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FRIENDS DON'T LET FRIENDS DRINK AND DUKHEN: BIRKAT KOHANIM AND SIMCHAT TORAH IN THE DIASPORA

I. INTRODUCTION

My wife and I relocated to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania just days before Rosh Hashana of 5768/2007. During our first *Simchat Torah* with Keshet Israel Congregation (KI),¹ I witnessed a custom I had never seen before: None of the synagogue's *Kohanim* recited *Birkat Kohanim* – the special priestly blessings traditionally conferred upon congregations during holiday services.²

When I inquired about this custom's origins, I was simply told this had just always been KI's practice since its founding by Lithuanian Jewish immigrants in 1902. Beginning with the famed R. Eliezer Silver (1882-1968), Keshet Israel had always been blessed with outstanding rabbinic leadership.³ As such, I was confident this *Simchat Torah* custom had a firm

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¹ The seventh and final day of the festival of *Sukkot* is immediately followed by *Shemini Atzeret*. In the Diaspora, *Shemini Atzeret* is a two-day holiday, the second day of which is known as *Simchat Torah*. In Israel, however, *Shemini Atzeret* includes *Simchat Torah* and is only a one-day holiday.

² The Biblical source for these blessings can be found in Numbers 6:22-27. The Yiddish word *Dukhenen* has become synonymous with *Birkat Kohanim*. The root of that word is *Dukhan* – used throughout rabbinic literature to signify a platform or the raised surface upon which *Kohanim* stand when blessing the congregation. For further reading on the term '*Dukhenen*', see this author's article entitled: "What Does The Duchan Have To Do With Birkas Kohanim?," available online at: <http://www.torahmusings.com/2015/06/what-does-the-duchan-have-to-do-with-birkas-kohanim/>.

³ Keshet Israel's first rabbi – R. Eliezer Silver – served the congregation from 1911-1925. He was followed by R. Chaim Ben Zion Notelovitz who served KI from 1925-1932. R. David L. Silver (a son of R. Eliezer Silver) served KI from 1932-1983. R. Dr. Chaim E. Schertz served KI as its rabbi from 1983-2008.

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halakhic basis, and my research began in earnest. A rewarding journey soon ensued, and this article is a summary of my findings.

II. *BIRKAT KOHANIM AND SIMCHAT TORAH:* THREE CUSTOMS

Neither the *Shulhan Arukh* nor the glosses of R. Moshe Isserles directly address the topic of *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simchat Torah*. However, a healthy discussion on the matter can be found in the writings of later halakhic authorities. In the midst of his comments on the laws of *Simchat Torah*, the *Mishna Berura* quotes two earlier sources which present three different customs regarding *Birkat Kohanim* on that day.

We are not accustomed to ascend the *Dukhan* platform since drunkenness is common (*Levush*). The *Elya Rabbah* writes that in Prague, the custom was [for the *Kohanim*] to ascend at *Musaf*, yet there are those who ascend at *Shaharit*. Each locale should follow its custom – and they should ensure that they [i.e. the *Kohanim*] do not drink.⁴

Thus, when it comes to *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simchat Torah*, there are three different but equally valid customs:

- 1) Maintain *Birkat Kohanim* in its normal place during *Musaf*.
- 2) Move *Birkat Kohanim* to an earlier point of the services – during *Shaharit*.
- 3) Omit *Birkat Kohanim* altogether.

III. POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR THE CUSTOMS

What is the rationale behind each of these three customs? Both the *Levush* and the *Elya Rabbah* cited above mention that a potentially serious problem exists with *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simchat Torah* – intoxicating beverages. Halakha clearly forbids a *Kohen* who has imbibed a relatively small volume of any intoxicating beverage from conferring *Birkat Kohanim* (*Shulhan Arukh*, O.H., 128:38). The basis for this is the Biblical injunction which forbids a *Kohen* from engaging in any aspect of the Temple service after drinking intoxicating beverages.⁵

⁴ See *Mishna Berura* 669:17, as well as *Peri Megadim* to O.H. 669, *Elya Rabbah* *ibid.*, *Elya Zuta* *ibid.*, and *Kitsur Shulhan Arukh* 138:8.

