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## A NOTE ON THE INTRODUCTION TO THE PRIESTLY BENEDECTION (*BIRKAT KOHANIM*)

There is a syntactical difficulty in the introduction to the priestly benediction (*Birkat Kohanim*; Num. 6:24-26) in most *siddurim*. The text reads:

*Elohenu velohay avotaynu  
barkheinu ba-berakha ha-meshuleshet  
Ba-Torah ha-ketuvah al yedei Moshe avdekha  
ha-amurah mi-pi Aharon u-banav  
Kohanim (?)  
Am kedoshkha ka-amur:*

A translation of which could be:

God and God of our fathers  
Bless us with the triple blessing  
[Found] in the Torah written by your servant Moses  
Delivered via Aaron and his sons  
*Priests* (?)  
Your holy nation, as it is written:

The last phrase does not clearly flow from what precedes it or into what follows. Standard *siddurim* with faithful English translations are noticeably awkward at this point (P. Birnbaum, Daily Prayer Book, Hebrew Publishing Co., New York, 1949 and 1977, p. 96: “. . . Aaron and his sons the priests, thy holy people, as it is said”; J. Sacks, Authorized Daily Prayerbook, 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Collins, London, 2007: “. . . Aaron and his sons the

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I thank the anonymous reader who pointed me in the direction of several additional sources relevant to this discussion.

## TRADITION

priests, Your holy people, as it is said.”). ArtScroll has a nearly identical translation (N. Scherman, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1990, p. 116, “. . . Aaron and his sons, the Kohanim, Your holy people, as it is said”) and attempts to explain the awkward syntax by pointing out that the *Kohanim* are described as a holy people because they were designated to serve God and bless Israel. The ArtScroll commentary cites I *Chr.* 23:13 as proof; however, this verse does not use the word *am* (people) to describe the *kohanim*; the verse simply states that Aaron and his sons were designated to consecrate holy objects, burn incense and bless the people.

In *Siddur R. Saadia Gaon* (ed. I. Davidson, S. Assaf, B.I. Joel, *Mekize Nirdamim*, Jerusalem, 1941, p. 42) the introductory phrase appears in a slightly altered format, obviating the grammatical awkwardness:

*Elohenu velohay avotaynu*  
*barkhenu ba-berakha ba-meshuleshet*  
*ba-Torah ha-ketuvah al yedei Moshe avdekha*  
*ha-amurah al yedei Aharon u-banav*  
Kohanei  
*am kedoshbekha ka-amur:*

There are two differences in R. Saadia Gaon’s version of the introduction. The first (*mi-pi*, lit. from the mouths of, to *al yedei*, lit., via the hands of) is minor and of no consequence. The second difference, however, of only a single letter in the Hebrew (the final *mem* is missing from the word *kohanim* [priests], making it the possessive *kohanei* [priests of]) allows the translation to be much smoother:

God and God of our fathers  
Bless us with the triple blessing  
(Found) in the Torah written by your servant Moses  
Delivered via Aaron and his sons  
*Priests of Your holy nation, as it is written:*

A footnote in *Siddur R. Saadia Gaon* excerpts the *Sefer Avudraham* (David ben Joseph Avudraham, 14<sup>th</sup> century) on this passage. In full, Avudraham (Saphrograph, N.Y., p. 64) quoted R. Joseph Kimhi (c. 1105-c. 1170, father of the more well-known David and Moshe), who made two points: First, R. Kimhi objected to the language “Priests of Your holy nation” because the *Kohanim* were priests of God, not of Israel; similarly prophets were never called “prophets of Israel” but rather “prophets of God.”

R. Kimhi seems to be referring here to the opinion of R. Huna the son of R. Yehoshua, who stated that the *Kohanim* were messengers of God (*Yoma* 19a, *Kiddushin* 23b and elsewhere).<sup>1</sup>

Second, R. Kimhi objected to calling priests a nation (*contra* the commentary in the ArtScroll *siddur*) because they are never referred to as such in the Bible; he proves this by citing verses such as Exodus 19:24 (and similarly II *Kings* 23:2), *Isaiah* 24:2, and *Hoshea* 4:9, where the words “priest/priests” and “nation” appear in the same sentence as separate entities. R. Kimhi concluded by stating that the correct text (*ha-nakhon lomar*) should read *Kohanim be-am kedoshbekha*, i.e. “priests in Your holy nation.”

Both the reading in the *Siddur R. Saadia Gaon* and the postulated reading of R. Kimhi are smoother than the reading in standard *siddurim*. Support for the reading of *Siddur R. Saadia Gaon* could be brought from the Talmud and *Mahzor Vitri*. *Sotah* 39b documents the custom of calling out “*Kohanim*” (priests) at the beginning of the priestly benediction. It would not be hard to imagine that the word “*Kohanim*” thus entered the *siddur* alongside or instead of the word “*Kohanei*.” *Mahzor Vitri* (ed. S.H. Horovitz, Nurnberg, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, 5683, reprinted Israel [no date] and by Lyon Press, Brooklyn, NY [no date], p. 67) has the text “*Ha-amurah mi-pi Aharon u-banav am kedoshbekha ka-amur*” without the word “*Kohanim*,” supporting the contention that the word “*Kohanim*” may have entered the text later.

