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"Thus" is the Magic Word

Chassidus on the Parsha

The Gemara teaches that everything that we receive and experience throughout the year is already decreed for us when we are judged on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

In addition to the annual judgement on Rosh Hashana, Chaza"l teach that a person is judged every single day. But what purpose does this judgement serve if we have already been found deserving on Rosh Hashana?

A similar question can be asked about the role of Davening. If everything that we will earn has been decided, why do we have to Daven for our needs on a daily basis.

Chassidus explains that the judgment on Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur determines the allotment of Chessed that we will receive from Hashem over the year ahead. But at this stage, the Chessed exists in a spiritual form in the lofty spiritual realms.

Chessed is experienced in each "world" in accordance with the nature of that world. In the worlds of the angels, like the world of the souls in Gan Eden, Chessed is the ability to be showered with G-dly light and experience deeper levels of understanding of Hashem.

In our world, we require this Chessed to be actualized in a material sense, to be translated as physical expressions of Chessed, such as Parnasa (livelihood), health etc.

To manifest in this form, the Chessed from it source has to descend through the various realms and forms. The daily judgement is whether we are deserving for our "allotted" Chessed to come down to us as we need it in our lives. If we are not deserving, it remains above for us to receive in Gan Eden. This is also the role of Davening.

The uniqueness of Birkas Kohanim is that the blessings come straight down and materialise for us in this world. They are not subject to judgment and cannot be held up on High.

In this week's Parsha we read the Mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim, for the Kohanim to bless the Jewish people with the threefold blessing beginning יברך ה' וישמרך.

The Gemara writes that a Kohen who does not give Birkas Kohanim when called upon to do so, violates three positive Mitzvos. This statement is not meant to be understood literally. Birkas Kohanim is only counted as one of the 613 Mitzvos. However, the passage uses three different phrases that direct the Kohen to bless the people, כה תברכו "thus shall you bless", אמור להם "say to them" and ושמו את שמי "place My Name upon Bnei Yisrael".

The Mitzvah is introduced with the words כה תברכו את בני ישראל אמור להם. Moshe is told to instruct Aharon and his sons "Thus shall you bless Bnei Yisroel, say to them…" In his Sefer Hamitzvos, Rambam quotes this as the actual source of the Mitzvah.

Literally it means "thus shall you bless"… with the words that are to follow. However, the commentators are still perplexed by the use of the word כה (thus) to introduce the Mitzvah. Aside from being an uncommon word to be used when communicating a Mitzvah, the word "thus", usually refers to something that has been demonstrated or previously stated. What does it refer to in this context?

The Kli Yakar explains that it is referring to the passage that appears immediately prior to Birkas Kohanim, the Parsha of the Nazir. Hashem is warning the Kohanim that just as a Nazir may not drink wine, you too may not give Birkas Kohanim while intoxicated.

The Gemara interprets the word כה as referring to different laws concerning the manner in which Birkas Kohanim is to be performed, including that; it must be said while standing, it must be recited in Lashon Hakodesh, it must be said with raised hands and it must be said with the Divine Name.

The Midrash picks up on the word כה and writes that the Jewish people merited the Mitzvah of Birkas Kohanim in the Zechus of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. We find the word כה used in connection to each of the Avos.

Hashem told Avraham כה יהיה זרעך "so shall be your descendants (like the stars)." At the Akeida, Avraham told his servants ואני והנער נלכה עד כה "and the lad (Yitzchak) will go on from here". And at Har Sinai Hashem instructed Moshe כה תאמר לבית יעקב "thus shall you say to the House of Yaakov".

In classic style, the Baal Haturim focuses on the Gematria, highlighting that כה is 25. There are 25 letters in the verse Shema Yisrael. The word ברכה (blessing) appears 25 times in the Chumash. The word שלום (peace) - which is the final and most important blessing in Birkas Kohanim, is also found 25 times in the Chumash.

Rabbeinu Bachya and others note that the privilege and power to be able to bless the Jewish people was the 25th gift given to the Kohanim, coming in addition to the 24 gifts and entitlements that they would receive from the Jewish people, such as parts of the sacrifices, Terumah, the first shearing etc.

Lessons in Love

The Zohar teaches that a Kohen may not Duchen if they do not love all of the people. If a Kohen despises even one Jew, not only may they not Duchen, it would be dangerous for them to do so. Some suggest that the word באהבה - "that He commanded us to bless His people Yisrael with love" - was added to the end of the blessing recited by the Kohanim before Duchening based on this Zohar.

