



Delighting in the Amazing Revelation of Rav Amram Gaon

They Instituted Reciting Birkas Kohanim after Berachos HaTorah to Teach Us that Studying the 60 Masechtos Blesses a Person with the 60 Letters of Birkas Kohanim

In this essay, we will focus on the mitzvas aseh of Birkas Kohanim, which appears in this week's parsha, parshas Nasso (Bamidbar 6, 22):

"וידבר ה' אל משה לאמר, דבר אל אהרן ואל בניו לאמר, כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם, יברכך ה' וישמרך, יאר ה' פניו אליך ויחנך, ישא ה' פניו אליך וישם לך שלום, ושמז את שמי על בני ישראל ואני אברכם."

And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying, "Thus shall you bless Bnei Yisrael. Say to them, 'May Hashem bless you and protect you. May Hashem shine His Countenance upon you and find favor with you. May Hashem lift His Countenance toward you and bring you peace.'" They will place My Name on Bnei Yisrael, and I will bless them.

The importance of Birkas Kohanim is evident from Chazal's institution to recite them every morning, immediately after reciting Berachos HaTorah. This teaches us that it is essential to study Torah immediately after reciting Berachos HaTorah, without any interruption. Therefore, immediately after reciting the Berachos related to Torah-study, they instituted reciting these pesukim from Torah she'b'chsav and a Mishnah from Torah she'b'al peh (Peiah 1, 1): "אלו דברים שאין להם שיעור"—**these are things for which there is no prescribed measure.**

Clearly, they chose this specific Mishnah, because it emphasizes the tremendous merit of studying Torah: "ותלמוד"—**but the study of Torah is equal to them all.** What, however, was their rationale for choosing the pesukim of Birkas Kohanim specifically to represent Torah she'b'chsav?

Evidently, these pesukim have a special significance related to the entire Torah.

One Who Studies the 60 Masechtos Is Blessed with the 60 Letters of Birkas Kohanim

We will begin to shed some light on the subject by introducing a teaching from the siddur of Rav Amram Gaon. He explains why the sages chose to learn the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim immediately after reciting the Berachos of the Torah. As we know, Torah she'b'al peh is comprised of sixty masechtos. This is taught in the Midrash Rabbah related to the passuk (Shir HaShirim 6, 8): "שישים המה מלכות, אלו שישים מסכתות של הלכות"—**there are sixty queens"; these are the sixty masechtos of halachos.** Now, Birkas Kohanim is comprised of 60 letters corresponding to the 60 masechtos that comprise Torah she'b'al peh. This teaches us that a person who studies the 60 masechtos merits the blessings conveyed by the 60 letters of Birkas Kohanim. Hence, the sages instituted learning this mitzvah immediately after reciting the Berachos for Torah-study.

As a loyal servant in the presence of his master, I would like to elaborate on his sacred words. I would like to explain the connection between the 60 masechtos and the 60 letters in Birkas Kohanim based on HKB"H's designation of Aharon and his sons as his agents to bless Yisrael. Let us refer to the Midrash on this week's parsha (Bamidbar Rabbah 11, 7):

"רבי שמעון בן חלפתא אמר, גדול שלום שאין כלי מקבל ברכה אלא שלום, שנאמר ה' יברך את עמו בשלום, אף בברכת כהנים אחר כל ברכות שיימן בשלום וישם לך שלום, לומר שאין הברכות מועילות כלום אלא אם כן שלום עמהם."

Rabbi Shimon ben Chalafta said: Shalom is exceptional; for, it is the only vessel capable of retaining berachah, as it states (Tehillim 29, 11): “Hashem will bless His nation with shalom.” So, too, with Birkas Kohanim. After all of the Berachos (of Birkas Kohanim), He concluded them with shalom—“He will bring you shalom” (peace)—to teach that the Berachos only serve a purpose if they are accompanied by shalom.

