



Birkat Kohanim: May God Bless You and Keep You?

For those of us who attend the Shabbat morning services regularly or, far less often, the “dukhenen” of the High Holy Days and Festivals, the words of the “Priestly Blessing”—the Birkat Kohanim—are familiar, even comforting.

There is no question that the blessings offer solace and support:

May God bless you and keep you.

May God light His countenance for you and be gracious to you.

May God lift His countenance to you and give you peace.

ber one is that the priest has some kind of personal power to bring “blessings”—material, spiritual, whatever—directly into our life. Both the tradition and modern sensibilities dismiss this understanding out of hand.

A second possibility is that, somehow, the priest is getting God’s attention by reciting the blessing and, because of that intervention or invocation, the Holy One acts to bestow blessings upon us. This, too, strains modern credulity, making God into a capricious benefactor, such that goodness

that a “blessing” is something that comes upon us with no action on our part; it simply “falls from heaven,” like manna if you will—which, for many of us who expect little more than acid rain from the heavens, leaves us feeling religiously and spiritually incompetent.

Another way of understanding blessings from God is that they come to us in the form of *opportunities*. That is, the Creator has created a world in which we are given an extraordinary range of opportunities to uplift our lives, sometimes in ways that even appear miraculous. But they exist only as *openings* to which we may respond—or not.

So this third possibility of what is happening when one is making the Priestly Blessing is that these three benedictions are not entreaties to God but questions to the congregation. May God bless *you* and keep *you*?

(Continued on page 3.)



But what, precisely, are we to imagine was happening when the priests in the Temple made this blessing or, for that matter, when the rabbi or other prayer leader makes it today?

Let’s consider some of the possibilities: Possibility num-

ber one is that the priest has some kind of personal power to bring “blessings”—material, spiritual, whatever—directly into our life. Both the tradition and modern sensibilities dismiss this understanding out of hand.

Before looking at a third possibility, consider why both of the first two understandings may be problematic. They implicitly suggest

Mark Your Calendar: August 3 & 17—Shabbat Evening Services & Dinners

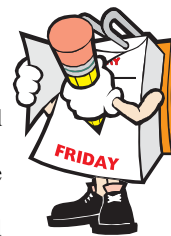
Kehillat Kharakim will offer Friday evening egalitarian services and Shabbat dinners on August 3 and 17 at the home of Rabbi Moshe and Khulda.

Services begin at 7:00 p.m. and include English and Hebrew prayers and singing.

After services there is a blessing of the children and a

sit-down Shabbat dinner.

Dinner is followed by readers’ theatre Torah-drama, and zemirot (table songs).



Everyone who comes is invited to bring a contribution to the tisch (table) in the form of a short story, a song, or a brief reading that’s related to Shabbat generally or the Torah parsha (portion) for the week.

Call (323) 934-2925 for information, location, and to hold a place.

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Otzar—Treasure

The blessing takes effect only with your participation. . . —as it is written (Dt. 15) “And Hashem your God will bless you in everything that you do.” It is not for you to sit with folded hands and hope for Hashem’s blessing without your active participation. And so it says in Tanhuma (Tetze 13) “Man must toil and labor with his two hands and the Holy-One-Blessed-be He sends his blessing.”

—Menahem Tzion

For Young People: The Animals Belong to God

Have you ever tried to hitch up your dog to pull a wagon or seen someone else try to do that? When Rabbi Moshe was about 10 years old, there was a boy who lived on his block who tried to hitch his dog and his cat together to pull his wagon.



What do you think of that idea? The Torah teaches us that we should never try to make two *different* animals work together. The Torah says that it's not what God intended when creating the world, and it causes the animals discomfort and pain.

Have you ever seen someone mistreat an animal on purpose? What did you think and how did it make you feel? Most of us would think it's a bad thing to do, and we would feel angry and maybe frightened too.

But aren't there some animals or insects that are useless, or worse? Can you name

some that you think are useless or dangerous? What do you think should be done with them? Should we get rid of them?

The rabbis understood a long time ago, before science had discovered so much about living creatures, that certain animals and insects could be dangerous. They knew that flies can carry disease. They knew that the saliva of rabid animals was dangerous.

