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Halachos of Birkas Kohanim – 2

Behaaloscha 5785

355

Details of the Mitzva of Birkas Kohanim The Kohen and the Mitzva of Birkas Kohanim

1. In the previous issue (354), we discussed some general halachos about the mitzva of Birkas Kohanim, e.g., whether the mitzva is only on the Kohen (par. 2) or also the Yisroel (3); the minhagim of Birkas Kohanim in Eretz Yisroel (18) and chutz l'aretz (7); and what to do when someone from one place finds himself in another place with a different minhag. In this issue and the next, we will focus on the halachos of how to fulfill the mitzva of Birkas Kohanim.

One Kohen, Two Kohanim

2. There is a machlokes Rishonim whether a single Kohen in shul fulfills the mitzvas asei d'oraisa or whether only two or more Kohanim can be yotzei the d'oraisa chiyuv of the mitzva.
3. **Two.** Some hold only two Kohanim above bar mitzva doing Birkas Kohanim fulfill the mitzva d'oraisa; a single Kohen does not (ר"ת (בתוס' מנחות דף מ"ד ע"א ד"ה כל כהן)).
4. **Single Kohen.** Others argue and hold a single Kohen also has a mitzvas asei d'oraisa to give a bracha to the tzibbur (מאירי סוטה דף (ל"ח ע"א, מהר"ל ומה"ר סק"ג). In fact, when there is one Kohen, the chiyuv d'oraisa is even if he was not called up (שם), unlike when there are two Kohanim, when the chiyuv d'oraisa only applies after they are called up (below, 7) (מחצית השקל סקט"ז, פמ"ג משב"ז ג').
5. Thus, some try to make sure to have two or more Kohanim for Birkas Kohanim to fulfill the mitzvas asei d'oraisa according to all opinions.

Three Conditions for a Kohen's Chiyuv to Go Up

Factors that Obligate a Kohen to Go Up

6. There is a mitzvas asei for a Kohen to give a bracha to the tzibbur, as we mentioned. If a Kohen does not go up, he throws away a mitzvas asei, but that is only if three conditions, to be explained, are fulfilled and he does not go up. The three conditions are:

Called Out Invitation for the Kohen to Come Up

7. **Calling "Kohanim!"** A Kohen must go up when he is called up with the call of "Kohanim!" in shul. This is borne out by the Targum of the posuk "אמור להם", which is "when they tell them". Meaning, the Kohanim are only obligated to give a bracha when they are told to (תוס' ברכות (גמ' סוטה דף ל"ח ע"ב, תוס' ברכות (גמ' סוטה דף ל"ח ע"ב, תוס' ברכות (גמ' סוטה דף ל"ח ע"ב)).
8. **Told to go up.** Similarly, if someone tells a Kohen to go up, he must go up (ש"ע ס"ב, מ"ב סק"י). However, some hold only a tzibbur or shliach tzibbur, not another individual, is able to obligate a Kohen (סידור (היעב"ץ, מאירי מגילה דף כ"ד ע"ב הובא בבא"ה"ל סוף ד"ה או ונשאר בצ"ע).
9. **Told to wash his hands.** Similarly, if the one washing the Kohanim's hands tells a Kohen to come wash his hands, it is considered as though he was called up for Birkas Kohanim, and he is obligated to go up (מ"ב שם). Here, too, some argue (as above, 8).

Only If He Was in Shul

10. Another condition for obligating Birkas Kohanim d'oraisa is that the Kohen must be in the shul when the Kohanim are called up or when he was told to come up or wash his hands, as mentioned (ש"ע ס"ב, הר"ן על הר"ף מגילה פ"ד הובא בבא"ה"ל ד"ה אם היה).

Leaving His Place During the Tefilla of רצה

11. Another condition is that the Kohen must "uproot his feet," i.e., begin moving forward to go up, at some point during the shliach tzibbur's tefilla of רצה. רצה is called "Avoda" (גמ' סוטה דף ל"ח ע"ב) and they did Birkas Kohanim in the Beis HaMikdash before completing the avoda. Thus, Chazal established that in tefilla, too, the Kohen should go up before the end of the bracha of Avoda, i.e., רצה (מ"ב סק"ז).