Let us explain. Shalom is the only vessel capable of receiving and preserving berachah. Hence, all of the Berachos are worthless and meaningless without shalom. It is analogous to drawing water from a well with a bucket full of holes and cracks. Whatever water is drawn from the well will spill out onto the ground. Therefore, HKB”H concluded Birkas Kohanim with the berachah of shalom: **“וישם לך שלום”—and He will bring you peace.** This is consistent with the principle (Berachos 12a): **“הכל הולך אחר החיתום”—everything follows the conclusion (of the berachah).** So, if shalom prevails among Yisrael, then they possess the vessel necessary to retain all of the Berachos contained in Birkas Kohanim.

Birkas Kohanim Is in the Merit of Aharon

Now, we learn a very important principle in the Gemara (B.M. 107b): **“קשוט עצמך ואחר כך קשוט אחרים”—first correct yourself and only afterwards correct others.** In other words, to confer the berachah of shalom on others, one must have first perfected the midah of shalom in oneself. When Aharon passed away, the Torah says (Bamidbar 20, 29): **“ויראו כל העדה כי גוע ויבכו את אהרן ויבכו את אהרן שלשים יום כל בית ישראל”—the entire assembly witnessed that Aharon had perished; they wept for Aharon thirty days—the entire house of Yisrael.** Rashi comments: Everyone grieved over Aharon’s death, both the men and the women, since he was the ultimate peacemaker—he promoted shalom and amity among disputants, including husbands and wives. Along these lines, we learn in the Mishnah (Avos 1, 12): **“הלל אומר, הוי מתלמידי של אהרן, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את ה’—Hillel says: Be among the disciples of Aharon—love peace and promote peace, love your fellow creatures and bring them closer to Torah.** In other words, Aharon epitomized the midah shalom; it was his trademark. In Avos D’Rabbi Nasan, we learn (12, 3):

When two people were quarreling with one another, Aharon would go and sit next to one of them. He would say to him: My son, look at the anguish your friend is experiencing! His heart is torn asunder, and he is tearing at his clothes. He

is saying, “How can I face my old friend? I am so ashamed; I betrayed his trust.” Aharon would sit with him until his rage subsided. Then Aaron would go to the other one. And he would say to him: My son, look at the anguish your friend is experiencing! His heart is torn asunder, and he is tearing at his clothes. He is saying, “How can I face my old friend? I am so ashamed; I betrayed his trust.” Thus, Aharon would sit with him until his rage subsided. Consequently, when these two saw each other, they would embrace and kiss one another. This is the implication of the passuk: “They wept for Aharon thirty days—the entire house of Yisrael.”

No one else epitomized the midah of shalom as did Aharon HaKohen, who is lauded as: **“אוהב שלום ורודף שלום”—lover of shalom and promoter of shalom.** Therefore, he was the best suited to bestow upon Yisrael the Birkas Kohanim which concludes with the berachah of shalom. This explains very nicely why all three of the three Berachos of Birkas Kohanim employ the name **Havaya**: **“יברכך ה’ וישמרך”, “יאר ה’ פניו אליך”, “ישא ה’ פניו אליך”.** For, we learn in the Gemara (Shabbas 10b) that one of the names of HKB”H is Shalom, as it states (Shoftim 6, 24): **“ויקרא לו ה’ שלום”—he called Him Hashem Shalom (the G-d of peace).**

We will endeavor to explain the connection of the name **Havaya** with the midah of shalom based on a teaching in the Tikunei Zohar (Introduction 9b). We learn that the name **Havaya**—the four-letter ineffable name—is derived from the first letters of the passuk (Tehillim 96, 11): **“ישמחו ה’ שמים ויתגל ה’ ארץ”—the heavens will be glad, and the earth will rejoice.** This passuk indicates that HKB”H establishes shalom between the inhabitants up above in the heavens and the inhabitants down below on earth. Along these lines, we have learned in the Gemara (Berachos 16b): **“רב ספרא בתר צלותיה אמר הכי, יהי רצון מלפניך ה’ אלקינו שתשים שלום בפמליא של מעלה ובפמליא של מטה”—after praying, Rav Safra, would say the following: “May it be Your will, Hashem our G-d, that You establish peace in the heavenly assembly and in the assembly below.”** Hence, at the conclusion of Birkas Kohanim, HKB”H declares: **“They will place My Name on Bnei Yisrael, and I will bless them.”** As a result of their uttering My name of shalom, I will bestow the berachah of shalom upon the people.

