

Receptivity, Dependence, Love, and the Healing Power of Blessing: In Defense of *Birkat Kohanim*

James Jacobson-Maisels

Passivity, Dependence, and Healing

In the midst of the morning service, near the end of the prayer leader's repetition of the Amidah, the *kohanim*, the hereditary priests, ascend to bless the congregation. Having removed their shoes and having had their hands washed by the *leviyim* (that is, the Levites), they cover themselves in their *tallitot*, raise their hands in a special incantory gesture, and, echoing the prayer leader word by word, bless the congregation. The congregation—quiet, eyes averted, many covered in their own *tallitot*—receive the blessing. It is an extraordinary and unusual moment of staging and ritual power in the service and one of the few moments (unfortunately) in my experience that the congregation takes unusually seriously: stopping talking, arranging their bodies in particular reverent postures, and focusing on the moment of prayer and blessing.¹ It is a ceremony filled with mystery, awe, and even superstition, and one that feels particularly archaic and atavistic in its ritual components. As I live in Israel, it is a ceremony that I experience in its fullness more regularly than my diaspora brothers and sisters, for its frequency increases as one comes closer to the precincts of holiness, though an attenuated version recited by the prayer leader is regularly experienced by us all.² It is a ceremony that has unfortunately, in my view, fallen into disuse and even disrepute in liberal Jewish circles, but one I that want to champion in this essay as a crucial

¹ The focused intentionality, including cessation of all talking and other distractions, during *Birkat Kohanim* is comparable, in my experience, only to the congregation's comportment, in traditional settings, during the *Kedushah*.

² In the Ashkenazic tradition, *Birkat Kohanim* is recited in the Diaspora only on festivals, but in the north of Israel every week on Shabbat, and in Jerusalem (and other parts of Israel) every day. Though there are significant halakhic objections to this *minhag*, see Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel Epstein (1829–1908), *Arukh Ha-shulhan* §128:63–64.

spiritual practice of blessing and transformation, and the bearer of an important message about the nature of who we are and the power of love.

I wish to highlight the receptivity, passivity, and even dependence that are part of the ritual of Birkat Kohanim. This moment is one of the few times that many of us are blessed, passively receiving a blessing sent forth by another. For those of us for whom neither amulets, rebbes, nor faith-healing is a normative part of our religious lives, Birkat Kohanim is a unique moment when we are formally, ritualistically, and lovingly blessed—as dependents—with well-being. The very structure of Birkat Kohanim, what seems to me its various atavistic elements, strengthens this aspect of its performance. The strong separation and preparation of those who offer blessing (as their hands are washed and they remove their shoes), the formal distinction between blesser and blessed (priests vs. lay Israelites), the mysterious and esoteric nature of the rite (the priests covering themselves with *tallitot* so their hands are not seen), and the deferential and reverential posture and distinction of those being blessed (standing in front of the *kohanim*, averting the eyes, being covered by a *tallit*)—all of these elements create a tableau, a formal ritual structure, that emphasizes the passivity, dependence, receptivity, and humility of those receiving the blessing. For those of us who receive the blessing, the ritual structure encourages us to let the blessing wash over us and penetrate us, to be passive receivers of the blessing...putting us in the unusual position, as modern adults, to be graced with blessing.

Perhaps this receptivity can be best felt by comparing the receiving of this blessing of love from the Divine, channeled through the *kohanim*, to a Tibetan Buddhist practice from the Dzogchen tradition, in which a blessing is received from spiritual benefactors (beings of great love, whether personally known to you or figures like the Buddha). This practice is described by John Makransky, a professor of Buddhism and Comparative Theology at Boston College and a

Tibetan Buddhist meditation teacher, in his book *Awakening Through Love*. Makransky describes the practice of calling up such figures and opening oneself to the love and blessings they will send. He then writes:

Receive the gentle, healing energy of that radiance. As other thoughts or feelings arise, let them be enveloped in this loving luminosity. No matter who you think you are, what you think you deserve, all such thoughts are irrelevant now—just accept the benefactors’ wish of love for your deepest happiness. Trusting this wish more than any limiting thoughts of yourself, receive it into your whole being.

Let yourself rely upon this love, the goodness it comes from, and the goodness it meets in your heart. To rely upon this love more than on your own defensive reactions is to find profound refuge.

Be at ease, open, and accepting, like a puppy lying in the morning sun, passively soaking up its rays. Absorb the soft, healing energy of love into every cell of your body, every corner of your mind. Bathe in this, heal in this, rest in this.³

Here one can feel, quite clearly, the profound dependence, passivity, and softening that such a practice calls for, as well as the healing it can potentially bring. The practitioner is instructed to “rely upon this love,” to trust the love and the practice in a posture of dependence. Similarly, one should, in a delightful image, “Be at ease, open, and accepting, like a puppy lying in the morning sun, passively soaking up its rays.” The spiritual posture is one of receptivity and, I suggest, one can feel how that posture of receptivity allows one to genuinely “absorb the soft, healing energy of love into every cell of your body,” to genuinely take in the blessing.

