

Why Were The Cohanim Chosen To Bless The Bnei Yisrael

– “so shall you bless the B’nai Yisrael” – כה תברכו את בני ישראל

In this week’s Sedra, we learn that the Cohanim are commanded to bless B’nai Yisrael. Why were Cohanim chosen to bless B’nai Yisrael? We learn time after time that we should honour and obey our Tzadikim, our wise, pious and scholarly. Surely we should be blessed by our most learned and humble, not by a particular group?

If the Torah informs us that only Cohanim can bless, and you cannot guarantee all Cohanim are always pious, then they must have been chosen for another reason. In fact, every Cohen must Duchan, even if he is not learned or religious.

The Gemora (Sotah 38b), when discussing Bircas Cohanim, provides a mnemonic for the various statements given by R’Yehoshua ben Levi on the laws of Bircas Cohanim, as follows:-

Desires	Hashem desires the Cohanim to bless B’nai Yisrael
Blessing	Every Cohen who blesses is himself blessed
Platform	Every Cohen who does not go onto the platform, (Duchan), transgresses 3 positive Mitzvos
Avodah	Every Cohen who does not go to Duchan during the Avodah blessing, רצה may not go up for that session of Duchaning
Cup	We give the Kos for Bircas Hamazon only to a person of generous disposition, לטוב עין
Recognise	Birds recognise misers. In contrast to a generous person, “ טוב עין ”, a miser is called “ צר עין ”
Benefit	One who derives benefit from a miser transgresses a לאו
Calf	The Eglah Arufah comes as a result of misers. The Eglah Arufah is brought if a corpse is found between towns and R’Yehoshua ben Levi blames the misers of the last town he visited, for failing to care for their guest.

So why does R’Yehoshua ben Levi when discussing his laws on Duchaning, include in his discussion who one chooses to bensch. What is the connection between Duchaning and benschung?

Rabbi A Wolkin, a 20th century commentator, suggests the selection of the person to bensch is not based on his learning, but is based on the feeling of mutual goodwill he has with the others gathered. For this reason, the one who is chosen to bensch is always the Tov Ayin, the one who is well disposed to others.

This explains the inclusion of this statement on Benschung by R’Yehoshua ben Levi with his laws on Duchaning.

The answer to our question of “Why were the Cohanim chosen to bless B’nai Yisrael?” is now clearer, since the Cohen’s livelihood is dependent on others. As the Cohanim had no land for produce, they will always have a bond of gratitude to all those who provide them with food and provisions, and the Cohen will bless Israel to have an abundant harvest.

This might help explain why the Bracha recited by the Cohen before Bircas Cohanim concludes with “has commanded us to bless his people Israel BE’AHAVA”, with love. The love is an essential part of the Mitzvah.

Yitzchok asked his son Esov (Bereshis 27, 3-4) to bring him venison before he blessed him. Knowing full well that Esov was wicked, Isaac needed to arouse himself with a feeling of love for Esov, to be able to feel well disposed towards him and make his blessing effective. No such requirement was needed for Yaacov to receive his father’s blessing.

We further understand that when we speak to our loved ones, we look at them directly. Just as the Keruvim faced towards each other when B’nai Yisrael were well disposed to Hashem’s will, so too must the Cohanim turn to face the Kehilla to bless them **panim el panim**.

Although all Mitzvos should be performed with love for Hashem, only in Bircas Cohanim is love mentioned in the Bracha and said prior to its performance. The Zohar (Naso 127b) states, “ any Cohen who does not have love for the Kehilla, or for whom the Kehilla does not have love, cannot Duchan.” Maybe if we are better disposed to each other, the blessing will go further.

Based on an essay of Rabbi I Bernstein tzl

In memory of my Father, Avraham Yitzchok ben Eliezer HaCohen, whose Yahrtzeit is 5 Sivan.