The Berachah Recited by the Kohanim

We will now focus on the formula of the berachah recited by the kohanim prior to blessing the people. This formula is mentioned in the Gemara (Sotah 39a) and is the basis for the

halachic ruling in the Tur and the Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 128, 11): **ברוך אתה ה' אלקינו מלך העולם אשר קדשנו בקדושתו של אהרן וצונו לברך את עמו ישראל באהבה. Blessed are You, Hashem, our G-d, King of the universe, Who has sanctified us with the kedushah of Aharon and has commanded us to bless His people, Yisrael, with ahavah.** It states explicitly that the kedushah of the kohanim is attributable entirely to the fact that they are the offspring of Aharon HaKohen. This is especially true of their designation to recite the Birkas Kohanim, as Moshe is instructed explicitly: **“Speak to Aharon and his sons, saying.”** But where do we find that they were commanded to bless Yisrael with **“ahavah”**?

We can postulate that the formula: **“Who has sanctified us with the kedushah of Aharon”** is instructing us to emulate Aharon: **“Love peace and promote peace, love your fellow creatures and bring them closer to Torah.”** For, it was in the merit of this outstanding quality that Aharon was awarded the privilege and honor of this mitzvah—to bestow the berachah of shalom upon Yisrael. Similarly, since his priestly offspring were sanctified with his kedushah and indoctrinated to emulate him, they recite the words: **“And has commanded us to bless His people, Yisrael, with ahavah.”** It is their task to indoctrinate all of Yisrael to emulate the ways of Aharon—to love peace and promote peace. Hence, Birkas Kohanim concludes with the words: **“וישם לך שלום”—and He will bring you peace.**

This explains very nicely that which is brought down in the Shulchan Aruch HaRav and also in the Mishnah Berurah (O.C. 128, 37), which is based on a teaching in the Zohar hakadosh (Nasso 147b): **“כהן השונא את הציבור או הציבור שונאים אותו, סכנה היא לכהן אם ישא את כפיו, ולכן יצא מבית הכנסת, ועל זה תיקנו לברך את עמו ישראל באהבה. If a kohen despises the public or the public despises him, it is dangerous for that kohen to bless the people (spread his hands). Therefore, he should leave the Beis Kenesses. For this reason, they instituted the formula: “To bless His people Yisrael, with ahavah.”** In other words, woe to the kohen whose hateful thoughts contradict the intent of the berachah of **“He will bring you peace.”**

It Is Impossible to Receive the Torah without Shalom

With this understanding, let us now clarify the assertion of Rav Amram Gaon. He said that our blessed sages chose to learn the mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim immediately after reciting the Berachos for Torah-study, because it is in the merit of studying

the 60 masechtos that one merits the Berachos bestowed by the kohanim, which are comprised of 60 letters. It is apparent that it is impossible to attain Torah-knowledge and insights without the midah of shalom, as it is written (Mishlei 3, 17): **“דרכיה דרכי נועם וכל נתיבותיה שלום—her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are shalom.**

For this reason, HKB”H only gave Yisrael the Torah at Matan Torah after they united as one person with one heart. Let us refer to the Midrash (V.R. 9, 9): **“גדול השלום שבכל המסעות כתיב ויסעו: ויחגו, נוסעים במחלוקת וחונים במחלוקת, כיון שבאו כולם לפני הר סיני נעשו כולם חנייה אחת, הדא הוא דכתיב ויחן שם ישראל, ויחגו שם בני ישראל אין כתיב כאן, Great is shalom, for with regard to all of the journeys (in the midbar), it is written: “And they journeyed and they camped” (both in the plural)—they journeyed with dissension, and they camped with dissension. But when they all arrived at Har Sinai, they all became a single encampment. This is indicated by that which is written (Shemos 19, 2): “Yisrael camped (in the singular) there.” “Bnei Yisrael camped” (in the plural) is not written here, but rather: “Yisrael camped (in the singular) there.” Rashi (ibid.) describes this phenomenon with the metaphor: “As one man with one heart.”**