The Maggid of Mezritch shared a novel insight on the use of the word כה "thus", as it relates to Birkas Kohanim. In his understanding, "thus" does not refer to the Kohanim or the blessing itself. Rather it refers to the Jewish people as the recipients of the blessing. Hashem is telling the Kohanim to bless the people "thus", as they are. They should not seek out only those who are righteous, important or outstanding. For every Jew, as they are, are deserving and worthy of G-d's blessings.

The Chozeh of Lublin explained that כה "thus", refers to the Kohanim. Kohanim are associated with the traits of love, kindness and peace. Aharon is described as one who loved peace and pursued peace. He would actively seek to bring peace between his fellow men, between husbands and wives and between the Jewish people and their Father in Heaven.

The word כה is telling the future Kohanim that as the "disciples of Aharon", their blessings must be given to the Jewish people like Aharon, with heartfelt love and kindness.

Further, the words כה תברכו את בני ישראל can mean that this is part of the blessing itself that was being imparted to the Jewish people. The Kohanim bless the people that they too should be blessed with the qualities of Aharon to pursue peace and to love one another just as Aharon did.

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the final blessing וישם לך שלום, "May He grant you peace". These words are not limited to living in peace with other nations. They are also a blessing that we have true peace and harmony amongst ourselves.

The Weekly Halacha Analysis

Kisui Rosh - Hair Covering for Married Women

Rabbi Yonason Johnson

Background - source of the Mitzvah

The Mishna[1] teaches that a woman who goes out with her head uncovered violates "Das Yehudis", the customary ways of modesty observed by Jewish women[2].

The Gemara challenges this, noting that going out with uncovered hair is more than just a violation of "Das Yehudis". It is a Biblical prohibition and would therefore be classified as a violation "Das Moshe" – the laws that are clearly written or alluded to in the Torah[3].

The Gemara brings the Biblical source for a woman covering her hair, from the Pasuk in the Parsha of the Sotah "and he shall uncover the woman's head"[4]. Rabbi Yishmael taught that this is a warning that the daughters of Israel should not go out with their head's uncovered.

The Midrash[5] explains the connection. When he uncovers the hair of the Sotah, the Kohen says to her "you went away from the ways of the daughters of Israel, whose way is to cover their hair and you have acted in the ways of gentile women who go with their hair uncovered. Here, now you have what you wanted"

The Gemara resolves the question by explaining that to satisfy the Biblical requirement of "Das Moshe", it is sufficient to go out with a Kalsa - a basket that has holes in it allowing the hair to be partially visible. However, for the requirement of "Das Yehudis", this is insufficient until the hair is properly covered. This is what the Mishna was referring to.

The requirement of Kisui Rosh is codified as Halacha in the Rambam[6] and Shulchan Aruch[7].

In addition to the violations of "Das Moshe" and "Das Yehudis" which are stand-alone Issurim, the Poskim identify other Halachic reasons why a married woman must cover her hair.

Elsewhere, the Gemara[8] teaches that the hair of a woman is nakedness, based on the Posuk in Shir Hashirim[9] "your hair is like a flock of goats". One may not say Shema or Daven in the presence of a married woman's uncovered hair, even if it is one's own wife. This is brought in Shulchan Aruch in the laws of Shema[10].

Another issue is that like other breaches of Tznius there is the problem of Lifnei Iver, placing a stumbling block in front of the blind to those who will see her[11]. The Poskim also note that not covering her hair would violate the prohibition of copying the ways of the non-Jews[12].

The requirement to cover hair applies only to married women. It does not apply to girls[13].

Does all the hair have to be covered?

Rabbi Moshe Alashkar (1466-1542 Egypt) writes[14] that in most Islamic lands, women do not cover the hair at the sides of their temples. Rashba and Raavad refer to the hair that protrudes outside of the tresses (Chutz Letzimasan). This refers to the small amount of hair that cannot be 'gathered' into the hair covering[15]. The Poskim include hair at the nape of the neck in this allowance.

The ruling of the Maharam Alashkar is quoted as Halacha in Shulchan Aruch and by the Acharonim, including the Magen Avraham, the Alter Rebbe and the Mishna Berura[16]. Magen Avraham adds that according to the Zohar, none of the hair should be visible, concluding that this is preferable to follow.