But the rabbis taught that even those animals we totally dislike may have good qualities. The snail was useful for curing scabs. The housefly helped with hornetstings. The mosquito helped with snake poison. They studied the animals carefully to learn how they could be used and should be cared for.

Why do you think it's wrong to mistreat an animal or to kill an animal without having very good reasons for doing so?

Here are some answers that you may add to your list: Mistreating or killing an animal causes pain to the animal. (How would you

feel if *you* were the animal?) Mistreating or killing an animal causes pain to the owner. (How would you feel if it was *your* animal that was mistreated or killed?) Mistreating or needlessly killing an animal hurts the person who mistreats or kills the animal. (Were you ever mean to an animal and, if so, how did you feel afterwards?) And someone who harms an animal without very good reasons is more likely to harm another person, which may be why we feel fear when we see it happen.

Torah teaches that other living creatures, even our pets, do not really belong to us. We didn't create them and we don't have the means to keep them all alive. They belong to God. They are only loaned to us. So we must not mistreat them or kill them without very good reasons.

The thing to remember is that in the Torah, an animal is described as a "living soul"—much like us! (Genesis 1:20, 24; 9:10)

Torah Shmooze: You Shall Love Adonai

And you shall love Adonai, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. (Deuteronomy 6:5)

"You shall rejoice to do that which is good in God's eyes once you discern there is no nobler goal than this." (Sforno) Here our commentator deals with the difficulty of commanding the emotion of love "by interpreting the phrase *ואהבת* as a promise and assurance, i.e., you *will* love [of your own volition once you have done God's will]." (N. Scherman & M. Zlotowitz)

"The idea of commanding a feeling is not foreign to the Torah, which assumes that people can cultivate proper attitudes. . . . Nevertheless, love of God in Deuteronomy is not only an emotional attachment to Him, but something that expresses itself in action. . . . Israel's duty to love God is . . . inseparable from action; it is regularly connected with the observance of God's commandments. . . . In such contexts 'love' means 'act lovingly.'" (J.H. Tigay)

That we are to love God with all our "might" requires not only emotion, but action that channels all our inclinations, both good and bad, "to the service of God"—even at the cost of our life. (J.H. Tigay)

"The words: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart' mean as if God had suddenly provided you with everything you had lacked in life so far. . . . A man [or woman] who has [thus] developed an affinity and love for God has concen-

trated all his [or her] wealth in this relationship, despising all material benefits the world has to offer in favor of relationship with God. . . ." (Or Hachayim)

"It applies in every place at every time for both man and woman. If a person transgresses this and fixes his thoughts on the material interests and vapid vanities of the world, not for the sake of heaven but only to pleasure himself in them, or to attain the esteem of this painful world, to make his name great, not with any intention to do good for people and to strengthen the hands of the honest—he disobeys this positive precept, and his punishment will be great." (Sefer haHinnuch)

"We have learned in Shabbat 30 that the last words in Kohelet *כל האדם כזה* 'for this is what man is all about' refer to the whole world being created only for the sake of man's observing God's commandments on earth. Loving God and fulfilling His commandments, then, is love of a most useful kind." (Or Hachayim)

"The point of 'loving God' is to perform His commandments out of a sense of love for Him. . . . The way this love for God expresses itself is by our studying the laws of the Torah and by obtaining a better understanding of what God expects of us

through such study." (Rabbeinu Bachya) "One can only love God [as an outgrowth] of the knowledge with which he knows Him. The nature of one's love depends on the nature of one's knowledge. A small [knowledge] a lesser love. A greater amount of knowledge arouses a greater love." (Hilchot Teshuvah 10:6)

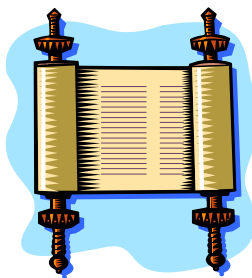
"Included in this mitzvah [is the obligation] to bring human beings closer to His service and worship. . . ." (Chafetz Chayim) "*Thou shalt love the Lord thy God: Make Him beloved to humanity, as did our father Abraham in the matter referred to in the verse, And the souls they had gotten in Haran* (Gen. 12:5). . . . Hence we learn that Abraham [and Sarah] converted people, thus bringing them under the wings of the Shekhinah." (Sifrei)

Do you have any experience that supports the connection between knowledge and love, that is, where knowing someone or something better or worse strengthened or weakened love?

