

Birkat Kohanim • ברכת כהנים

According to the Mishnah (Tamid 7:2), at the end of the daily service in the Temple, the priests would stand on the stairs leading to the inner courtyard, raise their hands, and bless the assembled worshipers with the three verses in Bamidbar 6:24-26. After the destruction of the Temple, the verses of Birkat Kohanim remained in the daily prayers as part of the final blessing of the Amidah. Outside of Israel and Egypt, however, Birkat Kohanim is only performed by Ashkenazic Jews in Musaf on Rosh haShanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot (days 1 and 2), Shemini Atzeret, Pesach (days 1, 2, 7, and 8), and Shavuot (both days). It is also done in Shacharit of Simchat Torah (since many people make kiddush after getting an aliyah on Simchat Torah, and Birkat Kohanim may not be offered by a kohen who has consumed alcohol). *Birkat Kohanim is still done if any of these days fall out on Shabbat; the tune, however, is omitted in that case.*

During the repetition of the Musaf Amidah on these days (and in Shacharit on Simchat Torah), after the קדושה, Kohanim and Levi'im leave to prepare for Birkat Kohanim. In addition to going over the procedure at this point, it is important to review the tune for Birkat Kohanim, so that everyone can sing it together. Also, Kohanim should all have **large tallitot** - it should be sufficient to cover your face and outstretched hands. If you need a tallit, ask and someone will gladly lend you theirs. Before hand-washing, Kohanim should **loosen their shoelaces** - later they can then be removed without using hands. Otherwise, shoes can be removed now. **Levi'im pour water** over the hands of the Kohanim (this is done even on Yom Kippur, when otherwise we don't wash). If no Levi'im are present, a first-born may do this. If not, each kohen should wash their own hands. No blessing is said over this washing, nor is the washing done in the usual *netilat yadayim* style.

After drying their hands, Kohanim should return to services. With the exception of Yom Kippur (when Musaf is very long), it is important to return quickly before the end of Musaf is reached. In addition, on Rosh HaShanah (when not on Shabbat) the shofar is blown during the repetition of the Amidah, so Kohanim and Levi'im should be sure to return in time to hear that. Kohanim should **remove their shoes without use of hands** before re-entering the room (or they can remove them inside the room if they are careful to place them under a chair where they will be out of the way).

When the leader starts the paragraph רצה (the first of the last three blessings of the Amidah), Kohanim should **proceed up to the front** of the room and **stand in a line in front of the congregation and facing the ark**. At the end of this paragraph, the congregation and the Kohanim recite the following paragraph, which is only said when Birkat Kohanim is performed in Musaf:

וְתַעֲרַב לְפָנֶיךָ עֵתִירָתֵנוּ כְּעוֹלָה וּכְקָרְבָן. אֲנֵא, רַחוּם, בְּרַחֲמֶיךָ הַרְבִּים הֵשֵׁב שְׂכִינְתְּךָ לְצִיּוֹן עִירְךָ, וְסִדֵּר הָעֲבוּדָה לִירוּשָׁלַיִם. וְתַחֲזִינָה עֵינֵינוּ בְּשׁוֹבְךָ לְצִיּוֹן בְּרַחֲמִים, וְשֵׁם נַעֲבֹדְךָ בְּיָרְאָה כִּימֵי עוֹלָם וּכְשָׁנִים קְדָמוֹנִיּוֹת.

The leader then repeats this paragraph and concludes with the blessing: שְׂאוֹתְךָ לְבָדְךָ בְּיָרְאָה נַעֲבֹד.... (On Simchat Torah, when this paragraph is not done, the leader concludes שְׂכִינְתוֹ לְצִיּוֹן as usual.) At this point, Kohanim **drape their tallitot over their head and hands**, and then they recite the following paragraph (מודים דרבנן) with the congregation:

מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ לָךְ, שְׂאֵתָהּ הוּא יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֱלֹהֵי כָל בָּשָׂר, יוֹצֵרנוּ, יוֹצֵר בְּרֵאשִׁית. בְּרֻכּוֹת וְהוֹדָאוֹת לְשִׁמְךָ הַגָּדוֹל וְהַקְּדוֹשׁ, עַל שֶׁחֲחִייתָנוּ וְקִיַּמְתָּנוּ. כִּן תַּחֲזִינוּ וְתַקִּימְנוּ, וְתַאֲסוּף גְּלִיּוֹתֵינוּ לְחֻצְרוֹת קְדִישָׁךְ, לְשִׁמּוֹר חֻקֶיךָ וְלַעֲשׂוֹת רְצוֹנְךָ, וְלַעֲבֹדְךָ בְּלִבְבֵנוּ שְׁלֵם, עַל שֶׁאֲנַחְנוּ מוֹדִים לָךְ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' הַהוֹדָאוֹת.

It is customary for Kohanim to offer the following short prayer here as well (quietly):

יְהִי רְצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שְׁתֵּהא הַבְּרָכָה הַזֹּאת שְׂצוּיֵתנוּ לְבָרֶךְ אֶת עַמְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּרָכָה שְׁלֵמָה, וְלֹא יִהְיֶה בָּהּ שׁוּם מְכַשׁוּל וְעוֹן מִעֲתָהּ וְעַד עוֹלָם.

After מוּדִים, the leader begins the next section quietly, and then calls out בְּהִנִּים, to which the congregation responds כְּאָמֹר - עַם קְדוֹשׁ - כְּאָמֹר. The Kohanim then **raise their hands** keeping the palms facing down (there should be a gap between the first two fingers and the thumb, as well as between those fingers and the other two) and recite the following blessing together:

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מִלֶּךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּקִדְּשָׁתוֹ שֶׁל אֶהְרֹן, וְצִוָּנוּ לְבָרֶךְ אֶת-עַמּוֹ
יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּאַהֲבָה.

When the Kohanim get to the word in bold (וְצִוָּנוּ), they **turn around to their right to face the congregation** while finishing the blessing. (This blessing must be recited by memory since a Kohen's hands must be up while reciting it, and hence holding a prayerbook or this sheet is not possible. If a Kohen cannot memorize the blessing, the next best thing to do is to listen carefully to the blessing made by the other Kohanim and answer "Amen" with the intent of fulfilling the obligation to make the blessing by so doing.)

After the congregation responds "Amen" to this blessing, the leader prompts the Kohanim with the words below. Kohanim repeat each word after the leader - however, for the last word in each line, the leader says the word, and the Kohanim sing a tune before repeating the word (*on Shabbat, no tune is done*).

יְבָרְכֶךָ יי וַיִּשְׁמְרֶךָ:
יָאֵר יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיַּחַנֶּךָ:
יִשָּׂא יי פָּנָיו אֵלֶיךָ וַיִּשֵׂם לְךָ שְׁלוֹם:

When repeating the words in bold, the Kohanim sway slightly, moving their arms left and right. The congregation responds "Amen" at the end of each of the three verses. After the congregation responds "Amen" to the final verse, the Kohanim **turn back** to their right to face the ark, and **lower their arms**. The leader then recites the paragraph beginning שִׁים שְׁלוֹם, and the Kohanim recite the following prayer:

רְבוּנוּ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, עֲשִׂינוּ מַה שְׁגִזְרַתְ עָלֵינוּ, אַף אַתָּה עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ כְּמַה שְׁהַבְטַחְתָּנוּ: הַשְׁקִיפָה מִמַּעוֹן קְדֹשְׁךָ,
מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם, וּבָרֶךְ אֶת עַמְךָ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֵת הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִתְּתָה לָנוּ — כְּאֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּעְתָּ לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ —
אֶרֶץ זָבַת חֶלֶב וּדְבָשׁ.

After the leader finishes the final blessing of the Amidah, Kohanim remove the tallitot from their heads and wear them normally. In general, Kohanim should stay up at the front until the end of the full Kaddish that follows the Amidah. Shoes can be put back on at this point; however, this should still be done without using hands, and the shoes should not be tied until after Aleinu. (On Sukkot, however, many congregations do *hoshanot* at this point in the service, in which case Kohanim can descend following the conclusion of the Amidah. On Simchat Torah when Hallel follows Shacharit, Kohanim should also leave at the end of the Amidah.)