Nor is this posture of dependence limited only to those who formally receive the Priestly Blessing. The priests themselves—as channels for divine blessing, rather than actual sources of blessing—are also properly seen as passive, as they open themselves so that the Divine might pass through them. This is clear from the very language of the blessing: “May the Eternal bless you and guard you. May the Eternal shine God’s face upon you and be gracious to you. May the Eternal lift God’s face to you and grant you peace” (Numbers 6:24–26). It is God who is

³ John Makransky, *Awakening Through Love: Unveiling Your Deepest Goodness* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2007), pp. 26–27.

properly the blesser, the source of blessing. The priests only invoke the wish for God's blessing to be manifest. In this sense, the priests are most properly seen as channels for divine blessing.

This is not a unique posture in the Jewish tradition. Indeed, Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (1522–1570) understands the central goal of the kabbalistic practitioner as becoming a channel for the divine flow, the divine energy that kabbalists believed to flow down from heaven into the earthly realm. This flow (*shefa*) is connected to the *s'firot*, divine personalities and qualities which together constitute the very nature of God. Unfortunately, the *s'firot*, as reflected in our broken world, are estranged from one another and in discord. The goal of the kabbalistic practitioner is to bring them back into unity. As Cordovero describes in *Pardes Rimmonim*, the perfected practitioner “will unify the *s'firot* and bind them with a strong tie, and thus, in his soul, will be a channel through which the *s'firot* will flow...”⁴ The perfected practitioner thus brings the divine flow into the world and unifies the *s'firot*. Yet it is not an active pulling down that Cordovero describes, but rather a passive opening to allow the Divine to flow through the practitioner. To enable this divine flow, the channel of course must be empty; that is, the perfected practitioner must be “clear” or “pure.”⁵ Any “self” that is filling the channel, any attempt by individuals to insert themselves in this process, blocks the flow. We can see this in another of Cordovero's works, the *Tomer D'vorah*, in his discussion of the *s'firah* Tiferet. Speaking of Torah, the paradigmatic divine gift, which the teacher must transfer or allow to flow to the student, Cordovero stresses that humility is essential in this process. If the scholar becomes prideful through the learning of Torah, such a one causes Tiferet, the central *s'firah*, to separate from the *s'firot* Nezaḥ and Hod; if humble and loving, then Tiferet will send its effluence (*shefa*)

⁴ *Pardes Rimmonim, Sha-ar Ha-kavvanah* §32 (Jerusalem: Yerid Ha-s'farim, 2000), p. 482.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 482. The Hebrew for “pure” in this passage is *zakh*.

to Nezaḥ and Hod and there will be no interruption in the divine flow.⁶ That is, humility brings about the unification of the *s'firot* by allowing the divine flow to continue uninterrupted, while arrogance causes a separation in the *s'firot* as it blocks the flow from the higher to the lower *s'firot* and so separates the lower *s'firot* from their source. Only through the “open channel” of humility can the divine flow create unity and connection. Yet in Birkat Kohanim, this role is accentuated and brought into relief through the structure of the rite: the *kohanim* channeling the blessing physically, orally, emotionally, and spiritually to the congregation. The preparations the *kohanim* undergo can be seen as ways to purify them and prepare them for the divine encounter, allowing the blessing to be channeled to the congregation rather than being trapped in the priests' egos.⁷ For both parties, then, Birkat Kohanim is in many ways about surrender, passivity, and receptivity.

It is perhaps this very quality that has led contemporary Judaism, particularly in its American variety, to put aside this practice.

There are, of course, many aspects of this ritual that may not sit well with a “modern” audience, including its seemingly atavistic or shamanic elements and its hierarchical nature. Yet one additional difficulty I would like to highlight is the passivity and dependence that are built into the ritual's structure—traits that are deeply at odds with the image of the autonomous individual championed by modern Western civilization, and particularly by American mythology that so valorizes the self-made individual pulled up by that person's own bootstraps. Indeed, this

⁶ *Sefer Tomer D'vorah* (Brooklyn: Mesivta Publication Society, 5703 (1942/1943), chap. 7, p. 26. By “central *s'firah*,” I mean to refer to the literal place of Tiferet within the schema of the *s'firot* flow, and not to its importance. The particularities of the significance of Tiferet, Nezaḥ, and Hod and their interactions are not important to our discussion here; the point is simply that one need recognize that separation or connection depends on the level of humility and “emptiness” of the practitioner.

⁷ Note the spiritual cleansing effected through hand-washing and the removal of shoes. (The latter resonates with the command for Moses to remove his shoes when approaching the sanctified space of the burning bush; cf. Exodus 3:5.)

championing of autonomy and (pathological)⁸ resistance to dependence can be seen, quite worryingly, in American attitudes about gratitude, particularly among American men. Indeed, a study investigating “which emotions they [the participants] most like to experience, which they most dread having, which they prefer to ‘keep in,’ and which they view as constructive and destructive” found that “Americans in general ranked gratitude comparatively low in desirability and constructiveness, and...American men, in particular, tended to view the experience of gratitude as unpleasant. Some, in fact, found gratitude to be a humiliating emotion....Over one-third of American men reported a preference for concealing feelings of gratefulness.”⁹

According to this study, many Americans (and particularly American men) found gratitude—an emotion that expresses dependence and challenges our illusion of autonomy by recognizing that which we have received from someone else—to be undesirable, unpleasant, unconstructive, worthy of concealment, and even humiliating. The posture of dependence, as a valorized and worthwhile disposition, is foreign to contemporary Western, particularly masculinist, ideology. Yet, the power of Birkat Kohanim, at least in part, is precisely its cultivation of this posture.

