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**Temple Israel 2009 – Rabbi David J. Fine**

**RH I  
Ritual:  
Upon Introducing Birkat Kohanim**

The last time we came back from a trip to Europe I almost lost my grandfather's tefillin. Or rather, British Airways almost lost my grandfather's tefillin. I have been putting on these tefillin every morning (except Shabbat and holidays, of course) since becoming bar mitzvah. But I missed a few mornings upon my return from that trip until British Airways finally delivered my lost suitcase. I can't begin to describe the relief I felt upon being "reunited" with those small black boxes. But allow me to tell a little of the story of my grandfather's tefillin.

The parchments contained in the black boxes we believe were prepared by a scribe in Eastern Europe about a century ago. My grandfather's parents, both immigrants from Galicia, a Polish province that was then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, gave these tefillin to their American-born son Leo, their sixth and last child, who would go on to become my grandfather. My grandfather went to NYU for college and dental school, and became a dentist in 1935. The family helped him set up his practice on Ocean Avenue in Brooklyn, where he worked until his retirement in 1980. My grandfather worked there every day except for a few years in the early to mid 40s when Dr. Monheit became Captain Monheit and served on a US army base in England. And he put on his tefillin every morning. Whether it was an early morning after night-time bombing raids in England, or minyan at the East Midwood Jewish Center in Brooklyn. My grandfather belonged to Conservative synagogues throughout his adult life. If he wasn't at minyan in the morning then he put his tefillin on at home. I know that putting

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tefillin on in the morning was a routine that he loved. And it was important to him. Almost like brushing teeth. And he always told me to brush my teeth.

My grandparents moved to Florida after my grandfather retired from his dental practice. Grandpa Leo enjoyed a brief retirement there of a little over a year until he died. I remember visiting my grandparents at their condo in Margate. I must have been seven or eight years old. I had never seen a golf course before and I thought it was the most beautiful thing in the world. They had a screened in terrace overlooking that golf course. I went out there after waking up and found my grandfather sitting in his chair in his tallis and tefillin. My parents suggested that I sing for him some of the prayers that I had learned so well at Solomon Schechter. He opened up his siddur to Adon Olam or Ein Keloheinu. I wanted to show him that I was beyond that, so I flipped to the Ashrei and recited it. Now when I say the Ashrei each morning, wearing his tefillin, I remember him sitting there, in those same tefillin, with a look of absolute pride and happiness on his face.

My parents kept the tefillin after Grandpa Leo died. A few years later, when I reached bar mitzvah age, my father took the tefillin to a scribe on the Lower East Side. The scribe, or sofer, opened the boxes and shared with us how beautiful and special that the parchments were. The scribe replaced the boxes and the straps, but the parchments inside are the same ones that my grandfather wrapped himself in each morning. I learned how to wear tefillin that year and have worn them ever since. Every morning before school. High school, college, rabbinical school. On every vacation. On planes and in airports. Across the country, in Israel, on safari in Africa, in Poland and in Germany. Every day is a new day and we never know exactly what the day will bring. But every

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day starts the same way for me. I put on my tefillin. I remember who I am and to whom I belong. And then the day can start.

I cannot imagine not putting tefillin on in the morning. And so I was anxious, to say the least, when our luggage was temporarily lost on our way home from Europe that summer. I had thought they were gone. The tefillin was the only thing I really cared about in the suitcase. I was furious at myself for not putting it into the carry-on luggage. That was back in the days before restrictions on carry-on luggage. I was starting to resign myself to the reality that I might not see them again. I figured I was lucky to have worn them for twenty years. I knew that the real connection to my grandfather was that we were saying the same words in the morning, that we had the same traditions and values, more than the pieces of parchment we wrapped around our arms and heads. And yet there was something in the wearing of the tefillin, in the physicality of it, that could not be replaced by anything else.

I was profoundly relieved when the suitcase containing the tefillin was delivered to our house a few days after we landed at JFK. I was reminded about how grateful I ought to be for having this ritual every day. There are other rituals which are just as powerful. Our tradition has so many different parts that will appeal to different people. Yes, we teach our seventh graders about tefillin. But, and this is a difficult “but” for a rabbi and teacher to admit, it is difficult to teach rituals as a part of a school curriculum. To be learned, a ritual needs to be experienced, and that is most memorably done with family.

The most popularly observed Jewish ritual is the Passover seder, and our first memory of our childhood seders is not what melody we sang for the Four Questions or

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how much bitter herb we swallowed, but rather, who was there sitting around the table.

We remember performing rituals with others, with family.

People who grew up with Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing, in their synagogues will remember standing together as a family, with a tallis wrapped around them, trying to peak through to see the mystery of the ritual. The kohanim and the levi'im leave the room towards the end of the musaf service. The kohanim take off their shoes and then the levi'im wash their hands. The kohanim then ascend the bimah, drape the long talleisim over their heads, raise their hands out with the ancient sign of God's blessing, and sing the words, repeating each one after the Cantor. We know those words very well. It is the threefold blessing, the blessing of Aaron, that we use on all sacred occasions. May God bless you and keep you. May God show you favor and be gracious to you. May God show you kindness and grant you peace. This has been done through this ritual since the very beginnings of ancient Israel.