⁵ See Leviticus 10:9, *Shulhan Arukh* O.H. 128:38, and *Mishna Berura* *ibid.*

On *Simhat Torah*, Jews all over the world gather to celebrate the completion of the yearly Torah reading cycle. While celebrating, many are accustomed to mark this achievement with a friendly toast over a glass of wine or other spirits.⁶ Due to the strong likelihood of a *Kohen* having imbibed even a small amount of an intoxicating beverage during *Simhat Torah* services, a great concern surrounds *Birkat Kohanim* on that day. This concern gave rise to the three above-mentioned customs. At first glance, all three of those customs can easily be explained:

- 1) Traditional Jewish observance is exactly that – traditional. As such, if the *Kohanim* ordinarily bless the congregation at *Musaf*, it is important that they do the same on *Simhat Torah* as well. To alleviate the concern that *Kohanim* may have imbibed intoxicating beverages, it becomes the community's responsibility to make certain that no such *Kohanim* ascend the platform to engage in *Birkat Kohanim*.
- 2) Other communities felt it was just not feasible to properly police the *Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*. After all, on that festive day, they would also want to celebrate with a toast. As such, how were congregations supposed to prevent *Kohanim* who had imbibed intoxicating beverages from engaging in *Birkat Kohanim*? This problem was solved by moving those blessings from *Musaf* to *Shaharit*. At that earlier point in the service, it would be highly unlikely that any *Kohen* would have had anything intoxicating to drink.
- 3) Apparently the *Levush* felt that even moving *Birkat Kohanim* to *Shaharit* was fraught with danger. Perhaps enjoying a toast in celebration of *Simhat Torah* had become so pervasive that he feared people may even enjoy a friendly toast (or two) at *Shaharit*. Thus, even if *Birkat Kohanim* was moved to *Shaharit*, the fear of *Kohanim* imbibing intoxicating beverages and engaging in the priestly blessings remained. In order to avoid this serious halakhic concern, on *Simhat Torah*, some communities cancelled *Birkat Kohanim* altogether.

IV. PROBLEM WITH PROPOSED EXPLANATION

Although I initially thought I had quickly made sense of the three distinct above-mentioned customs, it soon became apparent that I had not. Since

⁶ Some congregations have attempted to end this practice due to any number of unfortunate alcohol-related incidents they have experienced.

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KI's *Simhat Torah* custom regarding *Birkat Kohanim* followed the *Levush's* practice of omitting *Birkat Kohanim*, I spent some additional time researching that position. I soon found a nearly identical ruling recorded in the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (O.H. 669:3): "... and they [the *Kohanim*] do not ascend the platform since we are accustomed to drinking wine and spirits after the reading of the *Torah*."

The *Arukh ha-Shulhan* is explaining why he sided with the opinion that *Birkat Kohanim* should be omitted on *Simhat Torah*. He explains that the fear was that *Kohanim* who had imbibed intoxicating beverages after the Torah reading would then go on to participate in *Birkat Kohanim*. As such, he advises doing away with *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* altogether.

I was struck by the following question: The *Arukh ha-Shulhan* wrote that it was common practice for people to enjoy a drink *after* Torah reading on *Simhat Torah*, which would explain why he felt *Birkat Kohanim* was inappropriate during *Musaf*. Why, however, did he not advocate moving *Birkat Kohanim* from *Musaf* to *Shaharit*? As that earlier point of the service precedes Torah reading, it is a point when there would be no fear of *Kohanim* who had imbibed intoxicating beverages engaging in *Birkat Kohanim*.

I quickly realized that this same question could be asked on my initial understanding of the above-cited *Levush*. As such, it seems clear that a fear of *Kohanim* imbibing alcoholic beverages could explain why *Musaf* was not an appropriate place for *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*. However, that concern alone could not explain why the *Levush* felt that *Birkat Kohanim* could not be rescued by simply moving it to *Shaharit* on *Simhat Torah*.

V. BIRKAT KOHANIM IN THE DIASPORA

In order to gain a full understanding of the custom to omit *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*, one must investigate a basic detail of those blessings: In a post-Temple world, just how often are *Kohanim* supposed to share this unique blessing with the congregation?

For centuries, many of the greatest Jewish minds have struggled to explain the Ashkenazic communities' custom regarding *Birkat Kohanim* as practiced outside the Land of Israel.

