

(b) Blessing the Congregation

After the chazan has concluded the brocho "hatov shimcho" he silently says the prayer "borcheinu babrocho" until he reaches the word "kohanim" which he says aloud. This is a call for the kohanim to turn to the congregation and bless them. Since "kohanim" is the plural, some rabbis say that if only one kohen is present he does not call at all. Others say that kohanim refers to the tribe, and one kohen is also part of the tribe. After the cantor has said "kohanim" the kohanim recite the brocho "He who has sanctified us with the holiness of Aharon and has commanded us to bless his nation Israel with love." Some rabbis are of the opinion that since the brocho is to Hashem the kohen should face the ark. Others say that since the mitzvah is to bless Israel face to face, the brocho too should be said facing the congregation. As a compromise some start the brocho facing the aron hakodesh and turn when reaching the word "vtzivanu" (he who has commanded us) and complete the brocho when facing the congregation. The kohen raises his hands and awaits the calling of the cantor. To insure that the kohen does not err in his blessing as a result of his concentration on the melody, the chazan recites the blessing and the kohen repeats after him word by word in a medium tone. Although it is unlikely that the kohen will err in the first word the cantor still calls "yevarechicho" so that the recitation of each word be uniform. Among Sephardic Jews the first word is not called out by the cantor. To include the entire congregation in his blessing the kohen turns to his left and then to his right as he recites the verses. Each of the three verses of birchas kohanim has two blessings. For the first he turns to the left and for the second to the right.

(c) The Song and Prayer

When duchaning, the kohen sings the blessings. The melody varies in different countries. The purpose of singing is three-fold. It is a means of awakening kavana, for music has deep roots in Jewish life and it awakens the innermost part of the heart. It is symbolic of the singing in the Temple. It affords the congregation time to say certain prayers. Between each verse the singing period is longer, during which time the congregation says the prayer "ribono shel olom." Upon completion of the blessing the cantor starts "sim shalom" and the kohen turns to the aron hakodesh and puts his hands down. He now prays that his blessing be fulfilled. G-d blesses Israel as a result of the kohen, and the kohen too is blessed for bestowing this blessing on Israel. The cantor recites the kaddish and the kohanim leave the platform and are greeted with "yasher koach" — may you be strengthened," an expression of gratitude for the blessing. In addition this alludes to the fact that it is a mitzvah for the congregation to seek that they be blessed by the kohen. The kohen has thus assisted them in this area.

It is interesting to note that in the past decade birchas kohanim has taken a new dimension in Israel, whereby several hundred kohanim bless Israel by the kosel Maaravi (western wall). A blessing coming from hundreds is stronger than when coming from a few.