Indeed, the suspicion toward Birkat Kohanim that is so prevalent in liberal Judaism is part of a larger project of the demythologization and de-ativization of Judaism (which may express itself liturgically, for example, by replacing references to “a redeemer” with “redemption,” or by removing references to sacrifices). While this is a complex and intricate topic, it can also be linked, in part, to this fear of dependence. Myth, religious myth, places us in

⁸ Pathological in the sense that independence is seen as a supreme value, which displaces other crucial values (such as compassion) and is, moreover, illusory—as there never has been and never will be a completely independent human being, if only for the simple reason that no human being has ever brought him or herself into the world.

⁹ Robert Emmons, *Thanks!: How Practicing Gratitude Can Make You Happier* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2008), p. 130, citing Corinne Kosmitzki and Shula Sommers’s essay, “Emotion and Social Context: An American-German Comparison,” in *British Journal of Social Psychology* 27 (1988), pp. 35–49.

a larger trans-temporal and trans-spatial context in which we hold a paradoxical dual position. On the one hand, placing our lives in a cosmic context means that we are merely bit players, insignificant aspects of an extraordinarily grandiose universe. On the other hand, myth tells us that we are also the very integrated substance of the divine universe, avatars of the Divine of a sort—playing out, enacting, and actualizing the myth in our lives.¹⁰ In both cases, whether small (bit players) or colossal (divine avatars), we are never independent but always pieces of a larger story. In both cases our autonomy and individuality, our centrality as individuals, are brought into question.

This stance of dependence and passivity is perhaps highlighted in one traditional use of the Birkat Kohanim: as the blessing that parents give to their children on the Sabbath eve. In receiving the blessing, whether from our parents at home or from the priests in the synagogue, we are all, in a sense, made to be children. Yet, that childlike dependent posture is not one with which we are culturally comfortable, as adults. We can all imagine, for instance, how parents (especially men, given modern gender roles), while blessing their children, could become uncomfortable, awkward, or even humorous as their children grow older and eventually become adults. Indeed, we live in a culture where even children are expected and encouraged to be independent: going to bed by themselves at extremely young ages, turning in their tweens to peer (rather than parental) culture, receiving praise when they are able to do things themselves and being criticized and even shamed when they “act like a baby” by being “needy” or requesting help that is not deemed age-appropriate.¹¹ To be blessed is to recognize not only that one is needy, but also that one cannot meet all of one’s needs by oneself. It is, in many ways, the

¹⁰ This is most strongly true in Kabbalah, where the practitioner is, at times, quite literally an avatar of one of the *s’firot*.

¹¹ See the analysis of this phenomenon in Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Mate, *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers* (New York: Ballantine Books), 2008.

fundamental posture of prayer. Yet unlike the mostly personal prayers of our tradition, it is a posture starkly highlighted communally by the ritual structure of Birkat Kohanim.

The centrality of dependence, passivity, and receptivity can be seen in the various usages of Birkat Kohanim. In ancient times, for instance, Birkat Kohanim was inscribed on apotropaic amulets to confer health, prosperity, and well-being on their wearers.¹² Indeed, one midrash describes this as the very nature of the Priestly Blessing:

“On the day that Moses finished (*kallot*) [setting up the Tabernacle]” (Numbers 7:1). What is written before this matter? “May the Eternal bless you...” (Numbers 6:24). Rabbi Joshua of Sikhnin said: It is a parable of a king who betrothed (*kiddeish*) his daughter and performed the ceremony, and she then fell under the control of the evil eye. When the king went to marry off his daughter, what did he do? He made an amulet for her and said to her, “Wear this amulet, so that you do not fall under the control of the evil eye.” So too, when the blessed Holy One gave the Torah to Israel, God made for them a public display: “The whole nation saw the thunder” (Exodus 20:15), which was none other than betrothal (*kiddushin*), as it says: “God said to Moses: Go to the people and sanctify them (*v’kiddashtam*)...” (Exodus 19:10). But they fell under the influence of the evil eye and broke the tablets, as it says, “It was when he approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, that Moses grew angry and threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain” (Exodus 32:19). When they came and made for them a Tabernacle, God first gave them blessings so that they would not fall under the control of the evil eye. Therefore it is written: “May the Eternal bless you and guard you” first, and [only] after the priestly blessing does it say, “On the day that Moses finished (*kallot*) [the Tabernacle].”¹³

Playing on the similarity between the Hebrew words for “finished” (*kallot*) and “bride(s)” (*kallah* or *kallot*), the midrash sees the completion of the Tabernacle as a wedding ceremony/sanctification (*kiddushin*), with the Tabernacle serving as the *huppah* (wedding canopy) underneath which God and Israel are wed. Why does the Priestly Blessing precede the text describing the completion of the Tabernacle? Because the words of the blessing are an amulet, which protects the already-betrothed bride (Israel) from forces of evil and therefore

¹² See Barry Ross, “Notes on Some Jewish Amulets: *Ayin Ha-ra* and the Priestly Blessing,” in *Journal of Associated Graduates in Near Eastern Studies* 2:2 (1991), pp. 34–40, and see the essay by Michael Graetz elsewhere in this volume.

