

Parshas Naso 5762

This week we read about the מצוה of נשיאת כפים - *duchening*; which requires that the כהנים should bless the people with the triple blessing of יאר, ישא, יברכך.

We are all familiar with this מצוה since we participate in it every יום טוב. Actually, the Torah itself doesn't limit it to יום טוב. Nor does the Talmud. In fact, the רמב"ם, when formulating this מצוה, writes that the כהנים have a מצוה to bless the people *every day*. And it would seem to stand to reason, then, that we should have *duchening* every day.

In fact, there were גדולי ישראל who wanted to institute *duchening* every day. The Vilna Gaon tried to do so, but unsuccessfully. (He tried twice, and each time something untoward happened, which he took as a sign to desist from further attempts.) R' Nosson Adler - the Chasam Sofer's rebbe - instituted *duchening* every day. In Israel, of course, the מנהג is to *duchen* every day and that was also the מנהג in Egypt.

For the most part, however, the מנהג has become to refrain from *duchening* except on Yom Tov. The Rema explains the basis for this מנהג. Blessing others, he explains, requires a certain elevated state of mind. And nowadays, because of the pressures of our daily lives and our constant pursuit of פרנסה, it is difficult to summon up that special state of mind, except on Yom Tov, when the festive atmosphere elevates us.

Difficult to understand. תפילה and קריאת שמע, for example, also require a special state of mind, intense כונה. And yet we continue to say קריאת שמע and to daven every day. Why should ברכת כהנים be different?

Preface two other unique aspects of the מצוה of ברכת כהנים:

On the basis of the language of the pasuk (אמור להם) the ירושלמי derives that the מצוה only goes into effect when the people ask the כהנים to bless them. That, by the way, is why we call out to the כהנים, summoning them - asking them - to bless us.

Why should this be necessary?

Another rather strange thing about the מצוה of ברכת כהנים. The Gemara in Sotah tells of the following dialogue:

שאלו תלמידיו את ר' אלעזר בן שמוע: במה הארכת ימים? אמר להן: מימי לא עשיתי בית הכנסת קפנדריא, ולא פסעתי על ראשי עם קודש, ולא נשאתי כפי בלא ברכה.

What's so special about that? Don't all כהנים do that?

The poskim derive from here that apparently in Talmudic times it was not universal practice for the כהנים to recite a ברכה before *duchening*. That was the special practice of ר' אלעזר בן שמוע.

Why not? Don't all מצות require a ברכה?

The answer apparently is this. We know that there are 2 kinds of מצות: בין אדם למקום and בין אדם לחבירו.

One of the distinguishing features of מצוות בין אדם לחבירו is that the חיוב only applies when there is a need and, often, only when there is a request. The חיוב of צדקה applies only when there is an עני and only when the עני asks for צדקה. The חיוב to lend to someone who needs a loan applies only when one is asked for a loan. And so on.

Another special feature of מצוות בין אדם לחבירו is that they don't require a ברכה. We don't make a ברכה before giving צדקה, or paying a shiva call, or being מבקר חולה. Many reasons have been given for this fact, but whatever the reason, we can take it as a given.

Notice that these are the same features that we noticed regarding דוכענינג: The חיוב applies only when the כהנים are asked; and there is no mandatory ברכה.

Which leads to the conclusion that מצוה בין אדם לחבירו is a ברכת כהנים.

Just as someone who has the means must help a poor person with charity, so too the kohanim, who have it in their means to give berachos, must give these berachos to the Jewish people, who need them.

And while there is no obligatory ברכה, we follow the practice of ר' אלעזר בן שמוע and make a ברכה anyway, and the language of that ברכה emphasizes that ברכת כהנים is, indeed, a מצוה בין אדם לחבירו, an expression of love for our fellow-Jew: אקבמיו לברך את עמו ישראל באהבה

Let's go back to the רמ"א, who writes that ברכת כהנים requires a special frame of mind, which our טרדות preclude.

That special frame of mind is not כונה. ברכת כהנים doesn't need more כונה than ק"ש ותפילה. That special frame of mind, rather, is אהבה.

What the רמ"א is saying is an important insight into human nature. Even the most loving person, when he is caught up in his own troubles, has difficulty feeling love for others. טרדות and pressure cause us to become self-absorbed. And therefore in the pressure-cooker lives that we lead, says the רמ"א, it is difficult for the כהנים to summon up the אהבה that is required for ברכת כהנים, except on יום טוב, when the special atmosphere shuts out the every-day pressures.

(And perhaps that also explains why the מנהג in ארץ ישראל remains to duchen every day. Because as I explained on שבועות, ארץ ישראל has a special power to pull Jews together.)

There are several important lessons here to be learned. There is, first of all, a domestic lesson. Most of us live very pressured lives, and the רמ"א is telling us that that can affect the loving relationship that we ought to have with our families; children and spouses. It's important to be on guard against this, and also to try and find times that are islands of tranquility.

There is also a communal lesson here. This past week there have been several disturbing warnings from our government about the possibility of terror here in our country and in our city. Our collective blood pressure is surely rising. As we feel increased pressure here in our own lives, there is a human tendency for us to lessen our concern for our brethren in ארץ ישראל who feel the presence of terror all the time. We have to be on guard against that.

The כהנים are commanded to bless the Jewish people באהבה. Through their אהבה they are able to be the conduit through which ברכה is brought into the world and onto our people. May we, too, rise to the requisite level of אהבת ישראל that these times demand, and merit to be, too, a conduit through which ברכה will flow, to us and to all Israel

אמן.