

# **BIRCHAS KOHANIM, ROSH HASHANA**

## **Parshas Saitzai**

**By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach**

The priestly blessing, Birchas Kohanim, is one of the six hundred thirteen mitzvohs of the Torah. Before the fulfillment of the mitzva, the Kohanim recite the Bracha "Blessed are You Hashem... and has commanded us to bless His people Israel with love". The addition of the phrase "with love" is based upon the Zohar, and is fundamental in the very fulfillment of the blessing. The Kohanim are to muster a feeling of love for the congregation when they pronounce the blessing.

When Yaakov was about to bless his grandchildren Menashe and Ephraim, the Torah reads "Now Israel's (Yaakov's) eyes were heavy with age, he could not see, so he brought them near him and he kissed them and hugged them" (Bereishis 28:10). "In order that his soul may cleave to them, so that his blessing is validated" (Sepurnu).

According to the Yeraim, the mitzva is fulfilled not only by the Kohanim, but also by the Israelites listening and receiving the blessing. One may venture to suggest that this condition of love equally applies to the listeners. This is quite a grand requirement, but worthwhile, so that the blessing is brought to effect.

Where in the Torah do we find a source for the stipulation of love to ratify the Kohanim's blessing. One may suggest it is in our Sidrah. A major element in the priestly blessing is the power to transform a negative experience to a positive. While the Kohanim sing an extended chant, the listeners in the congregation recite a prayer about this transformation. "May it be Your will Hashem... that all my dreams regarding myself and regarding all of Israel be good ones... But if they require healing heal them (transform them.) And just as You transformed the curse of wicked Bilaam from a curse to a blessing, so may You transform all my dreams... for goodness."

Upon examining the verse in our Sidrah Ki Seitzei about the transformation of Bilaam's malediction into blessing, we notice that it is based upon love of Israel. "But Hashem... refused to listen to Bilaam, and Hashem... reversed the curse to a blessing for you, because Hashem... LOVED you" (Deuteronomy 23:6). The concept of transformation from the negative to the positive is intrinsic in the very blessing. The third blessing "May Hashem lift His countenance to you", Rashi (from Sifro) indicates a transformation from negative into positive countenance. Since this transformation is founded on love of Israel, as stated, it is thus logical that the priestly blessing must be pronounced with utmost love of Israel.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, the above sentiments gain more profound significance. The Talmud teaches us that Bilaam's wish to utter a curse could have had force, G-d forbid, only for a time limited to a second (Brochos 7a). Tosfos (Avoda Zora 4b) asks what malediction could he have said in one split second? He could have said the word "Kaleim" (destroy them). But Hashem in His great love for Israel transformed this word to "melech" king, the same three Hebrew letters reversed.

On the Days of Awe, Hashem is inaugurated as our King ("Melech"). The concept of Kingship of Hashem is central in all the prayers during the Ten Days of Repentance. When Bilaam's one word malediction was transformed into "Melech", it automatically heralded the good tidings of life. For "MELECH CHOFETZ BACHAYIM", our King wants life for us.

On Rosh Hashana and Yom Kipur, when our focus in prayer is for life, meaningful life, the blessings of the Kohanim is very pivotal. For, as mentioned, it is indicative of the transformation into the positive. The one word MELECH speaks volumes for a good life.