12. **Did not begin moving before רצה.** Some poskim say if a Kohen did not begin moving from his place during רצה, he is not obligated to go up even if he is called up or told to go up after the tefilla of רצה is completed, and he does not throw away a mitzvas asei (מג"א סק"ב, לקט יושר עמ' כ"ו, מ"ב סק"ע בדעת המחבר ס"ח). Other poskim are unsure whether he has a chiyuv if he is called up if he did not begin going during רצה (א"ר סקט"ז בשת תשי"מה"ר"ם). Thus, in practice, if a Kohen did not begin going up during רצה, he should make sure to leave the shul before the call of "Kohanim!" and he should not go up for Birkas Kohanim at all so that he does not potentially throw away a mitzvas asei. Another reason for this is so that people do not say there is a problem with his Kohen status, as people do not know he did not move his feet somewhat during רצה (מ"ב סק"ט).

Mitzva for Kohen to Give Bracha in All Cases

13. Even when a Kohen does not have a chiyuv to do Birkas Kohanim and will not throw away the mitzvas asei by not doing it, e.g., in the above cases, he still has a mitzva to give the bracha. He should make an effort and strive to give the bracha when he can and not avoid fulfilling this important mitzva of giving a bracha to the tzibbur.

Once a Day

14. After a Kohen does Birkas Kohanim once, he is yotzei his chiyuv d'oraisa that day. Thus, even if he is told to go up again at a different tefilla that day, e.g., he did Birkas Kohanim at Shacharis and then was asked by a different Shacharis minyan to go up, he does not throw away the mitzvas asei if he does not go up (ש"ע ס"ג). However, he still has a mitzva to go up a second time and he can make a bracha on Birkas Kohanim a second time (מ"ב סק"א).
15. **Different tefilla.** Although there is no chiyuv d'oraisa to do Birkas Kohanim more than once a day, Chazal established that they should do Birkas Kohanim at Shacharis and also Mussaf the same day, and on Yom Kippur, at Ne'ila too, when it is in the same shul (ש"ע ס"ג קכ"ט ס"א).
16. **Already did Birkas Kohanim alone.** Some say if a Kohen first does Birkas Kohanim alone and then has the opportunity to do it again with another Kohen, it is commendable for him to do it again with another Kohen. This is because he was not yotzei his chiyuv d'oraisa the first time according to some opinions (above 3), and now he has the opportunity to do Birkas Kohanim with another Kohen, fulfilling his chiyuv d'oraisa according to all opinions (קצות (השלחן ס"י כ"ג בדה"ש סקמ"ז)).

Removing the Shoes

Reason

17. R' Yochanan ben Zakai forbade going up for Birkas Kohanim with shoes or sandals on (גמ' סוטה דף מ' ע"א). The Gemara (גמ' סוטה) gives a few reasons for this.
18. **Honor for the tzibbur.** Originally, the Gemara explains that the reason is for the honor of the tzibbur, as people wear their shoes outside and they might be muddy (גמ' סוטה שם). The poskim explain that we are concerned for this reason too (מ"ב סק"ה).
19. **Not to spread false rumors.** Another reason the Gemara gives is to prevent rumors that a person is a posul Kohen. Shoes often have straps, and there is a concern a Kohen's shoe strap will break, and while he is sitting to fix and tie it, his fellow Kohanim will go up for Birkas Kohanim, leaving him alone fixing his shoes. People who see this will say the reason he is not going up is because he is a posul Kohen (גמ' שם, רש"י שם, מ"ב סקט"ו).
20. A Kohen may not go up with shoes even if they do not have straps, as Chazal did not make exceptions to this halacha (מ"ב שם).