¹³ *Midrash Tanhuma*, *Naso* §17.

allows her to complete the marriage. The blessing prevents Israel from once more falling into the sin of idolatry. The blessing is thus literally a form of protection that allows the consummation (*kallot*) of the marriage.

Similarly, the Talmud recommends recitation of the Priestly Blessing as a way to transform an uncertain dream into a blessing, explaining:

If one has seen a dream and does not remember what one has seen, let that person stand before the priests at the time when they spread out their hands, and say as follows: “Sovereign of the Universe, I am Yours and my dreams are Yours. I have dreamt a dream and I do not know what it is. Whether I have dreamt about myself or my companions have dreamt about me, or I have dreamt about others—if they are good dreams, confirm them and reinforce them like the dreams of Joseph; and if they require a remedy, heal them, as the waters of Marah were healed by Moses, our teacher, and as Miriam was healed of her leprosy and Hezekiah of his sickness, and the waters of Jericho by Elisha. As You did turn the curse of the wicked Balaam into a blessing, so may You turn all my dreams into something good for me.” One should conclude the prayer along with the priests, so that the congregation may answer, “Amen!”¹⁴

Here, in a lovely display of dependence and surrender, one who has had an uncertain dream simply asks that it be made beneficial in whatever way is appropriate, whether through its fulfillment or through its transformation and healing. Birkat Kohanim is considered the perfect time for this request, for such transformation, fulfillment and protection is the very nature of the priestly blessings.¹⁵

Similarly, Rabbi Isaiah Horowitz (1565–1630) describes a beautiful healing ceremony that utilizes the Priestly Blessing, which he details as “a beautiful ritual to do with a sick person who is *in extremis* (*ligsos*).” In this ceremony, the sick person is to recite a number of biblical verses (if possible), which are then completed by the person at the bedside.¹⁶ The sick person

¹⁴ B. Berakhot 55b.

¹⁵ For more on the role of the Priestly Blessing in the realm of dreams, see the essay by Howard Addison elsewhere in this volume.

¹⁶ *Sh'nei Luhot Ha-b'rit*, vol. 2, *P'sahim, Shores Y'sod Amud Ha-ḥesed, Perek Neir Mitzvah*, ch. 1 (ed. Warsaw 5690 [1929/1930]), p. 3b.

then says, “Thus shall you bless the children of Israel; say to them—” (Numbers 6:23), which is the introduction to the biblical Priestly Blessing. The person at the bedside then continues by reciting the text of Birkat Kohanim (Numbers 6:24–26), and they both conclude by then reciting another series of verses.¹⁷ It is noteworthy that the Priestly Blessing occupies a central place in the ritual; moreover, it is the only place where, utilizing the words of the verse, a sick person invites another to bestow a blessing, and the person responds with explicit words of blessing.¹⁸ Echoing the Talmud’s dictum, conveyed precisely in a discussion of healing, that “a prisoner cannot free oneself from the prison,”¹⁹ here an individual in a vulnerable and dependent position invites another person to recite the Priestly Blessing, so that the former can fully receive the blessing—which is meant to either aid in the person’s recovery, or to provide succor in finding acceptance and peace in the midst of the illness. The roles here are significant. Though in both wording and choice of verses it is abundantly clear that the blessing and healing comes from God, still the sick person explicitly instructs the companion to offer the blessing—thus placing oneself in a position of receptivity and dependence, in being blessed by one’s fellow.

This passivity and dependence, the receptivity of receiving a blessing, is crucial to the very content of the blessing itself, love and peace. Here form serves function, receptivity enabling the only true peace attainable: not the peacefulness of knowing that things will turn out all right (for we never know if things will turn out all right), but rather the peacefulness of knowing that we can be all right, that we can be present however things turn out. The true blessing is the ability to relax in the midst of the struggle, to find peace in the uncertainty, to receive what is. Passivity and receptivity, and the protection of equanimity that they help

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Interestingly, this ceremony is not particular to a *kohen*; rather, it seems that any Jew is encouraged to utilize the Priestly Blessing in this way.

¹⁹ B. Berakhot 5b.

engender, similarly make possible genuine love—the ability to truly be loved, receive love, be helped, feel gratitude, and enable true vulnerability and intimacy. It helps us relinquish our illusion of autonomy and our illusion of control, two barriers that prevent us from awakening to sincere equanimity and love. This passivity is neither disempowering nor about being weak or helpless. Rather, it is about recognizing that no matter how efficacious we can be, we are never in control—and that the striving, fear, and tension of control has no place for peace or love. This posture of receptivity empowers us to respond, from a place of balance and compassion, with wisdom and clarity. I will return to support this argument below; for now, we must turn to the place of love and peace in Birkat Kohanim, from which we can then see the profound connection between its posture of receptivity and the love and peace with which it blesses us.

