

What Is the Priestly Blessing?

Birkat Kohanim 101

By Sasha Friedman

The Priestly Blessing, Birkat Kohanim—also known as Nesi'at Kapayim, the “lifting of the hands”—is a blessing that has been recited by the *kohanim*, the priests, since biblical times. Today, it is performed in the synagogue, typically during the holiday Musaf service. The source for this practice is Numbers 6:23-26:



Art by Sefira Lightstone

Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying: This is how you shall bless the children of Israel: “May G-d bless you and guard you. May G-d shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you. May G-d turn His countenance toward you and grant you peace.” They shall bestow My Name upon the children of Israel, so that I will bless them.

Thus, G-d granted the patrilineal male descendants of Aaron the ability to channel divine blessings to the congregation. The Priestly Blessing is one of the most spiritually uplifting moments in Jewish life, as the entire congregation is embraced in a “divine hug.”

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Text of the Priestly Blessing

יְבָרֶכֶךָ	Yivarechecha	May [G-d] bless you
ה'	Adonai	
וְיִשְׁמְרֶכָּךָ	viyishmirecha	and guard you
יֵאָר	Ya'er	May [G-d] shine

ה'	Adonai	
פניו	panav	His countenance
אליך	elecha	upon you
ויחנך	veechuneka	and be gracious to you
ישא	Yeesa	May [G-d] turn
ה'	Adonai	
פניו	panav	His countenance
אליך	elecha	toward you
וישם	viyasem	and grant
לך	lecha	you
שלום	shalom	peace

When Is the Priestly Blessing Performed?

In ancient times, the priests recited the blessing every day while standing on a special platform in the Holy Temple known as a *duchan*. In some synagogues today, the recitation of the blessing is informally known as “*duchaning*.”

Today, the blessing is administered in the course of the prayer services, during the *chazzan's* Repetition of the Amidah. In Jerusalem, the Birkat Kohanim rite is performed every morning. On days when the Musaf service is recited, the Birkat Kohanim is performed both during Shacharit and Musaf. In many other Israeli cities, some (mostly Sephardim) perform Birkat Kohanim every day, while others (mostly Ashkenazim) do so only on Shabbat (or only on holidays). On public fast days, the *kohanim* recite the blessing during Minchah as well.

For more on this, see [When Is the Blessing Administered?](#)

In the Diaspora, many Sephardic communities perform the Birkat Kohanim every Shabbat, while in Ashkenazi communities, the Birkat Kohanim is only performed on major holidays during the Musaf prayer. An exception to this rule is Simchat Torah, when the Birkat Kohanim is done during the Shacharit (morning) services instead.

For more, see [Why Is the Priestly Blessing Only on Yom Tov?](#)

How Is the Priestly Blessing Performed?

Before Birkat Kohanim, the *kohanim* prepare for the blessing by having their hands washed and removing their shoes. They then come to the front of the synagogue, cover themselves with their *tallits*, face the congregation, and incant a blessing thanking G-d for "sanctifying us with Aaron's sanctity and commanding us to bless His nation Israel with love." They then lift their hands beneath their *tallits*. The exact configuration of the fingers depends on one's tradition, but the general idea is that the fingers are spread into sections resembling "windows."

The *chazzan* then leads the *kohanim* in the Birkat Kohanim. He recites aloud the fifteen words of the blessing, which the *kohanim* repeat word-for-word.

It is traditional in many communities for the *kohanim* to precede each word with a short melody.

For more on this, see [The Priestly Blessing](#).

It is customary for the congregation to stand for the duration of the Birkat Kohanim, out of respect for the Divine Presence. The congregation should face the *kohanim*—it isn't respectful to turn one's back (or side) to a blessing—but should not gaze at them. The men customarily cover their heads and faces with their *tallit*. Young children join their fathers beneath the *tallit*, which makes for a memorable childhood experience.

The congregation listens attentively and responds "amen" to the *kohanim's* preliminary blessing, and at the conclusion of each of the three verses of the Birkat Kohanim. While the *kohanim* sing the melody before the final three words of the Birkat Kohanim, the congregation recites a prayer requesting the "healing" of all their negative dreams.

For more on this, see [Role of the Congregation](#).

The Blessing of Love

This beautiful blessing has a strong rhythmic structure, and the verses become increasingly more personal. The first line, "May G-d bless you and guard you," refers to material blessings: sustenance, physical health and so on. The second, "May G-d shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you," refers to the interpersonal blessing of grace between ourselves and others. The third line is the deepest of all: "May G-d turn His countenance toward you and grant you peace." There are seven billion people on the earth. What makes us anything more than a face in the crowd, a wave in the ocean, a grain of sand on the sea shore? The fact that we are G-d's children. He is our parent. He turns His face toward us. He cares.

This knowledge gives us a profound sense of inner peace. We do not need to prove ourselves in order to receive a blessing from G-d. All we need to know is that His face is turned toward us. G-d sees us, hears us, holds us in His everlasting arms.

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