

CHAPTER I — *Preparing for the Mitzvah*

(a) Washing

Before the kohen ascends the duchar to bless those assembled he must wash his hands. The purpose of this washing is two-fold; it is a means of purification so that they may be fit for the blessing and it symbolizes the service in the Beis Hamikdosh which required washing. Among Ashkenazic Jews all the Leviyim assemble to wash the hands of the kohanim with each Levi washing the hands of one kohen. Among Sephardim only one Levi officiates and washes the hands of all the Kohanim. If there is no Levi then a bchor (first born) substitutes for the Levi. If there is no bchor, the kohen washes his own hands. First the Levi fills a cup of water which contains at least five ounces. He then pours it over the right hand of the kohen so that the hand is washed as far as the wrist. He then does the same to the left. No brocho is recited for this washing. Despite the fact that the kohen does not perform the mitzvah until the conclusion of "hatov shimcha" he washes his hands right after kedusha so that he may have ample time to prepare for the mitzvah. Once the hands have been washed he must not touch his shoes or any normally covered part of the body so as not to necessitate another washing. Therefore the kohen loosens the laces of his shoes before washing and slides them off as he gets ready to ascend the duchar.

(b) Removing the Shoes

After the Levi has washed the hands of the kohen he accompanies him to the duchar. This is a means of honoring one who is performing a mitzvah. Before ascending the duchar the kohen removes his shoes. The removal of shoes was proclaimed in Talmudic times by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai to avoid casting a suspicion on the authenticity of the kohen. A kohen might have to descend from the duchar to tie his laces causing him to miss part of birchas kohanim. This might cause them to question the kohen's authenticity. Although this decree was primarily designed for the laced shoe it is customary to remove all shoes as a symbol of the duchar in the Beis Hamikdosh, where the kohen was required to remove his shoes when standing on holy ground. If the kohen is in ill health slippers are permissible. After the kohen has removed his shoes he places them under a bench so that they may not be seen.

(c) Ascending the Duchar

As the chazan reaches "rtzay" in the tfillah, the kohen ascends the duchar. As noted earlier the duchar is a raised platform in front of the aron hakodesh. The elevation is symbolic of the duchar in the Beis Hamikdosh. Ascending at this point in the service is also reminiscent of the Temple where after the sacrifices the kohen blessed the Israelites. This also places birchas kohanim after the main part of the prayer before the brocho of "sim sholom", for the ending of this blessing is also peace. After arriving on the platform the kohen recites a prayer asking Hashem that his blessing be accepted. He stands facing the ark until the cantor calls "kohanim." If for some reason the kohen is unable to duchar he should leave the synagogue before "rtzay."