



Covering One's Face During *Birkat Kohanim*

לעילוי נשמת
 יואל אפרים בן אברהם עוזיאל זלצמן ז"ל

Question: In *chutz la'aretz*, when they do *Birkat Kohanim* (on *Yom Tov*), men cover their faces with their *tallit*. Upon making *aliya*, I rarely see people doing so. Is there a halachic *machloket* on the matter, or is it just a matter of *minhag*? What should I be doing?

Answer: The main halachic issue here is that one is not supposed to look at the *kohanim* during *Birkat Kohanim*. The sources begin with the *mishna* (Megilla 24b) that a *kohen* with blemishes on his hands must not do *Birkat Kohanim* because it can cause people to stare at the *kohen's* hands. The Yerushalmi (Megilla 4:8) says that this shows that it is forbidden for the congregation to look, irrespective of whether the *kohanim* have blemishes, because it can cause them to not properly concentrate on the *berachot*. This

is codified by the Rambam (Tefilla 14:7) and the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 128:23). (This concern is best understood according to the opinion that the *tzibbur* has a *mitzva* to accept the *kohanim's beracha*; see Be'ur Halacha to 128:1; Dvar Avraham I:31.) The Mishna Berura (128:89) says, that since concentration is the problem, one should not be looking anywhere, and that the halacha only precludes extended looking, as only this would impair one's concentration.

The explanation that most people think of is that it is disrespectful and potentially dangerous to look at a *kohen's* hands during *Birkat Kohanim* because of a special Divine Presence (*Shechina*) that exists there. Indeed, the *gemara* (Chagiga 16a) says that doing so could damage one's vision. The Beit Yosef (OC 128) points out that the *Shechina* is on the hands only in the *Beit Hamikdash*, where they would use the *Shem Hameforash* during *Birkat Kohanim*, and so our present-day practice of not looking relates only to concentration. (Some kabbalistically oriented sources say that the danger effect still exists – see Da'at Torah to the Shulchan Aruch *ibid.*) Although we have seen that it should thus be permitted to look casually, the Mishna Berura (*ibid.*) comments that the *minhag* is to not look at all as a remembrance of the care taken in the *Beit Hamikdash*.

In fact, some take further precautions. The

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Beit Yosef (ibid.) reports a *minhag*, which is indeed followed broadly today, for each *kohen* to pull their *tallit* over his head and even his hands. This prevents the *kohanim* from being distracted by the people, and the people from being distracted by the *kohanim*. By the same token, it also prevents seeing the hands, with the *Shechina* implications.

If this is not enough, there is the *minhag* you ask about, which is mentioned and encouraged by the Kaf Hachayim (OC 128:142), that members of the *tzibbur* also cover their heads with a *tallit*. He says that if one does not cover his eyes with a *tallit*, he at least should shut his eyes. Some mention (see Piskei Teshuvot 128:55) covering children with a *tallit*. This is probably more logical if the problem is the *Shechina* issue as opposed to concentration, as the latter is unlikely to be important for a child. At some point, apparently quite recently and as a grass roots idea, some fathers started putting their hands on their child's head, as some sort of conduit for the *beracha* of the *kohanim* to land well on the children. It could be that this was borrowed from the practice of fathers to put their hands on their children's

heads when blessing them (including with *Birkat Kohanim*) on Friday night.

We have seen how the *minhag* you experienced in *chutz la'aretz*, was an extension of an extension of an extension. It could be that it just did not spread to Israeli communities here as much as abroad. The explanation could be that when *Birkat Kohanim* is a rare, highly anticipated event, people are more inclined to seek every possible enhancement, but not in Israel, where its frequency fosters a more basic approach.

Now that you live in *Eretz Yisrael*, we suggest to follow the local practice. However, especially since people do not look around at this time, you may, if you prefer, cover your head during *Birkat Kohanim*, as this is not divisive. ■

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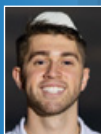
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