Love, Protection, Peace, and Blessing

The Priestly Blessing is essentially a blessing of love, incanted in love, and expressing divine love and care for the recipients. The hasidic master Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein of Krakow (b. c. 1753) beautifully presents this idea of the centrality of love in his work *Ma-or Va-shemesh*, in a homily on the priestly blessings. He explains:

Torah commentators have already remarked as to why it is written “Say to them” (Numbers 6:22) and not “Speak to them.” Concerning this, it seems to me that the verse hints that one who comes to bless Israel must have this quality, that he loves them with a love as powerful as he loves his soul and heart. Even the lowest of the low among Israel he loves like his soul. And through this he glorifies them before their Father in heaven with a plethora of virtues. And through this he arouses compassion and great forces of lovingkindness, and draws down upon them all manner of blessings. And this is hinted at in the words “Say to them”—that is to say, the word “say” (*emor*) comes from the language of “you have affirmed (*he-emarta*) the Eternal this day [as your God]” (Deuteronomy 26:17). And its explanation is that God commanded the priests, “Thus shall you bless the children of Israel; say to them...” (Numbers 6:22)—meaning that with this quality you will

bless the children of Israel; that is to say, that you will love them. Then you will be fit to bless Israel.²⁰

The meaning of “thus” in the verse, the Ma·or Va-shemesh explains, is that the blessing must be done with a particular quality, the quality of love. Only *thus*, in this way—with love—must you (the priests) bless Israel. Indeed, the priests are only fit to bless Israel when that love is present. This love is not merely a mild generic caring but rather a passionate concern, like one’s love for one’s own soul and heart. Such love, he explains, is a powerful force, pulling down compassion, love, and blessings through the channel of the priest and into the world. Such love glorifies its recipients, allowing their inherent virtue and goodness to be seen and extolled. Indeed, that is the nature of love: to allow ourselves and others to see and be seen through the eyes of love, to acknowledge our fundamental virtue and worthiness. Similarly, the Zohar teaches: “Any priest who does not love the people or whom the people do not love should not spread out his hands to bless the people.”²¹

Indeed, the necessity of love is expressed in the very ritual formulation of Birkat Kohanim, which requires that the priests begin the ceremony by reciting the blessing, “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the world, who sanctified us through the sanctity of Aaron and commanded us to bless the people Israel with *love*,” in which context the word love (*ahavah*) rings out and permeates the space then filled by the Priestly Blessing. This command to bless with love can of course be read two ways. On the one hand it is a command, as the Zohar and the Ma·or Va-shemesh suggest, that the priest must himself feel love for those he is blessing, that the blessing itself must be performed with love. On the other hand, as the hasidic master Rabbi Yerahmiel Yisrael Yitzhak Danzinger (1853–1910) teaches, it can also be read as blessing

²⁰ *Ma·or Va-shemesh, Parshat Naso, s.v. va-y’ dabbeir...dabbeir el aharon.*

²¹ Zohar III 147b.

its recipients with the experience of love, “that there will be between them love and unity and each one will love the other.”²² Perhaps it is this requirement of love that disqualifies a priest who has committed manslaughter from performing the priestly blessing.²³

As the *Ma-or Va-shemesh* makes clear concerning the priest who pronounces the blessing, it is the love of the *kohen* that arouses and brings down the heavenly love and blessing, because

he loves them [i.e., the people whom he is blessing] with a love as powerful as he loves his own soul and heart. Even the lowest of the low among Israel he loves like his soul. And through this he glorifies them before their Father in heaven with a plethora of virtues. And through this he arouses compassion and great forces of lovingkindness and draws down upon them all manner of blessings.²⁴

This is to say: whatever our metaphysical commitments, the love and blessings bestowed here are, at least initially, the love of one human being for another. How can such love, a loving vision that truly sees, appreciates, glorifies, and extols everyone it encounters—no matter how seemingly low or unworthy—not bring forth boundless compassion, lovingkindness, and blessing? How can such a love not extend beyond itself to cause, in kabbalistic language, an arousal above?²⁵ Whether understood metaphysically or empirically, we can see how intentions and acts of love extend beyond themselves to affect more than what seems to be their limited borders. We can see how the Priestly Blessing itself is an act of love, communicating and bringing love to both blessed and blesser.

Indeed, the blessing itself not only communicates love but is itself an act of love. As Gerald Janzen explains, “The Priestly Blessing...exemplifies what Austin characterizes as ‘performative speech’: words do not simply refer to something, but actually do what they say. ‘I

²² *Yismah Yisrael, Parshat Naso*, s.v. *v’zeh she-omeir [birkat kohanim] asher kid’ shanu*.

²³ B. Berakhot 32b.

²⁴ *Ma-or Va-xhemesh, Parashat Naso*, s.v. *va-y’ dabbeir...el mosheh leimor*.

