

CHAPTE II — *Performing the mitzvah.*

The actual mitzvah of birchas kohanim may be divided into two parts; raising the hands and reciting the verses stated in Bamidbar 6 24-26.

(a) Positioning the Hands

Inasmuch as there are two phases to the mitzvah it is called by two names: "nsias kapayim" — raising the hands and "birchas kohanim" — blessing the congregation. First the kohen stretches out his hands at shoulder height with the palm facing the ground and the outer part of his hand the sky. This position is symbolic of a father blessing his son. Since raising the hands is part of the mitzvah the brocho "he who has sancitfied us" etc. is recited prior to lifting the hands.

Another aspect in positioning the hands is the forming of five spaces or windows between the fingers. The spacings are symbolic of Hashem's presence during the blessing as King Solomon says in Shir Hashirim "maytzitz min hacharakim," Hashem observes from between the small openings. There are six views amongst the rabbis as to what constitutes the five spaces. Consequently the custom of one congregation may differ from another. The kohanim of the same congregation should use the same position. The views are as follows: (1) The fingers of the pinky and ringmaster are joined as well as the pointer and index. Each hand has two spaces; one between the ringmaster and pointer and the second between the index finger and the thumb. The fifth space is between the thumb of the right and left hands. The right hand is slightly higher than the left. (2) A second view uses the first four spacings, but substitutes the fifth with the joining of the thumbs at the central bone thereby creating a space above the connecting point. The difficulty with this view is that the thumbs are not straight as the other fingers are. (3) Some form the fifth space by connecting the thumb at the very top with the right resting on top of the left. (4) A fourth view connects the top of the index finger of the right to the top of the index finger of the left. (5) Some rabbis suggest that all fingers be apart hence each hand has four spacings and the fifth is between the hands. (6) The final view is that all fingers are apart but in an upward position with the palm of one hand facing the palm of the other hand.

Both the kohanim and the Israelites may not look at the hands of the kohen when duchaning for the spirit of Hashem rests between his fingers. In addition this tends to distract our attention. As a precautionary measure it is customary for both the kohen and the Israelites to raise their taleisim over their heads so that the hands of the kohen is covered and their view is obstructed.