Along these lines, we find another Midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 11, 7): **“גדול השלום שניתן לאוהבי תורה שנאמר שלום רב לאוהבי תורתך, גדול השלום שניתן ללומדי תורה, שנאמר וכל בניך למודי ה' ורב שלום בויך. Great is shalom, for it was given to those who love the Torah. As it says (Tehillim 119, 165): “There is abundant shalom for those who love Your Torah.” Great is shalom, for it was given to those who study the Torah. As it says (Yeshayah 54, 13): “All your children will be students of Hashem, and your children’s shalom will be abundant.”** The message that shalom is a prerequisite for attaining the Torah is also conveyed by the passage in the Gemara (Yevamos 14b): **“אף על פי שנחלקו בית שמאי ובית הלל... לא נמנעו בית שמאי מלישא נשים מבית הלל ולא בית הלל מבית שמאי, ללמודך שחיבה וריעות נהגים זה בזה, לקיים מה שנאמר האמת והשלום אהבו. Even though Beis Shamai and Beis Hillel argued . . . Beis Shamai did not refrain from marrying women of Beis Hillel nor Beis Hillel of Beis Shamai. This serves to teach you that they treated each other with affection and kinship, in fulfillment of that which is stated (Zechariah 8, 19): “Love truth and shalom.”**

With this in mind, we can explain the elucidation in the Gemara (Kiddushin 30b) related to the passuk (Tehillim 127, 5): **“לא יבשו כי ידברו את אויבים בשער, מאי את אויבים בשער, אמר רבי חייא:”**

בר אבא, אפילו האב ובנו הרב ותלמידו שעוסקין בתורה בשער אחד, נעשים אויבים. **"They shall not be shamed when they speak with enemies in public places (literally: at the gate)." Who are the "enemies at the gate" referred to by the passuk? Rabbi Chiya bar Abba said: Even a father and his son, a Rav and his pupil, who are engaged in Torah-study at the same gate (in the same place of study); they become each other's adversaries; and they do not vacate their positions until they make loving peace with one another.** As we have learned, Torah cannot be attained or retained without shalom. Hence, if those engaged in Torah-study do not make peace with one another and love one another, they cannot divine the true meaning of the Torah.

This explains magnificently the choice of Rabeinu HaKadosh to conclude the six orders of the Mishnah with the berachah of shalom (Oktzin 3, 12): **"אמר רבי שמעון בר חלפתא, לא מצא הקב"ה כלי: "מחזיק ברכה לישראל אלא השלום, שנאמר (תהלים כט יא) ה' עוז לעמו יתן ה'." Rabbi Shimon bar Chalafta said: HKB"H did not find a vessel better suited for preserving berachah for Yisrael than shalom, as it states (Tehillim 29, 11): "Hashem will give His nation strength; Hashem will bless His nation with shalom."** The Tosafos Yom Tov explains the rationale of Rabeinu HaKadosh for concluding the Mishnayos with this passage as follows: **He wished to appease and arouse the hearts. For, although the Mishnayos are replete with controversy—the disputes between the sages—and a rash heart might think that their disputes stemmed from conflict and a lack of harmony; he teaches us that this was not the case. The Torah is a mighty vessel filled with Hashem's berachah—shalom. There is not a single iota of conflict or lack of harmony. As their statement (Kiddushin 30b) regarding the passuk (Tehillim 127, 5) reflects: "When they speak with enemies . . ." they appear to be enemies, but they ultimately become devoted friends. This certainly holds true for those who study Torah l'shema—not to be haughty or to show off in front of others.**

We can now appreciate why our blessed sages chose to learn the pesukim of Birkas Kohanim immediately after reciting the Berachos of the Torah. After all, the two are intimately related. In the merit of the berachah of shalom delivered by the descendants of Aharon—the lover and promoter of shalom—we are able to attain and comprehend the Torah, whose ways are pleasant, and all her paths are shalom. This is the message of the passuk

(Malachi 2, 7): **"כי שפתי כהן ישמרו דעת ותורה יבקשו מפיהו כי מלאך ה' צבאות: הוא." For the lips of the Kohen should safeguard knowledge, and people should seek teaching from his mouth; for he is an agent of Hashem, Master of Legions.**