Living in the later part of the 15th century, one of the giants of Ashkenazic Jewry was R. Yaacov ben Yehudah Landau, author of the halakhic work *Agur*. In section 176, R. Landau writes:

The great Torah scholar R. Yaacov ben Moshe Levi Moelin⁷ was asked why *Kohanim* [in Ashkenazic lands] did not bless the congregation each day – as it is a positive Torah precept to do so. He answered this was due to the custom of *Kohanim* to immerse themselves first – as was recorded in the *Hagahot Maimoni*.⁸ It was too difficult for them to immerse daily in the winter. As such, the custom developed [for the *Kohanim* to bless the congregation] only during the festivals. Another reason [how this custom developed] was the concern of lost work. If a *Kohen* is not called upon [to bless the congregation], he has not transgressed [any Torah precept by not blessing the congregation].⁹

R. Yosef Karo was quite critical of the Ashkenazic communities' custom of restricting of *Birkat Kohanim* to the festivals alone. In his commentary to the *Tur Shulhan Arukh* (O.H. 128:44), he quotes R. Landau's explanation of this practice and writes:

He offered a forced explanation to justify his local custom, yet it does not suffice. For that which he wrote, 'Because they are accustomed to immerse themselves prior [to *Birkat Kohanim*],' that is a stringency which results in a leniency... After all, immersion prior to *Birkat Kohanim* is never mentioned in the Talmud. If they accustomed themselves to be stringent and immerse, why should this be a reason to abolish three positive [Torah] precepts each day? Even though one only violates those precepts if he was called up [to bless the congregation], nonetheless, it would be better to fulfill the three precepts each day while forgoing immersion, since there is no obligation for one to immerse. This [custom] ends up causing one to neglect three [Torah] precepts each day. I commend the inhabitants of Israel and Egypt who perform *Birkat Kohanim* each day – since they do not immerse themselves prior to blessing the congregation.

After reading R. Karo's comments, one can imagine the sense of urgency R. Moses Isserles felt in his desire to defend the ancient Ashkenazic custom of limiting *Birkat Kohanim* to the festivals alone. In two places, R. Isserles proposes a *limmud zekhut* – a post-facto halakhic justification of his community's longstanding practice.

The first of R. Isserles' two explanations is a rebuttal of sorts to R. Karo's above-cited comments. R. Isserles took note of the fact that

⁷ Commonly referred to as 'Maharil,' c. 1365-1427, Germany.

⁸ Authored by R. Meir ben Barukh of Rotenberg, Germany (c. 1215-1293).

⁹ See responsum 21 in Maharil's newer collection of responsa for more on this topic.

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R. Landau (who had quoted R. Moelin) had actually offered two explanations for the development of the Ashkenazic custom to restrict *Birkat Kohanim* to the festivals alone: A) the *Kohanim's* customary immersion prior to those blessings; and B) the concern of causing people to miss work.

In his sharp critique of the prevalent Ashkenazic practice, R. Karo had attacked only the first of R. Landau's explanations. Taking note of this, R. Isserles wrote:¹⁰

And I say, the explanation which they thought is secondary is actually primary. It is the concern of the loss of work of the congregations of these lands [which led to the custom]. For in their exile, the *Kohanim* and the congregations are constantly occupied with making a living. They lack the ability to provide for their families anything more than the daily bread they are able to earn by the sweat of their brows. They are constantly occupied in making a living, and they are unable to be in a state of happiness. Therefore, there is no *Birkat Kohanim* on a day when people would be idle from their work – and even on the Sabbath there is no *Birkat Kohanim* since the people are occupied with their thoughts and concerns over their livelihoods of the past and future days. While they may rest their bodies somewhat [on the Sabbath] from their toil, they are still not in a complete state of happiness – as opposed to the festivals where the Torah writes (Deuteronomy 16:14) “and you shall rejoice on your holidays”. As such, the custom developed to limit *Birkat Kohanim* to the holidays alone. So it appears to me.

R. Isserles expands upon this explanation in his glosses to the *Shulhan Arukh* (O.H. 128:44). After a short discussion of how integral happiness is to *Birkat Kohanim*, he writes:

We are accustomed in all of these lands to reserve *Birkat Kohanim* for the festivals alone – for that is when people are basking in the joy of the holidays, and [only] one with a glad heart should offer [those] blessings. This is in contrast to all other days – even on Sabbath– when people's minds are occupied with thoughts of their livelihoods and their loss of work. Even during the festivals, *Birkat Kohanim* is limited to the *Musaf* service – as that is close to when people will leave the synagogue and rejoice in the happiness of the holiday.¹¹

¹⁰ *Darkhei Moshe* to *Tur* S.A. O.H., 128:21.

¹¹ It is of interest to note the *Mishna Berura's* comments to this gloss. See *M.B.* 128:167.