How, if at all, do you understand the link between contemplating God's commandments and "attain[ing] absolute joy"?

What are your most memorable experiences of someone else loving God, and what were the hallmarks of that love?

What do you imagine would be the effect on your life (and that of your family) if, whenever using your material wealth, your intention was "to do good for people and to strengthen the hands of the honest"?



Birkat Kohanim (con't.)

The kohen or rabbi or prayer leader is asking us: Are you open to that possibility? Are you willing to respond to the opportunity that is being offered to you? Are you willing to step through the opening that the Creator has created for you? We may understand the invocation of these “blessings” as *questions*—to us!

Generally, the first blessing (“May God bless you and keep you”) refers to “material bounty”—specifically: “posterity, possessions and wealth, fertility, health, victory, strength and peace.” (J. Milgrom) So the question is put to us: Are you willing to use all the openings that the Creator has created for you? We see endless possibilities for satisfying our needs for “worldly goods” through *un-godly* means—greed, gossip, deception, lies, thievery, exploitation, injustice, and much worse. But do we also see and use the God-given opportunities, the openings to fulfill our material wants through our own acts of kindness and respect for others which, if not always producing more materials goods per se, inevitably leave us more satisfied with the goods we have acquired?

The second blessing (“May God light His countenance for you and be gracious to you.”), according to the rabbis, refers to spiritual endowment. The question put to us here: Are we responsible, literally *able to respond*, to see the wonder of the Creator’s creation and use the Torah that provides us with a blueprint to its design and workings? Denying our “responsibility” is to deny ourselves access to these opportunities that the Creator has created for us to uplift ourselves materially as well as spiritually.

Possibly the most important aspect of the third blessing (“May God lift His countenance to you and give you peace”), as suggested by the Midrash (Numbers Rabbah 11:7), is that we may choose not to be victims of our own yetzer hara (evil inclination). We may choose instead to use the God-given opportunities to make peace with one another.

But what is this peace that we may choose? The root of “shalom” (peace) is *completeness* or *wholeness*. It is “. . . the reverse of every kind of separation and fragmentation.” (Or Hachayim) Thus one of the names of God is shalom because the *Holy One* “ties together worlds [and] keeps them united. . . .” Peace, then, is much more than the absence of disharmony: “Peace is more like the silver thread that joins two people or two entities, combining them into a unified whole.” It is more than the absence of quarrels or even the presence of tolerance: to be complete, unified as one, we must share common purposes and goals. Without those “silver threads,” there is the likelihood that our incipient separateness will ultimately lead to disintegration and decay. (Akeidat Yitzchak)



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Carol S. Kestler

But where has the Creator created an opportunity for us to become united, to begin sharing common purposes and goals?

We recently asked that question at a Torah shmooze after a Friday evening Shabbat dinner. One young guest thoughtfully answered that we must begin to listen to one another, presumably to hear one another’s day-to-day pressures and hopes (many of which remain disappointed or even shattered).

That’s certainly true. Yet for someone to listen, someone else must be speaking. And for many of us, it’s often more difficult to

talk about the pressures and disappointed hopes in our own lives than to listen to those of a relative, friend, or neighbor. Many of us have internalized the idea that we must have everything under control, or at least maintain the appearance of seamless mastery. As one Jewish advice columnist put it to a correspondent whose friend was having marital problems but wouldn’t talk about them: “In our community, kvetching is OK, but anything beyond that we keep private.” We claim the right of privacy for our most challenging and troubling problems. No longer living in geographic proximity and not knowing one another as extended family members or neighbors, as we might have 50 or 75 years ago, we idolize rugged individualism.

Hillel said, “Do not separate yourself from the community.” In much of contemporary life, however, we Jews have become geographically dispersed and denominationally disparate. We have accommodated the concomitant loss of community by privatizing our lives. The result is an epidemic of individual self-reliance, personal careerism, and disdain for directly giving and receiving support communally.

