to Me that I will bless them.” And later, the Rashbam adds: “When the kohanim bless Israel, it is in My name and not in theirs; I will bless Israel as the kohanim prayed for.”

The verse and its interpretation indicate that the kohanim are not “blessing” the people but rather are a medium for conveying God’s blessing. The Rashbam explains it as a prayer of the kohanim that the people of Israel be blessed by God. If this is the case, there is added reason to include the daughters of kohanim who have lineal sanctity, among those who can participate in this prayer, or serve as a medium for conveying God’s blessing.

The history and development of **נְשִׂיאת כַּפִּים** and **בְּרַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים** shows that it went through variations in both where it was performed and by whom. Originally, it was practiced in the Temple,¹⁴ and outside the Temple as well. After the destruction of the Temple, the ritual of **נְשִׂיאת כַּפִּים** took place in the synagogue. At a certain point in time, additional phrases to be recited by the congregation were added. And, in the absence of the kohanim, the **שְׁלִיחַ צַבּוּר** recited the blessing in place of the kohanim. So it is clear that the place, the words, and the individuals involved in the **נְשִׂיאת כַּפִּים** ritual varied based upon Rabbinic interpretation and the needs of the times. Until recently, only males were involved in synagogue rituals, and it is understandable that women did not participate in this as well as other rituals. But there is no reason why the history and development connected with this ritual should not continue.

For those whose objection to women’s participation in this ritual is based upon the fact that it was a Temple ritual and the exclusive responsibility of males, it must be noted that

⁹ Joel Roth, “The Status of Daughters of Kohanim and Leviyim for Aliyot,” *PCJLS 86-90*, p. 429.

¹⁰ Sifra, Shemini, Parshat א, commenting on the verse **וְיִשָּׂא אֶהָרֵן אֶת יָדָיו אֶל הָעָם וְיִבְרַכֶּם** connects **מִתְנַת כְּהוֹנָה** **וְנְשִׂאוֹת כַּפִּים**. Since it has been shown that lineal sanctity applies to daughters of priests, the same would be applicable for **בְּרַכַּת כֹּהֲנִים**.

¹¹ Sifrei, Naso, piska 43 (Horvitz ed., p. 49).

¹² Sifrei Zuta, Naso 27 (Yaskowitz ed., p. 250).

¹³ Num. 6:27.

¹⁴ M. Tamid 8:2.

in the biblical verse there is absolutely no reference to the Temple or any other site for the recitation of the blessing. In fact, there is no mention of time or place for the performance of the ritual. The interpretation and codification that placed it in the Temple is Rabbinic and not Biblical. Therefore, to prohibit a **בת כהן** from participating in the ritual on the grounds that it is Biblically part of the Temple service (and therefore the exclusive responsibility of male kohanim) is not accurate. Were that the case, we would have been inclined to omit the recitation of the **ברכת כהנים** from the repetition of the Amidah whenever the hazzan was not a kohen.¹⁵

Although kohanim today are considered to be **ספק כהנים**,¹⁶ in many circles they are still accorded special honors such as: the first aliyah, leading the **ברכת המזון**, pidyon haben and **נשיאת כפים**. In the first three cases, a **בת כהן** is permitted to receive these honors and participate in the ritual. This practice is based on lineal sanctity for daughters of kohanim or on different interpretations of Biblical or Rabbinic texts. There is no reason not to do the same for **נשיאת כפים**.

Conclusion

A **בת כהן** is permitted to participate in **נשיאת כפים** for the following reasons:

- (1) **בניו** does not mean only sons but rather children;
- (2) The role of the kohen is either to serve as the medium for God's blessing to Israel, or to pray for Israel to be blessed;
- (3) There has been a steady development in the **נשיאת כפים** ritual, and there is no reason for that development to stop;
- (4) We have permitted a **בת כהן** to participate in all other honors accorded to kohanim, and **נשיאת כפים** should not be an exception;
- (5) The Torah gives no indication of a direct connection between this ritual and the Temple, where women were excluded from participating. Therefore, there is no Biblical basis for excluding them.

¹⁵ An examination of discussions found in Menahot 18b and Taanit 26b-27a imply that there are grounds to permit daughters of kohanim to participate in **ברכת כהנים**. I thank my colleague Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner for bringing these sources to my attention.

¹⁶ Rambam, M.T. Hilkhot Issurei Biah 20:13; Magen Avraham to Orach Hayyim 128:457. For a full discussion see David Novak, *Law and Theology in Judaism*, second series, (New York: Ktav, 1976), pp. 165-166.