In his nearly contemporaneous work, *Levush*, R. Mordecai Yaffe echoed R. Isserles' comments and added an important point regarding *Yom Kippur*:

And even during the festivals, *Birkat Kohanim* is limited to *Musaf*, as that is the end of services when people will rejoice in the happiness of the holiday. *Birkat Kohanim* takes place on *Yom Kippur* even though there is no happiness [via] food and drink. Nonetheless, it is a day of joy since it is the day of forgiveness and atonement, and since we honor our holy God by wearing our finest clothes.¹²

After quoting R. Isserles' explanation of the Ashkenazic custom of restricting *Birkat Kohanim* to the festivals alone, the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* writes (O.H. 128:64):

Behold, there is certainly no proper explanation of our custom to neglect the Biblical precepts of *Birkat Kohanim* all year long. Many have written that it is an improper custom. However, what can we do? It is as if a heavenly voice called out and will not allow us to engage in *Birkat Kohanim* throughout the year. And I have a tradition that two of the greatest scholars of previous generations – each in their own locale – hoped to reinstitute *Birkat Kohanim* on a daily basis. When the set date for this arrived, matters became chaotic, and they were not successful. Thereupon, they declared that they saw this as having been declared in heaven.¹³

After having shared his candid thoughts on the matter, the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* reinforced R. Isserles' above-cited explanation of this ancient Ashkenazic custom with the following source (O.H. 128:64):

As far as the law is concerned, this can be explained based on what I mentioned earlier in paragraph 49. According to the Zohar, [in order for a *Kohen* to bless the congregation] he needs to be in a state of happiness comparable to Aaron and his sons on the eight day of the Tabernacle's inauguration. That is the meaning of, "so shall you bless."¹⁴

Thus, we now have a better understanding of the perplexing Ashkenazic custom to restrict *Birkat Kohanim* to the *Musaf* service of the

¹² *Levush ha-Tekhelet* 128:44.

¹³ The two great scholars R. Epstein writes of have been identified as the Vilna Gaon (1720-1796) and his disciple R. Chaim of Volozhin (1749-1821). See *Sefer Aliyot Eliyahu* (Jerusalem, 5749), 57-8 n. 1 for further reading.

¹⁴ Numbers 6:23.

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holidays.¹⁵ This enigmatic but millennia-old practice is universally upheld by Ashkenazic communities outside the land of Israel.¹⁶

VI. BIRKAT KOHANIM AND SIMHAT TORAH

With a fuller understanding of the longstanding Ashkenazic limitations regarding *Birkat Kohanim* in general, the three *Simhat Torah* customs cited above can all be properly understood.

To review, those three *Simhat Torah* customs are:

- 1) Maintain *Birkat Kohanim* in its normal place in services – during *Musaf*.
- 2) Move *Birkat Kohanim* to an earlier point – during *Shaharit*.
- 3) Omit *Birkat Kohanim* altogether.

Custom 1: As we have seen, R. Moses Isserles staunchly defended the longstanding Ashkenazic custom of restricting *Birkat Kohanim* throughout the year to *Musaf* on the holidays alone. His explanation of this custom was based on the integral role that a true state of happiness plays in *Birkat Kohanim*. The need for happiness is so great that *Birkat Kohanim* simply cannot take place when that state cannot be fully felt. According to R. Isserles, such a state can only be achieved at the *Musaf* service during the holidays. Accordingly, the same limitations which apply to *Birkat Kohanim* during any other holiday apply on *Simhat Torah* as well. Therefore *Birkat Kohanim* can only take place during *Musaf* – and at no other point – on *Simhat Torah*. Engaging in *Birkat Kohanim* at that time,

¹⁵ R. Ephraim Zalman Margolis (1762-1828) also authored a lengthy responsum attempting to explain this perplexing Ashkenazic custom. See his *Sefer Beit Ephraim* O.H. 6.

¹⁶ It should be noted that while caught up in the excitement surrounding Sabbatai Zevi – the 17th century messianic imposter – some European congregations instituted the public recitation of *Birkat Kohanim* each Sabbath. See Responsa *Ohel Yaakov* (68-71) by R. Yaakov Sasportas (1610-1698). In the aftermath of Zevi's embrace of Islam in 1666, several of those congregations turned to R. Sasportas – one of Zevi's most outspoken opponents – for guidance. R. Sasportas advised each of those communities to return to their previously-held custom which limited *Birkat Kohanim* to the holidays. Perhaps one of the reasons why the Vilna Gaon and his great disciple R. Chaim of Volozhin were unsuccessful in changing this Ashkenazic custom (see n. 13) – despite the power of their scholarship and personalities – was because, in the minds of many, calls for reciting *Birkat Kohanim* more frequently had unfortunately become associated with the tragic episode of Sabbatai Zevi one century earlier.

however, needs to be carefully supervised to ensure that no *Kohanim* who have imbibed intoxicating beverages bless the congregation.