However, Avudraham, after quoting R. Kimhi, concluded that “*Kohanim am kedoshbekha*” could be correct (*ve-nir’ah li she-yukhal lomar*) because of the (similar) phrase “*u-benei Aharon am kedoshbekha*” (and the children of Aaron Your holy people) that appears in the confessional of the high priest during the Yom Kippur additional (*Mussaf*) service, in both the *siddurim* of Rav Amram (*helek rishon*, 5716, Saphrograph, N.Y. p. 50) and R. Saadia Gaon (*op. cit.* pp. 273, 278 and 286). Presumably since *u-benei Aharon* (the sons of Aaron) are priests (*Kohanim*), Avudraham considered the two phrases equivalent.

Oddly, Avudraham did not cite the mishna in *Yoma* (4:2) where the phrase “*u-benei Aharon am kedoshbekha*” first appears, nor did he respond to R. Kimhi’s second objection, that the priests are never referred to as a nation. Finally, he did not cite the text from *Mahzor Vitri*, even though

<sup>1</sup> There are two differences between the formulation of R. Kimhi and that of R. Huna. R. Kimhi used the expression *Kohanei ha-Shem* (God’s [i.e., not Israel’s]) priests, rather than *shelihei de-rabmana ninhu* (they are agents of God [i.e. and not agents of the people]). The second difference is the additional counter-example of the prophets, which is only brought by R. Kimhi and not R. Huna.

the text “*Aharon u-banav am kedoshkha*” in the *Mahzor Vitri* is nearly identical to the wording of the mishna in *Yoma*, “*u-benei Aharon am kedoshkha*.” Abraham Abele ben Hayyim Ha-levi Gumbiner (ca. 1637-1683, author of the *Magen Avraham*) resolves some of these issues. First, he does cite the mishna in *Yoma* 4:2 when dealing with the wording of the introduction to *Birkat Kohanim* in *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim* 127. Second, he attempted to answer the second objection of R. Kimhi by saying that you cannot call *Kohanim* a nation (*am*),<sup>2</sup> but you can refer to them as “Your holy nation” (*am kedoshkha*).

Despite the slightly awkward syntax,<sup>3</sup> Avudraham’s conclusion, coupled with the answer of the *Magen Avraham*, defends the extant text in standard *siddurim*.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, *lefi aniyut da’ati*, the answer of the *Magen Avraham* is in need of clarification, because if *Kohanim* cannot be referred to as a nation, why can they be called “Your holy nation”? Thus the current reading may not be entirely problem free; as such, the text in *Siddur R. Saadia Gaon*, or the proposed reading of R. Kimhi, may be more satisfying from a literary perspective.

<sup>2</sup> The *Magen Avraham* cited the discussion in *Hulin*, 131a-132b as proof that *Kohanim* are not referred to as a nation (*am*), and did not cite the scriptural verses cited by R. Kimhi. This proof seems to be used by E. Lichtenstein (*Hiddushei ha-Ritva* to *Yoma* 19a, footnote 974, Mosad Harav Kook, Israel, 5756) as well. R. Lichtenstein added that the text of Ritva (R. Yom Tov ben Abraham Ishbili, ca. 1250-1330) had a “*hei*” before the word “*Kohanim*,” to emphasize that the *Kohanim* are *am kedoshkha* (Your holy nation), but not the priests of a holy nation (i.e., Israel), to specifically counter the reading of “*Kohanei*.” See also the gloss to the *Bet Yosef* cited below in n. 4, where the author also agrees that the text should read “*ha-Kohanim*.” If “*ha-Kohanim*” is the correct reading, one could again postulate that the “*hei*” at the beginning of the word fell out due to the influence of the calling out of “*Kohanim*” as prescribed in *Sotah* 39b.

<sup>3</sup> It is curious that none of the standard Medieval or modern commentators on the Mishna (R. Obadiah ben Abraham yare Di-Bertinoro [c. 1450-c. 1516], *Tosafot Yom Tov* [R. Yom Tov Lipman ben Naphtali Ha-Levi Heller, 1579-1654], R. P. Blackman [Judaica Press, N.Y., 1983] or R. P. Kehati [1910-1976]) comment on the unusual phrase “*u-benei Aharon am kedoshkha*” as it occurs in the mishna in *Yoma*.

<sup>4</sup> The *Bet Yosef* (R. Yosef Karo ben Ephraim, 1488-1575) also seems to agree, as he quoted the entire Avudraham in his second to last comment to *siman* 127 of the *Tur* (of Jacob ben Asher, 1270-1320) *Shulhan Arukh Orah Hayyim*. See also the *Shiyarei Knesset ha-Gedolah* (R. Hayyim ben Israel Benveniste, 1603-1673) quoted in the *Hagahot ve-He’arot*, found in the edition of the *Tur Shulhan Arukh* published by Hotel Deborah Ltd. (Tel Aviv, Israel, 1993), who argues against the reading of “*Kohanei am kedoshkha*,” and who continues that even adding the “*hei*” in front of the word “*Kohanim*” (see n. 2) is not necessary.