Yet tzibbur, community, is the very thing that is “completed” in the blessing of peace. And not surprisingly, “The holiness of God depends on the [unity of our] community. *לְיִשְׂרָאֵל וְנִקְדָּשְׁתִּי בְּתוֹךְ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל* (Leviticus 22:32), I will be sanctified within the community of Israel.” (Akeidat Yitzchak)

Shall we, then, seek the blessings of God, pursuing the opportunities for peace beyond ourselves, reaching out to family and community?

If we answer affirmatively to the questions that are implicit in the Birkat Kohanim, our prospective blessings include relief from our private anxieties and depression, personal enlightenment, and spiritual liberation—and, of course, our movement together toward the creation of a community in which both we and God are sanctified by our deeds toward one another.

Elul: A Running Start on Turning Our Life

Before Rosh Hashanah comes the month of Elul, which begins Sunday evening, August 19. Since we can’t make dramatic changes of attitude or behavior on short notice, Elul is the time set aside to reflect on how we have behaved this past year, weighing our actions against the Torah’s call for us to live in the image of God.

Our tradition teaches that on the first day of Elul, Moses ascended the mountain a

third time to be at one again with God. So Elul is a time to reconnect with God, to focus our intention once again on the vision for our life that Torah teaches us.

Here are two practical things we can do during Elul, before the arrival of High Holy Days, to reawaken ourselves: With our family we can blow the shofar every morning, except



on the last day of Elul (eve of Rosh Hashanah). And we can give tzadakah (“charity”) every day, even if only small amounts deposited in a “pushke” at home.

If we are still victimizing ourselves and others with our anger, hatred, envy, ridicule, venality, boasting, and self-indulgence (e.g., obsessive eating, drinking, spending, etc.), the days of Elul give us a running start on turning our lives in a better direction.

OPENINGS

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ABOUT KEHILLAT KHARAKIM—על קהלת חרפים

- Kehillat Kharakim—a community of *openings*—is a family-centered congregation that meets twice-monthly for Shabbat services .
 - Kehillat Kharakim Friday-evening services regularly include a devar Torah (“sermon”) in the form of a readers’ theatre Torah-drama.
 - Kehillat Kharakim’s formation is being sponsored by Gather the People (GTP), a nonprofit organization founded by a Sponsor Committee of rabbis from virtually all the major branches and movements of Judaism.
 - Kehillat Kharakim’s rabbinic leadership is provided by Rabbi Moshe ben Asher and Khulda bat Sarah, formerly the “Rabbi Team” for Congregation Beth Israel of Chico, California.
 - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is to create a community of *openings*, or “kharakim,” through which family members of all ages can draw upon Judaism and congregational life to increase meaning and fulfillment in their own lives.
- The goal is a congregation that, regardless of where one begins or ends in Jewish knowledge or commitment, encourages greater exploration, acquisition, and expression of Judaism—and regardless of where one fits religiously, treats each person with kindness and respect.
 - The Kehillat Kharakim vision is that, apart from our capacity as individuals, we also have a role as a *kehilla*, a congregational *community*. Following the example of Nehemiah, who gathered the people to rebuild the wall and gates of Jerusalem, we assume that we too can reduce the pressures and realize the hopes that will uplift our families. By doing mitzvot *collectively*, we can bring about change for the good in our day to day lives.
 - Kehillat Kharakim is an independent congregation, not affiliated with any of the movements or branches of Judaism.
 - Kehillat Kharakim has the following kashrut policy: all food must be dairy or parve, unless special arrangements have been made, and must be prepared according to kosher guidelines; packaged goods must be certified as kosher; fresh baked goods must be purchased from kosher bakeries; and home-baked goods must contain only vegetable shortening. Non-kosher food shall not be served.

Kehillat Kharakim is a project of
Gather the People
An Education & Training Resource
for Congregational Community Development
<http://www.gatherthepeople.org>

PASTORAL COUNSELING AVAILABLE

Rabbi Moshe offers pastoral counseling without charge to any Kehillat Kharakim individual, couple, or family. Pastoral counseling addresses religious and spiritual as well as psychological and emotional needs. Moshe has a Ph.D. in Social Work, was a staff member of the Adirondack Samaritan Counseling Center of Glens Falls, NY, and was trained at the Gestalt Therapy Institute of Los Angeles. Call (323) 934-2925 for more information or an appointment.

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