²⁵ See just such a comment on Birkat Kohanim in Rabbi Yaakov Yosef of Polonne (1710–1784), *Sefer Tol’ dot Yaakov Yosef, Parashat Naso* §8.

love you’ not only reports the speaker’s affections, but enacts them verbally; their efficacy is to be felt by one to whom they are addressed. Likewise, ‘God bless you’ is a verbal act whose efficacy is conveyed in those words.”²⁶

The performative speech act of blessing itself not only conveys the love of the speaker for the one blessed but is itself an act of love. It is a moment of genuine intimacy and care. This is why the Talmud insists that the blessing be said face to face: “‘Thus shall you bless’ (Numbers 6:22)—face to face. You say ‘face to face,’ but perhaps it should be face to back? The verse teaches us, ‘Say to them’—like someone speaking to a friend.”²⁷ In other words, the blessing must be said in a posture of intimacy, the way one would talk to a friend. Despite the formal and hierarchical nature of the ceremony, there is no intent to distance or estrange, but rather to enable a genuine intimate encounter. Indeed, the language of “face to face” is particularly striking and powerful. This is so for two reasons. First, speaking face to face is precisely how the relationship between Moses and God is described, and is the ultimate sign of divine intimacy;²⁸ and second, because of the prominent place of the face in the priestly blessings. In three short lines, the divine face is mentioned twice: “May the Eternal bless you and guard you. May the Eternal shine God’s *face* upon you and be gracious to you. May the Eternal lift God’s *face* to you and grant you peace.” The shining of the divine face and its lifting toward those blessed indicate divine love, care, and attention flowing toward the blessed.

What, then, is the connection between the two ideas discussed so far—the centrality of receptivity, dependence, and passivity in the Priestly Blessing; and the centrality of love—and

²⁶ J. Gerald Janzen, “What Does the Priestly Blessing Do?” in *From Babel to Babylon, From Babel to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History and Literature in Honour of Brian Peckham*, ed. Joyce Rilett Wood, John E. Harvey, and Mark Leuchter (New York: T & T Clark, 2006), p. 26, citing J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 2d ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976).

²⁷ B. Sotah 38a.

²⁸ Note, though, that the Hebrew is slightly different in the two formulations. In speaking of Moses’ encounter with God, it is *panim el panim* (Exodus 33:11); in the Talmudic passage, it is *panim k’neged panim*.

how do they both relate to the wish for peace that is the ultimate end of the Priestly Blessing?²⁹

In brief, I want to maintain that the protection and blessing that Birkat Kohanim provides is precisely love. Love is the blessing and healing, and it is the peace that is the promise of the blessing. The surrender, dependence, receptivity, and passivity structured into the Priestly Blessing are what enables that love, and the peace that is its fruit, to be actualized. That is: love is actualized through receptivity and surrender. The protection of love, the peace it provides, is the deep knowing that we are held in love, held from outside, in a posture of dependence and passivity.

We can see this aspect of the Priestly Blessing by turning again to the Tibetan blessing practice discussed above. Makransky describes how the posture of receptivity enables the transformation of love, which the practice provides. He explains:

Tibetan Buddhists generally begin their meditations by recalling spiritual benefactors who embody for them the enlightened qualities of the infinite, non-conceptual nature of mind. Their reverence and receptivity to the qualities of these benefactors becomes so strong that they learn to trust the mysterious, infinite ground of those qualities: the vast expanse of openness and cognizance beyond self-clinging. Through the power of such receptivity and trust, they are enabled to release their egos into the infinite nature of mind itself. Tibetans do this by envisioning their spiritual benefactors—their lamas³⁰ and buddhas³¹ and bodhisattvas³²—as a radiant field of refuge before them. Then they receive the luminous blessings and energies of their benefactors' enduring love, compassion, liberating wisdom, and spiritual power into their whole being. The warm, radiant energy of those qualities helps them to relax their ego-centeredness, to melt away their self-protectiveness, and to sense the radiant ground of those qualities as absolute goodness. Pulled beyond themselves in this gentle way, they merge joyfully into oneness with their benefactors within that ground, which is the infinite, non-conceptual nature of mind beyond separation (buddha mind, dharmakaya).³³ In this way, a conceptual practice of devotion to the goodness of

²⁹ The centrality of peace, *shalom*, in the blessing can be seen both in the fact that the blessing concludes with the idea of peace and also in how the other elements of the blessing all lead toward and contribute to peace. Moreover, Birkat Kohanim is followed liturgically by the Sim Shalom prayer, which (as we will discuss below) is a kind of echo and reformulation of the Priestly Blessing.

³⁰ Teachers of dharma.

³¹ The various enlightened beings who inspire Tibetan Buddhists.

³² Those who strive for enlightenment of themselves and others.