Specific Halachos

21. **Completely barefoot.** A Kohen should not go up completely barefoot. That would be disrespectful, as people do not appear barefoot before honorable or important individuals (ש"ת הרדב"ז) (ח"ו סי' רס"ד, וע"פ הגמ' חגיגה דף י"ג ע"ב לאו אורח ארעא וכו', מ"ב סק"י). Even in hot climates, where some people do not wear socks, people still do not usually stand barefoot before an important person barefoot. Nevertheless, a Kohen without socks should not refrain from doing Birkas Kohanim (ל"ב ש"ת אג"מ א"ח ח"ב סי' ל"ב).
22. **Socks.** Although we find that someone with a blemish on his foot should not go up for Birkas Kohanim because people might stare at him and not concentrate on Birkas Kohanim (ש"ת ס"ל), there is no concern for distraction when it comes to socks. Thus, a Kohen with a hole in his sock does not need to refrain from going up unless it is a big and very prominent hole (מור"ר בש"ת שבט הקהתי ח"ה סי' רס"ו).
23. Similarly, a Kohen may go up with all sorts of colors or patterns on his socks, e.g., "Birkas Kohanim socks," which have the form of a Kohen's hands during Birkas Kohanim woven into the fabric, or the like. This is because there are people who wear all sorts of colorful socks all the time, so it does not arouse much surprise (ש"ת אג"מ שם).
24. **When to remove the shoes.** If a Kohen can remove his shoes without touching them with his hands at all, it is best to untie the laces before washing his hands (פמ"ג א"א סק"ט) and remove the shoes after washing, right before he goes up for Birkas Kohanim (מ"ב סק"ו). However, if he might touch his shoes while removing them, he should remove them before washing so that he does not get his hands unclean after washing them (ע"פ המבואר בשו"ע סי' י"ג המבואר בשו"ע סי' י"ג קכ"ח סק"ו).
25. **Where to leave the shoes.** Today, it is accepted to remove the shoes in shul before going up for Birkas Kohanim. However, it is not proper to leave shoes out in the open during the bracha. Instead, they should be placed under the benches out of respect for the tzibbur. This is because shoes are generally dirty or dusty from the street, in line with the reason mentioned above (18).
26. **Right shoe first.** Some say Kohanim should first remove the right shoe before Birkas Kohanim and then the left. Since removing the shoes is for a mitzva, the mitzva should be done with the right shoe first (לוח א"י ר"ה, הגר"ח קנייבסקי, דעת נוטה עמ' ס"ד, ע"י גליין 97 אות י"ב). However, others argue and hold one should not exchange the regular practice of removing the left shoe before the right, as removing the shoes is not a mitzva action to prioritize the right side; there is just a halacha of Birkas Kohanim that it must be done without shoes (סופרים וספרים על לוח א"י הג"ל). This approach makes sense.

Netilas Yodayim Before the Bracha

שאו ידיכם קודש וברכו את ה'

27. The Kohanim must wash their hands before going up for Birkas Kohanim, as the posuk (ב' תהלים קל"ד), "שאו ידיכם קודש וברכו" (גמ' סוטה דף ל"ט ע"א, שו"ע סי' י"ג) "את ה'."

Morning Netilas Yodayim

28. Some poskim hold a Kohen may rely on the netilas yodayim he did in the morning before davening, and he does not need to wash his hands again before Birkas Kohanim (הובא בתוס' סוטה שם) (ד"ה כל כהן, רמב"ם הובא בב"י).
29. **Right before Birkas Kohanim.** However, most Rishonim argue and hold the Kohanim must wash their hands again before Birkas Kohanim, because the Gemara says (ברכות דף מ"ב ע"א), "Immediately after sanctifying comes the bracha" (רש"י ותוס' שם). This is the psak (שו"ע).
30. **No water.** If one does not have water, he may rely on the opinion that he is yotzei with the morning netilas yodayim if he washed his entire hands in the morning (שער הציון סק"ד), as long as he did not lose focus (מ"ב סק"ט) and knows he did not touch an unclean area [היסח הדעת].
31. **No other choice.** In a very crowded shul, e.g., Yomim Nora'im at a Chassidishe Rebbe or the like, when it is very difficult for each Kohen to go outside to wash their hands due to the packed crowds, the Kohanim may rely on the above opinion that they can rely on their netilas yodayim before davening. They should be careful not to lose focus of their netilas yodayim until after Birkas Kohanim, and they should not touch unclean places, areas with sweat, or the like, as mentioned (מור"ר בעל שבט הקהתי).
32. **Washed for Shacharis Birkas Kohanim.** If a Kohen washed his hands for the Shacharis Birkas Kohanim, strictly speaking he does not need to wash again for the Mussaf Birkas Kohanim if he did not go outside or get distracted. However, the minhag is to wash again before the Mussaf Birkas Kohanim.

When to Wash

33. **Before רצה.** L'hatchila, the Kohanim should try to wash their hands before the bracha of רצה so that when רצה is being said,

they are already prepared and ready to do Birkas Kohanim (מ"ב סק"ז). Still, they should wash as close as possible to the beginning of רצה to prevent too long of a break between washing and the bracha. B'dieved, if a Kohen did not wash before רצה, he can wash after רצה too (מ"ב סק"ז) as long as he began going up for Birkas Kohanim during רצה (מ"ב סק"ח) and water for washing is brought to him near the front of the shul.

