



The End of the Amidah: A Blessing from God

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In Parashat Naso we read what is known as the Priestly Blessing, or Birkat Kohanim (Numbers 6:24-26). This is a moment in which God blesses Israel, through the medium of the priests. This 15-word blessing became one of the most important liturgical pieces in Jewish tradition. Indeed, this serves as part of the conclusion to the public recitation of the morning Amidah.¹ How are we meant to understand this blessing in the context of our prayers?

The Amidah is structured as a direct communication by the worshiper to God, marked by the second person address “You.” Indeed, the second word of the Amidah is “You,” and every blessing in the series concludes with “Blessed are You.” When we pray to God, we speak **to** God, not about God. We all have direct access to God through our words.

But is this a monologue with only one speaking partner, or a dialogue in which God also addresses us? Structurally, Birkat Kohanim answers this question. It is God’s response to

¹ In most cases the blessing is not recited in the afternoon. For some exceptions, see Talmud Bavli Sotah 39b-40a. Contrast R. Meir’s opinion that it was recited after all Amidot (Bavli Ta’anit 26b). For more on what serves as the conceptual end of the Amidah, see my essay on Parashat Tzav, “The Eternal Nature of Gratitude,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/eternal-nature-gratitude>.



us—a direct address to the people (mediated by the priests) in which God blesses us.

This mediated encounter between the people and God is emphasized in the talmudic discussion about how the priests are meant to direct themselves when channeling the blessing to the people.² The Talmud considers the possibility that the priests should not face the people when reciting this blessing in the synagogue, but rather face the back of their necks.³ This would symbolize an inability to directly encounter the Divine presence in prayer, either because of the potential intensity or the respect due to God. But the Talmud rejects this option explicitly:

Talmud Bavli Sotah 38a

Another teaching: “Thus shall you [priests] bless [the children of Israel; say to them]”—face to face. You say face to face, or perhaps it is face to the back of the neck? Scripture teaches: “Say to them”—like a person who speaks to their fellow.

תלמוד בבלי סוטה לח.

תניא אידך: "כה תברכו" - פנים כנגד פנים, אתה אומר: פנים כנגד פנים, או אינו אלא פנים כנגד עורף? ת"ל: אמור להם, כאדם האומר לחבירו.

We are meant to receive this blessing while directly facing the priests. Just as when a person speaks to another person, they face each other, so, too, this blessing is delivered as part of a face to face dialogue. Our relationship with God as expressed in prayer is one in which we stand and face each other, as opposed to lying prostrate or bowing throughout the recitation.⁴

² For more on the posture of the priests during Birkat Kohanim, see my colleague R. Shai's essay on Parashat Naso, "On Channeling and Receiving Blessing," printed in *The Heart of Torah*, and available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/channeling-and-receiving-blessing>.

³ This is Rashi's understanding in Bavli Sotah 38a, s.v. או אינו: the people would turn their back to the priests. For the possibility that the priests would turn their back to the people (and face the sanctuary), see Ma'aseh Rokei'ah to Hilkhhot Tefilah 14:3.

⁴ The Talmud considers the possibility that we should remain in a bowed position when we recite God's name in the Amidah, but rejects this in favor of an orientation in which we are standing tall before God. See Bavli Berakhot 12a. For this understanding of the Amidah generally, see Uri Ehrlich, *The Nonverbal Language of Prayer*, trans. Dena Ordan (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2004).



However, the choreography of the priestly blessing has the potential to be confusing: it might look like the priests—rather than God—are blessing us. After all, it is the priests who recite the liturgy, and whom God directs to bless the people (“Thus shall you [priests] bless Israel”). But a number of *midrashim*, based on a later verse that states “And I [God] will bless them” (Numbers 6:27) emphasize: it is God who blesses us:

Sifrei Bemidbar #43, ed. Kahana, p. 126
ספרי במדבר מג

“I will bless them”—so that Israel won’t say: our blessings depend on the priests, Scripture taught “I will bless them”

"אני אברכם", שלא יהיו ישראל אומרים ברכותינו תלויות בכהנים ת"ל "ואני אברכם", שלא יהיו הכהנים אומרים אנו נברך את ישראל ת"ל "ואני אברכם" אני אברך את עמי ישראל.

So that the priests won’t say: “we bless Israel,” Scripture taught: “I will bless them”—I will bless My nation Israel.

It is God, not the priests, who is the source of the blessing. Applied to the Amidah, it is God, not the priests, who responds to our prayers with a blessing.

Another *midrash* offers a clear—if daring—image of what is happening in the moment of priestly blessing: God stands **behind** the priests and is channeled through them:

Midrash Tanhuma Naso 8
מדרש תנחומא נשא ח

Israel said to the Holy Blessed One, “Master of the universe: You told the priests to bless us, but we need Your blessing, to be blessed directly from Your mouth...!”

אמרה כנסת ישראל לפני הקדוש ברוך הוא רבש"ע לכהנים אתה אומר שיברכו אותנו אין אנו צריכין אלא לברכתך ולהיותנו מתברכין מפ"ך ...

The Holy Blessed One responded, “Even though I told the priests to bless you, I stand with them and bless you.”

אמר להם הקדוש ברוך הוא אף על פי שאמרתי לכהנים שיהו מברכין אתכם אני עומד עמהם ומברך אתכם



In this *midrash*, Israel begs God for a direct blessing; they are disappointed that the priests—not God—seem to be offering a blessing. But God reassures them that the blessing actually comes from God, who is, in fact, very close. Indeed, as described in the continuation of this text, God is standing right behind the priests, as it were.