Custom 2: While fully agreeing with the need to limit *Birkat Kohanim* to the narrow window of *Musaf* during the holidays, some communities realized this would cause serious challenges on *Simhat Torah*. Having completed a full year's worth of weekly Torah readings, people would feel a strong urge to celebrate the occasion by toasting one another. In the midst of such a celebratory atmosphere, it would be too difficult to control which *Kohanim* remained eligible to bless the congregation and which ones needed to refrain from doing so based on how many toasts they had enjoyed.

Such locales were left with just two options: A) completely omitting *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*, and B) moving *Birkat Kohanim* from *Musaf* to *Shaharit* on that day.

Many of those communities did not consider cancelling *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* to be an option. After all, with so few opportunities for *Kohanim* to bless the congregations of Ashkenazic lands, *Simhat Torah* was a precious opportunity to receive those blessings. As such, many congregations hoped to find a way to make that happen. Not willing to lose out on *Birkat Kohanim*, they took the bold step of moving *Birkat Kohanim* to *Shaharit* on *Simhat Torah*. By moving those blessings to a point in the service which preceded the Torah reading – and celebratory toasts – they ensured that all of their *Kohanim* were in fact eligible to participate in *Birkat Kohanim*.

How did those communities justify this break from the classic Ashkenazic custom which limited *Birkat Kohanim* to the *Musaf* service of the holidays alone? It is possible to say that their thought process was similar to the above-cited observation of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (O.H. 128:64):

Behold, there is certainly no proper explanation of our custom to neglect the Biblical precepts of *Birkat Kohanim* all year long... However, what can we do? It is as if a heavenly voice called out and will not allow us to engage in *Birkat Kohanim* throughout the year...

In the view of those communities, the ultimate reason behind this Ashkenazic custom to limit *Birkat Kohanim* to *Musaf* during the holidays alone was never fully clear. As such, some communities recognized they could not engage in *Birkat Kohanim* during *Musaf* on *Simhat Torah* since there would be no way to properly monitor which *Kohanim* should bless the congregation. At the same time, they were not prepared to omit *Birkat*

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Kohanim altogether on that day. As such, those communities felt justified in taking the bold step of moving *Birkat Kohanim* from *Musaf* to *Shaharit* on *Simhat Torah*.¹⁷

Custom 3: Now it is easy to understand how a third custom – that of omitting *Birkat Kohanim* altogether on *Simhat Torah* – developed. This custom adheres most closely to the ancient Ashkenazic custom which R. Isserles defended. As R. Isserles explained, *Birkat Kohanim* can only be recited when the *Kohanim* are in an absolute state of happiness. In the Diaspora, such a level of joy can only be achieved during *Musaf* on the holidays. As such, there were simply no other times of the year when Ashkenazim living outside the land of Israel could honestly experience such happiness.¹⁸

Since allowing *Birkat Kohanim* during *Musaf* on *Simhat Torah* was highly problematic, and moving those blessing to *Shaharit* was simply not an option for some communities, there remained no way for *Kohanim* to recite the priestly blessings in those locales. As such, for those who felt compelled to take R. Isserles' explanation of a perplexing but long-standing Ashkenazic custom seriously, no option for performing *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* in the Diaspora remained. Hence, odd as it sounds, in some Ashkenazic communities – outside the Land of Israel – the custom developed to completely omit the priestly blessings on *Simhat Torah*.¹⁹ At this point in my research I felt confident that I had arrived at a proper understanding of Keshet Israel Congregation's above-cited *Simhat Torah* custom.²⁰

¹⁷ I thank R. Yisroel Reisman (*Rosh Yeshiva* of *Yeshiva Torah Vodaas* and *Rav* of Agudath Israel of Madison – Brooklyn, NY) for clarifying this point in a personal communication.

¹⁸ See *Arukh ha-Shulhan* O.H. 129:2, where he plainly states that he could not imagine *Birkat Kohanim* taking place at any point other than *Musaf*.

¹⁹ This third custom was the position of the *Levush* and the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* cited above. It should be noted that the custom of completely omitting *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* is unique to Jewish communities in the Diaspora. After all, the priestly blessings would be recited during the *Shaharit* service in Israel on *Shemini Atzeret/Simhat Torah*, as per normal practice. As such, of the three customs regarding the recitation of *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* mentioned above (sections II and VI), it is logical that only the first two would have developed in Israel.