The 60 Letters of Birkas Kohanim and the 60 Masechtos Allude to Shalom

It gives me great pleasure to add a delightful tidbit to the words of Rav Amram Gaon. Let us refer to the Mishnah (Ta'anis 26b): **"לא היו ימים טובים לישראל כט"ו באב"—Yisrael had no days as festive as ט"ו באב.** In Ohev Yisrael, the great Rabbi of Apta, zy"a, explains the allusion inherent in this statement based on what we learn later on in the Gemara (ibid. 31a): **"עתיד הקב"ה לעשות מחול לצדיקים, והוא יושב ביניהם בגן עדן, וכל אחד ואחד מראה באצבעו, שנאמר ואמר ביום ההוא הגה אלקיננו זה קוינו לו ויושיענו, זה ה' קוינו לו נגילה ונשמחה בישועתו." In the future HKB"H will make a circle of the tzaddikim and He will sit among them in Gan Eden; and each and every one will point his finger, as it says (Yeshayah 25, 9): "He shall say on that day, 'Behold! This is our G-d; we hoped to Him and He saved us; this is Hashem to Whom we hoped; let us exult and be glad in His salvation.'"**

In his own inimitable way, he explains the nature of the circle that HKB"H will make for the tzaddikim based on the principle that every tzaddik serves Hashem in his own distinct way. Although each one's way seems different and divergent from the others, in truth they are all valid and true--**"אלו ואלו דברי--אלקים חיים"**. For, every individual has a unique purpose and role to play in Olam HaZeh. Hence, in a circle, all the participants are equal; they are all equidistant from the center and they are all on the same level.

It is precisely for this reason that HKB"H will make a circle for the tzaddikim le'asid la'vo. Thus, He will demonstrate that they are all equal in His eyes; they all intended to serve Hashem devoutly, **"l'shem shamayim,"** each in his own way. Therefore, He will sit among them, in the center of the circle, and they will all point toward Him with their fingers—indicating that all of their actions were for the sake of serving Hashem. He was their focus and is the center of the circle.

In this manner, he interprets the allusion in Chazal's statement: **"ט"ו באב"**. The name ט"ו באב can be interpreted as the fifteenth (ט"ו) letter of the aleph-Beis (אב), which is the letter "samech"---ש---shaped

like a circle. Thus, it alludes to the circle that HKB”H will make for the tzaddikim in the future, demonstrating that they are all equal. Therefore, it is the most festive of days because there will be unity among all of the tzaddikim. This concludes his magnificent remarks.

Hashem Supports All the Fallen Ones with the Letter “Samech” Alluding to Shalom

Now, I would like to present to our royal audience an interpretation of a statement from Chazal in the Gemara (Berachos 4b) based on what we have learned:

”אמר רבי יוחנן, מפני מה לא נאמר נו”ן באשרי, מפני שיש בה מפלתן של שונאי ישראל, דכתיב נ’פלה לא תוסיף קום בתולת ישראל... אמר רב נחמן בר יצחק, אפילו הכי חזר דוד וסמכן ברוח הקודש, שנאמר ס’ומך ה’ לכל הנופלים.”

Rabbi Yochanan said: Why is the letter “nun” omitted in Ashrei? (Every passuk begins with a letter of the aleph-Beis in order; however, there is no passuk beginning with the letter “nun.”) **Because it alludes to the downfall of Yisrael, as it is written (Amos 5, 2): “She has fallen (נ’פלה) and will no longer rise—the maiden of Yisrael” . . . Rav Nachman bar Yitzchak said: Nevertheless, David proceeded to support them with “ruach hakodesh,” as it states (Tehillim 145, 14): “Hashem supports all those who have fallen.”** (This passuk begins with the letter “samech.”)