Therefore the priests spread their fingers in order to say:
The Holy Blessed One stands behind us. Thus it says,
“Behold this one stands behind the wall, looking through
the window, peering through the cracks.” (Song of Songs
2:9). Through the fingers of the priests God “peers through
the cracks”—when the priests spread their hands...

לפיכך הכהנים פורשין את כפיהם לומר
שהקב"ה עומד אחרינו, וכן הוא אומר (שיר
השירים ב:ט) "הנה זה עומד אחר כתלנו
משגיח מן החלונות מציץ מן החרכים" מה
בין אצבעות של כהנים מציץ מן החרכים
בשעה שפושטין כפיהם...

The priests are meant to stretch out their hands and spread their fingers in such a way that it resembles a lattice work.⁵ In this *midrash*, God peers through their hands—like the lover peers through the lattice in Song of Songs—looking directly at the people of Israel during the blessing. God is positioned behind the priests as they bless, and the priests are simply the conduit through which God blesses us directly.⁶

The structure of the 19 blessings of the Amidah, then, is one in which I offer praise (blessings 1-3), then make requests of God (blessings 4-17), and finally offer my gratitude to God (Modim, blessing 18); next, I receive a blessing from God in response (Birkat Kohanim). Sim Shalom (blessing 19) functions as a coda to Birkat Kohanim. This structure of the end of the Amidah is made explicit in one part of the Mishnah that describes the order of the Amidah:

⁵ The five spaces between their fingers is a play on the word “ה-חרכים - the cracks,” which is read as חרכים-ה: five (the numerical value of the letter *heh*) cracks. See broadly on this point Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1998), vol. 6, pp. 23ff.

⁶ For more on this image, see my essay on Parashat Tetzaveh, “The Intimacy of Wearing God’s Name,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/intimacy-wearing-god>.



Mishnah Rosh HaShanah 4:5

The order of the blessings are:

Avot (Ancestors), Gevurot (Powers), and Kedushat HaShem (the holiness of the name)... and say: Avodah (Service), Hoda'ah (Thankfulness), and **Birkat Kohanim**.

משנה ראש השנה ד:ה

סדר ברכות אומר אבות

וגבורות וקדושת השם ...

ואומר עבודה והודאה וברכת

כהנים

Notice that, as the Mishnah describes it, Birkat Kohanim (not Sim Shalom) is the final part of the Amidah. It follows directly on the heels of the Modim blessing.⁷ Sim Shalom, the final blessing in today's Amidah, is more of a literary coda to Birkat Kohanim than a separate blessing.⁸ Indeed, Birkat Kohanim ends by asking God to grant peace (וישם לך שלום), and the next prayer reinforces that request with similar language (שים שלום). The essence of the end of the Amidah is in fact the priestly blessing, a moment when God's voice of blessing emerges.⁹

Prayer is meant to be an intimate conversation with God. For me, it is sometimes hard that I,

⁷ Some scholars attempted to understand "*birkat kohanim*" in this Mishnah as referring to Sim Shalom, not Birkat Kohanim (see, for example Joseph Heinemann, *Ha-Tefillah Bi-Tkufat Ha-Tannaim Ve-Ha-Amoraim* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1966), p. 23, n. 10. See also Rambam Perush Ha-Mishnah to Mishnah Tamid 5:1, ed. Kafih, p. 277, who says this refers to Sim Shalom, because Birkat Kohanim itself comes later in Tamid 6:5. But others claim that "*birkat kohanim*" in this Mishnah refers to the Priestly Blessing. See Louis Ginzberg, *Perushim Ve-Hiddushim Be-Yerushalmi* (New York: JTS, 1941), vol. 3, p. 28, n. 34; Louis Finkelstein, "The Development of the Amidah," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 16 (1925-26), p. 21, n. 48, and p. 39, n. 86. Indeed, David Henschke definitively rejects the possible understanding of the Mishnah as referring to Sim Shalom: see "Le-Toldot Tefillat Ha-Amidah," *Tarbiz* 84 (2016), p. 363-365 and n. 89; Henschke, "Tefillat Kohanim U-Birkhatam Ba-Mikdash," in *Ke-Tavor Be-Harim* (Alon Shevut: Herzog, 2013), pp. 60-61.

⁸ See Mateh Moshe Laws of Prayer #176. See also the connection between Sim Shalom and Numbers 6:27 (the verse following Birkat Kohanim) identified in Bavli Megillah 18a. See further on the linguistic connections between Numbers 6:26 and Sim Shalom: R"i bar Yakar, ed. Yerushalmi, pp. 66-67; Seligmann Baer, *Seder Avodat Yisrael*, p. 103. David Henschke argues ("Le-Toldot Tefillat Ha-Amidah," p. 374) that Sim Shalom was a substitute—not a response—to Birkat Kohanim.

⁹ Although common practice is that the Birkat Kohanim is only recited by the leader performing the repetition, there were some communities in which the individual worshiper recited these verses in the silent Amidah. See Etz Hayyim of R. Yaakov Hazan, ed. Brodie, p. 90; Darkei Moshe to Orach Hayyim 127; Rema OH 127:3; Magen Avraham 121:3; Minhagot Vermaiza (Kirchheim), ed. Mordechai Peles (Jerusalem: Machon Yerushalayim, 1987), p. 36.





and not God, am doing all the talking; I am the one saying “You.” God sometimes feels like a silent partner in this supposed conversation. The role of Birkat Kohanim in the context of the Amidah offers another view: God does respond to my requests—with a blessing. The priests themselves are not offering a blessing to the children of Israel, but instead are the channel through which God responds directly to my prayer. It is true that God’s voice, as it were, is moderated through human priests (as it is in Parashat Naso as well). And yet, God’s blessing emerges. To me, this is a powerful way to conclude Judaism’s most central prayer.