"Uprooting the Feet" to Wash the Hands

34. We mentioned (11) that to be obligated in Birkas Kohanim, a Kohen must begin going up during the shliach tzibbur's tefilla of רצה. There is a machlokes haposkim regarding the halacha if a Kohen left his place during רצה to go out and wash his hands but did not get a chance to begin going up to the front after washing before the shliach tzibbur finished the bracha of Avoda, i.e., until he said "המחזיר שכינתו לציון." Is it considered that the Kohen began going up during רצה?
35. **No.** Some rule that leaving one's place to wash is not considered "uprooting the feet" to allow a Kohen to go up for Birkas Kohanim. Thus, if the shliach tzibbur already started רצה, the Kohen should rush out to wash his hands so that he will have time to start going up after washing before the shliach tzibbur finishes "המחזיר שכינתו לציון." However, if he already finished the entire bracha of Avoda and a Kohen did not yet start going up to the front, he should not go up (מ"ב סק"ח); but if he did go up, he should stay (שער הציון שם).
36. **Yes.** However, some are meikel and hold leaving one's place to wash his hands is considered "uprooting the feet" since washing is a preparation for Birkas Kohanim (ערוה"ש סט"ו). B'dieved one can rely on this.

Type of Washing

37. The Kohen must wash with water. Wiping his hands on pebbles, dirt, or anything that can clean—which suffices for tefilla and Krias Shema b'dieved (שו"ע סי' צ"ב ס"ד)—does not suffice b'dieved, as this washing is like the Kohanim washing their hands for the avoda, for which wiping the hands certainly did not suffice (מ"ב סק"ט).
38. **Entire hand.** The Kohanim must wash their entire hands until the wrist, like when the Kohanim washed their hands for the avoda in the Beis HaMikdash (שו"ע סי' י"ג).
39. **No bracha.** The poskim discuss whether a Kohen makes a bracha on washing his hands. In practice, the minhag is not to make a bracha even if a Kohen lost focus of his morning netilas yodayim before Shacharis.

Washing Through Leviim

40. The minhag is for a Levi to pour water over the Kohanim's hands. The reason is to add kedusha through holy people. The Leviim are called holy, as the posuk (י"ז במדבר ח') says "וקדשת את הלוויים" (הב"י בשם מדרש זוהר פ' נשא). While this is not essential at all, Leviim should do this in all places.
41. **Levi washing his own hands.** The Sefardi minhag is that the Levi washes his own hands before washing the Kohanim's hands (שו"ע סי' י"ג); the Ashkenazi minhag is that the Levi does not wash his hands first (רמ"א שם). However, if a Levi lost focus of his netilas yodayim before Shacharis or he touched an unclean area, it is proper for him to wash his hands before washing the Kohanim's hands (מ"ב סק"ג).
42. **No Levi.** If there is no Levi present, a bechor, i.e., firstborn of his mother, should wash the Kohanim's hands, as bechoros also have some kedusha. If there is no bechor either, the Kohen should wash his own hands; he should not have a Yisroel wash his hands (מ"ב סק"ב).
43. **Levi talmid chacham, Kohen am haaretz.** Some write that a Levi who is a talmid chacham, e.g., a big rav or rosh yeshiva, does not need to wash the hands of a Kohen who is an am haaretz even if there is no other Levi there. The reason is so as not to disrespect the honor of his Torah (בן איש חי תצוה ז').
44. However, most poskim hold that a Levi talmid chacham should not refrain from fulfilling the minhag that comes from the Zohar; on the contrary, this is his honor and his mitzva (שו"ע סי' י"ג). It is known that several world-class gedolim who were Leviim washed Kohanim's hands (ע"י תשובה ח"ב קט שהגאב"ד) (בריסק נהג כן ברגל). This was the practice of the Shevet HaLevi.
45. **Multiple Leviim washing together.** The common minhag is for multiple Leviim to wash a Kohen's hands, i.e., multiple Leviim hold the cup and wash the Kohen's hands all together. Some question this, as two people doing this is an abnormal form of washing (הגר"ש אלישיב הובא בשבט הקהתי ח"ב סי' י"ז). However, a justification is that since they are doing this to give everyone a share out of love for the mitzva, it is considered a normal form of washing for this purpose (מור"ר בעל שבט הקהתי).