³³ Buddha mind or *dharmakaya* is the infinite, non-conceptual nature of mind beyond separation.

spiritual benefactors, and to the infinite ground of that goodness, provides the most effective entry into non-conceptual meditation.³⁴

It is the receiving of love, a conceptual practice of reverence, receptivity, and devotion, which evokes enough trust in the basic goodness of reality that we can take refuge in that reality and relax into its mystery.³⁵ The more deeply we learn to receive the unconditional love that accepts us just as we are, the more we can trust and let be into just what is, to relax into an intuitive knowing beyond anxieties of self-concern.³⁶

Here, Makransky makes clear the connection between receptivity, blessing, love, and peace. It is when we are able to genuinely receive the love bestowed on us, to really take in the blessing of love, that peace arises as a fundamental trust in the nature of what is. This is not some Pollyannaish certainty that everything will turn out alright, but rather a strong, centered knowledge—founded on love—that we can be alright, however things turn out. This Tibetan practice also helps us to understand the importance of the dependence, hierarchy, formalism, and surrender that we have noted in *Birkat Kohanim*. That is to say (as Makransky points out): reverence and receptivity are key. It is reverence which enables the kind of open-hearted, non-striving receptivity that is fundamental to this practice and which allows, in the Jewish context, the practitioner to receive the “enduring love, compassion, liberating wisdom, and spiritual power” not of their benefactor directly, but rather of the Divine as channeled through the priests. It is the posture of reverence, dependence, trust, and surrender that can allow the practitioner to “melt away their self-protectiveness, and to sense the radiant ground of those qualities as absolute goodness.” Indeed, it is this absolute goodness that, the *Ma-or Va-shemesh* tells us, is reflected in the loving gaze of the priest bestowing the blessing.

³⁴ Makransky, *Awakening Through Love*, p .48.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 49–50.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

When performed properly, or perhaps ideally, the relative formal postures and positioning of the blessing priest and the blessed congregant, and the love that the priest must bring to the blessing, allow for a special and childlike softening of the heart in the blessed. This allows the individual to genuinely take in and embody the love and blessing being sent forth, to trust the blessing and the love, and so to experience the peace and equanimity that come with such a deep opening, softening, and trust. Here, to use Makransky's phrase, Birkat Kohanim helps enable the practitioner, the one blessed, "to trust...the vast expanse of openness and cognizance beyond self-clinging."³⁷ That is, Birkat Kohanim invites the blessed to simply let go: to no longer be in control, to give up self-protection, to relinquish the illusion of ultimate autonomy...and so to be opened to love, blessing, and peace; to be opened to the vastness of divinity. As Makransky explains, "It is the receiving of love, a conceptual practice of reverence, receptivity, and devotion, which evokes enough trust in the basic goodness of reality that we can take refuge in that reality and relax into its mystery."³⁸ This, I believe, is the promise of Birkat Kohanim: that we might, through our "reverence, receptivity, and devotion," truly receive the love which is its nature, evoking for us sufficient trust so that we relax into the Reality and its basic goodness, so that we can experience the peace which is the promise of the Priestly Blessings. Birkat Kohanim is a precious and relatively rare opportunity to open and receive the love that is being sent to us. It is an opportunity to stop doing, controlling, and making and instead to take a few moments, a recurring Shabbat, to soften, open, surrender, relax, and receive.

Blessing and Being Blessed: Birkat Kohanim and Blessing as a Spiritual Practice

³⁷ Ibid., p. 48.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 49.

Having discussed the central importance of the posture of receptivity I want now, in a sense, to turn our discussion on its head and consider how what we have discovered might be applicable more generally to a practice of blessing and to the very stance of the blesser. That is: having considered ourselves as the blessed, can we take what we have learned and become in turn blessers ourselves—making Birkat Kohanim, in an extended way, a more everyday and widespread practice for ourselves and others? Doing so is not an innovation, but rather an extension of two pre-existing liturgical facts surrounding Birkat Kohanim.

The first is the fact that the priests themselves are blessed in their very blessing. As we learn in the Talmud:

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi also said, “Every *kohen* who pronounces the benediction is himself blessed, but if he does not pronounce it he is not blessed, as it is said, ‘I will bless them that bless you.’” Rabbi Joshua ben Levi also said, “Any *kohen* who refuses to ascend the platform transgresses three positive commandments, namely: ‘Thus shall you bless,’ ‘Say to them,’ and ‘So shall they put My name [and I will bless them].’”³⁹

The priests themselves are blessed in their blessing, but only if they themselves bless. Here the priest is the receiver of the blessing but also its channel—and his receptivity, the passive aspect, is dependent on his blessing, his active aspect. Indeed, the blessing itself is described as a “performative commandment” (that is, as a positive commandment, one of the *mitzvot aseih*) in three ways,⁴⁰ one that must be actively done in order to be fulfilled. The priest can then be both active and passive at the same time, both calling down and also receiving the blessing.

³⁹ B. Sotah 38b (quoting Genesis 12:3 and Numbers 6:23, 27), based on the Soncino Press translation, trans. A. Cohen (London: Soncino Press, 1936).

⁴⁰ “Thus shall you bless,” “Say to them,” and “So shall they put My name [and I will bless them]” are all distinct positive commandments according to the Talmud.

This stance of the priest is reflected in the stance of praying Jew who, in reciting the Sim Shalom prayer (the final blessing of the Amidah, which immediately follows the Priestly Blessing), mirrors Birkat Kohanim itself.⁴¹ Let us compare the two blessings.

