

Nasso, 5780, Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

A foundational rule of reciting Berachot over a Mitzvah is that the Beracha must always immediately precede the performance of the Mitzvah. For example, we recite a Beracha over the Shofar, and then immediately blow the Shofar; we recite a Beracha over a Lulav, and then immediately shake the Lulav. It is thus not surprising that immediately after reciting the Beracha over the mitzvah of learning Torah each morning, we must fulfill the Mitzvah of learning Torah. While one could conceivably have fulfilled this obligation by reciting any randomly selected verses from the Torah and the Talmud, our custom is to specifically recite the Biblical verses of Birkat Kohanim. The question thus emerges: of all the thousands of eligible verses, why were these verses selected to introduce our Torah learning every single day of our lives?

The selection of these verses cannot be coincidental. The words of Birkat Kohanim describe G-d's endless love for His children and the blessings He wishes to bestow upon them (through the conduit of the Kohen): to "protect" them from harm (6:24), to "illuminate" with His "smiling, radiant countenance" (6:25, Rashi), and to gift them the ultimate blessing, "peace" in all senses of the word. The recitation of these verses before engaging in Torah study reminds us daily that an ultimate purpose of Torah is to enable man to feel G-d's love and experience His blessings. From the very first words of the Torah, which describe how the entire world was created for the sake of man, every letter of the Torah is ultimately a proclamation of how dear man is in the eyes of G-d. If G-d did not love you, He would have no reason to create you or to care about what you do, and He certainly would have no reason to want to bless you. The verses of Birkat Kohanim epitomize this love, and are therefore a most appropriate reminder to set the tone for our study every day of our lives.

This perspective on Torah may explain the fascinating Halacha (Shulchan Aruch OC 47) that one can fulfill his or her obligation of Birchot HaTorah by reciting the liturgical blessing of "Ahava Rabba" before Shema. This prayer describes the intense love that Hashem feels for His children, and is thus appropriately connected to the theme of Torah study. This concept also may provide a deeper reason why many of us ate dairy last week on the holiday of Shavuot. In Jewish thought, milk represents the attribute of lovingkindness, like a mother nursing her beloved baby. The Torah, which was given on Shavuot, represents G-d's ultimate act of lovingkindness towards us, giving us the opportunity to connect with Him and live a life of sanctity and blessing. Of course, the Torah makes occasional mention of punishments and repercussions, just as a loving parent will set boundaries and limits to help a child grow. But these punishments are never the essence of the Torah. As our Sages teach, the attribute of Divine love far outweighs the attribute of Divine judgment.

People may sometimes study Torah for decades, memorizing the minutiae of Halacha, but forgetting the fundamental point of how deeply Hashem loves them. And this can change everything. When a person feels loved unconditionally by Hashem -- no matter how much he may mess up or how filthy or incompetent he may feel -- he himself will be filled with love and compassion. This love will in turn spill over to everyone he meets, in the same way a cup of

wine that is continuously filled will naturally overflow onto everything around it. This phenomenon evokes the image of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai, whose profound holiness led him to always be the first to greet every person he encountered, whether Jewish or gentile (Berachot 17). By contrast, when a person forgets this love, he may be more prone to feel angry, insignificant, and closed off from others. With a cup that is itself empty, he has nothing to give to others. Reciting Birkat Kohanim after Birchot HaTorah imbues us with encouragement and reminds us of how precious we are to Hashem, thereby refilling our cup every single morning.

The mindful recitation of Birkat Kohanim takes on special importance this week. The cold-blooded murder of a child of Hashem for the color of his skin, the heartless destruction of the businesses of innocent people, and the rampant rhetoric of hate have, each on its own level, flooded the world with so much darkness. I have personally spoken to many people this week who are emotionally exhausted from all of the cruelty and anger that they have witnessed, in a way that they hadn't felt over the past few months. While we must of course stand strong in physically protecting ourselves and our community from harm, we must simultaneously fight back spiritually. Reciting Birkat Kohanim each morning reminds us to overflow towards others in the way that Hashem acts towards us in these blessings -- with "graciousness," "smiles," and a "radiant countenance" -- thereby spreading His love throughout the world. And in doing so, may we merit the ultimate blessing of Hashem, "וישם לך שלום" -- "May he make peace for you," a blessing that our world so desperately needs.