The Mishna Berura[17] points out that it is still forbidden for a man to look at these hairs on a woman other than one's wife. He[18] also references the Zohar as well as the Gemara's[19] description of Kimchis, who merited to have 7 of her sons serve as Kohen Gadol because the beams of her house never saw her uncovered hair. He writes that it is appropriate to follow this practise.

No hair may be uncovered

A number of Poskim[20] explain that the ruling of the Maharam Alashkar only refers to a woman's own husband in relation to saying Shema in her presence. However, when in public, all hair must be covered as a matter of Tznius and "Das Yehudis".

In an extensive Teshuvah[21], the Tzemach Tzedek writes *"privately in the presence of her husband, a woman is permitted to expose the side hairs which extend beyond her kerchief. While other men are present there is no permissibility to do so…. The hair protruding beyond the kerchief is Halachically identical with 'Ervah' (and must be covered)"*.

Chabad Chassidim follow the Tzemach Tzedek's rulings as the final and binding Halachic authority.

A very lenient ruling

In one of his Teshuvos[22], Rav Moshe Feinstein permits exposing up to half a Tefach (4cm) of hair at the front of the head. He bases his ruling on the Gemara in Brachos that rules that the hair of a woman is Ervah. He compares the Ervah of hair to the Gemara's statement that a Tefach of revealed skin of a woman is Ervah and draws a parallel with regards to the measure.

Since the average width of the head is 2 Tefachim, one may expose up to half a Tefach of hair at the front. He stresses that this is the maximum exposure allowable and that any more is forbidden.

He notes that the Chasam Sofer and others are strict, however based on his reasoning, one who does expose this amount of hair in public can not be described as violating "Das Yehudis".

Questioning this ruling

Rav Moshe's ruling stands against all of the Rishonim and Acharonim[23]. In their view, the hair is treated more strictly than the rest of the body. The allowance of a Tefach does not apply to hair[24].

Even those who understand the leniency of the Maharam Alashkar as referring to going out in public, it only allows for exposing the hair at the sides of the temples or the nape of the neck. One cannot extend leniency to the hair at the front of the hairline.

Further, the discussion in the Gemara about an uncovered Tefach is explicitly referring to the reciting of Shema in its presence, but not to the ways of Tznius. It is not meant as a Heter to go out Lechatchila. Just as it is forbidden to uncover less than a Tefach of those parts of the body that are usually covered, the same applies to hair.

Even Rav Moshe agrees that it is Halachically preferable to cover all of the hair and in other responsa it seems that this is opinion. His son Rav Dovid and others relate that this Teshuvah was written as a 'Horaas Shaah' – a limited ruling to a particular woman in a specific exceptional situation. Rav Dovid wrote that it is a Mitzvah to publicise that his father never intended to give an all-out Heter for women to expose this amount of hair[25].

In a letter[26], the Rebbe writes "I am perplexed... You state that the Kallah will commit to wearing a Sheitel in a way that all of the hair will be covered except for 2 fingerbreadths that will be exposed. Who are you trying to fool? You can't fool Hashem, you can't fool others. You can only fool oneself and what benefit can be derived from this?

1. Kesubos 72a
2. Rashi
3. Rashi
4. Bamidbar 5:18
5. Bamidbar Rabbah 9:16
6. Ishus 24:11
7. EH 21
8. Brachos 24a
9. 4:1
10. OC 75:2, Shulchan Aruch Harav 75:4
11. Tzemach Tzedek
12. Divrei Chaim
13. Rosh Brachos 3:37, Shulchan Aruch 75:2, Shulchan Aruch Harav 75:4
14. Siman 35
15. Ram"o OC 75
16. 75:13-14
17. 75:13. Based on Elya Rabbah
18. 75:14
19. Yoma 47a
20. Chasam Sofer, Tzemach Tzedek
21. EH 139 also Chiddushim Al Hashas Brachos Chapter 3
22. EH 1:58
23. Chasam Sofer, Tzemach Tzedk ibid, Shlomo Zalman Auerbach Shulchan Shlomo 75, Chazon Ish,
24. The Poskim also point out the incongruity of those who rely on the leniencies of the Igros Moshe while 'ignoring' his stricter ruling such as not listening to music, not using timers on Shabbos and stringencies in Eruvin.
25. Recorded in Oz Vehadar Levusha
26. Igros Kodesh volume 9 p325