²⁰ After researching this topic, I am somewhat surprised that every other synagogue or yeshiva where I had spent *Simhat Torah* prior to moving to Harrisburg was accustomed to recite *Birkat Kohanim* during *Shaharit* on that day. After all, acquiescing to such an innovative liturgical change seems out of character for most Orthodox institutions.

VII. AN ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

In the course of researching this topic, I learned that the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio also follows the custom of completely omitting *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*.²¹ Having grown up in Cleveland, I knew that the Telshe Yeshiva made great efforts to retain their liturgical customs as they were originally practiced in pre-World War II Lithuania. After *Sukkot* of 5773/2012, I wrote to R. Sholom Shapiro of the Telshe Yeshiva hoping to learn more about this custom.²²

The day after I had mailed my letter to R. Shapiro, I was amazed to see him walk in and join Keshet Israel for its morning *minyán* (he had stopped in Harrisburg while driving between Cleveland and the greater New York area). Following services, R. Shapiro was gracious enough to spend time discussing this matter with me. In addition to confirming my understanding of how the three above-cited Ashkenazic customs had developed, R. Shapiro shared one more fascinating resource with me.

It seems that many Hasidic communities also omit *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*.²³ Some do so, however, for a completely different reason than discussed above. In his work entitled *Shem mi-Shemuel*, R. Shmuel Bornsztain²⁴ writes in the name of R. Hanokh Henakh Levin of Alexander (1798-1870):

The reason for the custom of *Kohanim* refraining from *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* is as follows: Having received the blessings of Moses, we do not require the blessings of the *Kohanim*. And if they were to offer us their blessings, it would be disparaging to the blessings of Moses.²⁵

Accordingly, some Hasidic communities omit *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* in order to avoid showing any disrespect to Moses. After all, in the

²¹ The yeshiva was founded in 1875 in Telshe, Lithuania. Under the leadership of R. Elya Meir Bloch and R. Chaim Mordecai Katz, the yeshiva was reestablished in Cleveland, OH in 1941. In 1957, the yeshiva moved to its current campus in Wickliffe, OH – just outside of Cleveland.

²² R. Shapiro is the *Menabel Ruhani* and *Rosh Kolloel* of the Telshe Yeshiva. He has also published several works detailing his yeshiva's unique customs. Their custom of omitting *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* is listed as item number 17 on p. 59 in R. Shapiro's *Kuntres Minhagei Yeshivat Telshe* (Wickliffe, Ohio, 5773).

²³ See *Sefer Nitei Gavriel* on *Sukkot* (Jerusalem, 5762), 467 n. 5 for a list of Hasidic communities which follow this custom.

²⁴ R. Bornsztain (1855-1926, Poland) was the second *Rebbe* of the Sokhotchover Hasidic dynasty.

²⁵ *Shem mi-Shemuel* on *Sukkot*, 233.

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final chapters of the Torah read on *Simhat Torah*, Moses blessed each of the twelve tribes of Israel with lofty blessings. Some Hasidic communities feared that calling upon their own *Kohanim* to bless their congregations would imply they were still in need of blessings even after having just read the blessings which Moses had conferred upon all of Israel.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The above-cited novel explanation of the *Shem mi-Shemuel* might explain the practice of some Hasidic communities.²⁶ However, it is extremely unlikely that this would explain the custom of Harrisburg's Keshet Israel Congregation, which was founded by non-Hasidic Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. I feel confident that KI's longstanding custom of omitting *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* is based on the above-cited rulings of the *Levush* and *Arukh ha-Shulhan*, and is rooted in the previously-cited theory of R. Moshe Isserles.²⁷

²⁶ I found a nearly identical explanation offered in *Sefer Mishmeret Shalom* (47:4) by R. Shalom of Koidanov-Brahin (1850-1925).

²⁷ R. Shapiro shared one more interesting detail with me. The official custom of the Telshe Yeshiva is to omit *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*. However, for many years, a smaller unofficial later *minyan* was held at another location of the yeshiva's campus on the morning of *Simhat Torah*. As that unofficial *minyan* did not follow all of the longstanding Telshe customs, *Birkat Kohanim* was recited during their *Shaharit* service. Fully aware of this, each year, after completing their own prayers at the yeshiva's official *Minyan* (*sans Birkat Kohanim*), several of the yeshiva's rabbis and students would stop into that later *minyan* in order to be blessed by their *Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah*.