The Priestly Blessing	Sim Shalom
<p>May the Eternal <i>ble</i>ss you and guard you. May the Eternal <i>sh</i>ine (<i>ya-eir</i>) <i>God's face</i> upon you and be <i>gracious</i> to you. May the Eternal lift <i>God's face</i> to you and grant you <i>peace</i>.”</p>	<p>Place <i>peace</i>, goodness and <i>ble</i>ssing; life, grace, lovingkindness and compassion, upon us and on all the people Israel. Bless all of us as one, our Father, with the <i>light (or) of Your face</i>. For by the light of <i>Your face</i> you have given us, Eternal our God, a Torah of life, love of kindness, charity, blessing, compassion, life, and <i>peace</i>. May it be good in <i>Your eyes</i> to bless all of Israel at every time and every hour with <i>Your peace</i>. Blessed are You, Eternal, who blesses the people Israel with <i>peace</i>.</p>

The Sim Shalom prayer, in its repetition of almost every element of the Priestly Blessing—its particular echoing of the illumined face of God, and its parallel conclusion with the blessing of peace—can be seen as a kind of extended adaption of the Priestly Blessing for the lay practitioner. Whether in a liturgical context that includes the Priestly Blessing or not, the lay practitioner similarly requests blessing for oneself and one’s people. The Sim Shalom prayer, in this sense, is thus a kind of extension of the Priestly Blessing, the receiving of blessing from outside into lay practice, where the lay practitioner continues the practice of blessing for oneself and one’s people.

This process is paralleled in the Tibetan practice we have been exploring. Makransky instructs, following the receiving of the blessing from the benefactors, as follows:

After a little while, join your benefactors in their wish for you. While receiving the radiance of their love, mentally repeat the wish for yourself, using words like these: “May this one have deepest well-being, happiness, and joy.” Affirm the words repeatedly in your mind. Try to mean them as you say them, just as your benefactors mean them for you. Like everyone else in this world, you most deeply need and deserve happiness and well-being. Repeat the wish for yourself while

⁴¹ See Michael Fishbane’s comments in this regard in “Form and Reformulation of the Biblical Priestly Blessing [Num 6:23],” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103:1 (1983), p. 120.

accepting your benefactors' love even more deeply into body and mind,
communing with them through its radiance.⁴²

Similarly, in the Sim Shalom prayer, we are invited to join in the well-wishing of the priests' channeling of the divine blessing. We ourselves becomes, as we are, one of a "kingdom of priests" (Exodus 19:6).

This points to the way in which the practice of blessing—in our prayer life (where the Amidah, the "prayer" *par excellence*, is structured as a series of blessings) and in our spiritual life more broadly—can be a powerful spiritual practice. It encourages us to take seriously the blessing of ourselves and others with love and well-wishing, whatever our metaphysical positions, as a transformative practice of love, protection, and peace. That is, we are to understand our own practice of blessing, though structurally different and lacking many of the elements of the Priestly Blessing, as parallel to those blessings themselves. By this I mean that even in our own enactment of blessings, passivity, dependence, and receptivity are crucial and are the very mechanisms by which the healing of the blessing is manifested, the way that the love, protection, and peace come into the world.

We can see this clearly in the instructions that Rabbi Kalonymus Kalmish Shapira, the Piaseczner Rebbe (1889–1943), gives concerning a blessing practice he teaches, a practice of cultivating certain qualities by saying phrases that invite in those qualities. He teaches concerning the repetition of a particular phrase: "One repeats this several times, but not forcefully. The whole point here is to quiet one's thoughts. Speaking with great forcefulness is liable to arouse the self;⁴³ rather on the contrary, one utters the phrase with great gentleness."⁴⁴ Here, in the saying of the blessing itself, in the calling down of the change or the inviting in of

⁴² Makransky, *Awakening Through Love*, pp. 26–27.

⁴³ The Hebrew for "self" here is *anokhi-ut*, literally "I-ness."

⁴⁴ "The Subject of Quietening," in *Derekh Ha-melekh* (Jerusalem: Va-ad Haseidei Piaseczno, 1995), p. 451.

the quality, one still takes on a stance of receptivity. The words must be said gently. It is not a practice of strength and force, but rather a kind of receptive activity. There is a kind of non-self action here, which acts and blesses in a way that is consonant with the receptive and dependent stance of the receiver of blessings. Even in our own action, in our own blessing and cultivation, premeditated “autonomous” acts, the blessings only works, the Piaseczner Rebbe tells us, when we approach this act with a passive, inviting, and soft texture, sans any illusion of control.

In this way, the Priestly Blessing is a model more broadly for a kind of spiritual practice that can be present in our lives, however often we are actually able to experience the ritual of the blessings themselves. We can actualize this model in our traditional prayer lives, as well as in concrete meditative practices of blessing and cultivation—both blessing and being blessed—as ways to manifest the love, protection, and peace of the Priestly Blessing, as well as innumerable other qualities. At the same time, we can bring a new intention and presence to the ritual of Birkat Kohanim itself, opening ourselves more fully to receiving the blessings that are offered and channeled to us. In both cases, we are presented with the possibility of being held in something wider and deeper than our normal small sense of self, something beyond the “me” that is desperately striving to control and dominate the world. In both cases, we are given the possibility of truly receiving blessing and, in that receiving, being healed.