Thus, we learn that the letter “nun” alludes to נ’פילתם—the downfall and spiritual descent—of Yisrael in galus; whereas the letter “samech” alludes to the support and assistance that Hashem will provide to elevate Yisrael at the time of the future geulah. Along these lines, the Bnei Yissaschar (Kislev-Teves 4, 2) explains the significance of the term נ”ס—meaning miracle. Initially, when trouble and calamity befall Yisrael, the situation is alluded to by the letter “nun”—associated with some form of downfall. When, however, HKB”H rescues them and elevates them, it is alluded to by the letter “samech.” Thus, the word נ”ס is formed by the combination of the “nun” and the “samech,” representing divine, miraculous salvation: “סומך ה’ לכל הנופלים”—**Hashem supports all the fallen ones.**

It appears that the matter can be explained based on what we have learned in the Gemara (Yoma 9b). The second Beis HaMikdash was destroyed because of “sin’as chinam”—baseless hatred. Thus, we can conclude that in order to hasten and bring about the complete geulah, the sin of “sin’as chinam” must be

corrected; in other words, “shalom” must prevail among the people of Yisrael.

It is precisely for this reason that HKB”H is destined to send Eliyahu HaNavi prior to the geulah; it will be his task to spread “shalom” throughout Yisrael. As the sages teach us in the Mishnah (Eduyos 8, 7), Eliyahu will not come to distance or to draw near: ...הלכה למשה מסיני שאין אליהו בא לטמא ולטהר לרחק ולקרוב... אלא לעשות שלום בעולם, שנאמר הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליהו הנביא וגו', והשיב אלא לעשות שלום בעולם, שנאמר הנה אנכי שולח לכם את אליהו הנביא וגו', והשיב... **It is a halachah transmitted to Moshe at Sinai that Eliyahu will not come to clarify what is impure and what is pure, to distance and to draw near . . . but to make peace in the world, as it states (Malachi 3, 23): “Behold, I will send you Eliyahu HaNavi . . . and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers.”** For, the future geulah from this prolonged, agonizing galus will only be realized via “shalom”—the opposite of “sin’as chinam” that caused the destruction of our Beis Mikdash.

We can now comprehend why the letter “nun” alludes to Yisrael’s spiritual downfall and descent in galus. The shape of the letter נ is that of a circle broken in half. This implies that the circle of shalom has been torn asunder due to the grievous sin of “sin’as chinam.” Conversely, the letter “samech”--ס—represents the tikun; it is the intact circle of shalom. When shalom prevails in Yisrael, everyone is equal; individuals are not envious of their fellow’s success; that is what the circular “samech” symbolizes. In that merit, we will realize the geulah, as indicated by the passuk that begins with the letter “samech”: “סומך ה’ לכל הנופלים.”

We now have cause to rejoice. We can now explain the wonderful connection between the ס (60) masechtos and the ס letters in Birkas Kohanim. Torah she’b’al peh is comprised of 60 masechtos to teach us that the Torah can only be acquired by friends studying and analyzing it together. The shalom that exists among them is like the circle of the letter “samech”—no one sees himself as superior to his study partner. This explains beautifully why Rabeinu HaKadosh chose to conclude the ס masechtos of Mishnayos with the message: **“לא מצא הקב”ה מחזיק—ברכה לישראל אלא השלום”**—**HKB”H did not find a vessel better suited for preserving berachah for Yisrael than shalom.** He is teaching us that the Torah is only acquired with shalom—symbolized by the letter “samech.” In this merit, we will be privileged to experience the geulah, as promised by the passuk: **“Hashem supports all the fallen ones.”**

For this same reason, there are ס' (60) letters in Birkas Kohanim. Birkas Kohanim was given to Aharon and his children, because they epitomize the doctrine of loving and pursuing shalom. Hence, Birkas Kohanim concludes with the berachah of shalom: "וַיִּשָׂם לָךְ שְׁלוֹמִים"—and He will bring you peace. This is precisely what the letter "samech" symbolizes—the shalom that prevails in Yisrael. When shalom and harmony prevail in Yisrael: "Hashem supports all the fallen ones."

Now, we can revisit the words of Rav Amram Gaon. Our blessed sages established the practice of learning the words

of Birkas Kohanim immediately after reciting the Berachos for Torah-study. He explained that this practice teaches us that one who studies the 60 masechtos of Torah she'b'al peh merits the blessings of Birkas Kohanim, which is comprised of 60 letters. The two allusions go together hand in hand, emphasizing the greatness of shalom. In the merit of shalom, HKB"Y will hasten the future geulah, at which time the tzaddikim will sit around Him in a circle, resembling the shape of the letter "samech"—swiftly, in our times! Amen.



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