The Temple service was the center of the Israelite cult. Since the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans we no longer sacrifice animals as a way of reaching God. While the Temple's loss has been mourned for two thousand years, most of us believe that the end of animal sacrifice was good for the Jews. Maimonides, the great medieval rabbi, argued that prayer is a higher form of worship than sacrifice. And yet there are a few rituals that we do that originate from that most ancient period of our religious history. One of them is the shofar. No one can fully describe the power and meaning of that sound when we hear it. Its power, though, is not objective. Although the book of Joshua does testify that the walls of Jericho fell down when the Israelites blew the shofar blasts, we know that the shofar's power is particularly poignant in Jewish ears,

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because of what the sound *means* to us. More than just a horn or battle alarm, the shofar speaks directly to our souls and reaches points inside of us that even the best psychologists cannot approach. Another ancient ritual is the lulav and etrog. Signs of the harvest and perhaps also fertility symbols, the lulav and etrog are used in the Sukkot service in a few weeks. While not observed overwhelmingly in the Jewish world today, Sukkot was *the* high holiday of ancient Israel when the people took up the palm and the citron and invoked God's blessing for a fruitful year. I invite you to call our office this week or next and order a lulav and etrog. Use it with us in synagogue. Or have it at home for the festival.

The other most ancient ritual that we have retained is the Birkat Kohanim, the Priestly Blessing. Commanded in the Torah, this is the only actual prayer that the Torah gives us to say. Yes, the Shema Yisrael comes from the Torah, but it is not phrased or presented as a prayer in the Torah the way that the threefold blessing is. These three lines have been said in the context of Jewish worship since the very beginning. In the Israel Museum in Jerusalem you can see a stone inscribed with these three lines in the ancient Hebrew script. It is the oldest known inscription of any part of the Bible. I don't know of any other ritual that we have that is that ancient, except, as I said, the shofar and the lulav and etrog. All of our other observances and traditions have evolved and changed through the course of time, to some degree or another. And yet Birkat Kohanim is in danger of being forgotten.

For many years the Priestly Blessing was simply omitted in Conservative congregations. This was part of a larger discomfort with ritual in general. While at least most of the men in Conservative synagogues wear kippah and tallit, few will wear

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tefillin, even on a weekday service. And on Sukkot, it is often only a minority, sometimes only the Rabbi and Cantor, who have a lulav and etrog. Tefillin, lulav and etrog are too physical. Let us just come to synagogue and sit. But this is changing today. As a result of the success of the egalitarian revolution, women have started to explore the meaning of synagogue rituals, an area that was traditionally restricted to men. This has developed into a new appreciation of rituals for men and women together. And it is the right thing. As much as I love the intellectual side of Judaism, I know that Judaism cannot perpetuate itself purely as a philosophy. It needs to be lived and experienced, and that is through ritual.

The Priestly Blessing is being reintroduced into Conservative congregations across the country, and we at Temple Israel are adding it this year as a part of that greater movement. Some have expressed reservations with Birkat Kohanim because of the implied hierarchy between the kohanim and the rest of us. While I understand that, nothing could be further from the intention of tradition here. Someone needs to recite the wording, and if it were open for anyone then how would we decide who would go up and who would not? The Talmud teaches us that the reason why the first aliyah to the Torah reading goes to a kohen is so that people don't fight over who has the most honor and should have the first aliyah. A kohen is given the aliyah because he or she is a kohen, not because he or she is more important or more honorable. All kohanim can take part in the Priestly Blessing. It is in fact the *only* part of the service that is not selected either by our special high holidays honor committee that distributes all the other parts, or the President, the Rabbi and the Cantor, who are elected by special congregational votes. There is no vote, no selection, to be a kohen. It is not a special honor. It is pure ritual.

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The text of the Blessing is about God's protection and the peace it brings. Just as the kohanim cover their heads with their long talleisim, we also bend our heads or put our tallis over our heads, imagining, feeling God's protective arm enveloping us. Families should stand together for the blessing. If you have a large enough tallit you can drape it over children; if not, you can place your hands over your children's heads, blessing them as the Cantor and the kohanim recite the blessing from the bimah. Tradition teaches us not to look at the kohanim. By preserving a sense of mystery and magic, the observance becomes all the more memorable, especially for our children. They will remember this. We should be at that point shortly after 12:30, within the last half hour of the service. And if there are kohanim and levi'im, men *and* women, who would like to participate but are not sure what to do, Bob Obeiter, our ritual chair, will be available to explain things when I invite the kohanim and levi'im to prepare. But not to worry; it is not complicated.

Although, the kohanim do have to form a complicated sign with their hands, we're not supposed to look, and even if we do it's supposed to be covered by their talleisim, but with their hands they make this sign: [*signify*]. Yes! This is the Vulcan salute! And this year we did experience a bit of a Star Trek renaissance in our surrounding popular culture, passing that "tradition" on to a new generation with the release of the new movie. But Leonard Nimoy only took the idea from synagogue. He confesses he used to peek during the ritual. If you have no idea what I'm talking about you may be better off, but Mr. Spock, an alien character on Star Trek, makes this sign of greeting and farewell, with the words: "Live long and prosper. Peace, long life,"—not so dissimilar either from the text of our ancient liturgy. The hand forms the Hebrew letter *shin*. It can stand for Shaddai, a name of God. It has three limbs, signifying the three-

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fold blessing. And it refers to the last word of the third line of the blessing which starts with the letter *shin*: “shalom.”

Star Trek may be forty-something years old, but Birkat Kohanim is three thousand years old. Our children do not know it. Many of us do not know it. But we can recover it. And we should. Because it will stay with us.

What is the most memorable part of a Rosh HaShanah service? Hmm? Why the hesitation? The Rabbi’s sermon of course! But no. I had to reread my past sermons this week to recall what I spoke about just a year or two ago. The most memorable moment is the shofar blowing. When we think back as adults upon going to synagogue on this day as children, that is what we recall. That and, perhaps the Birkat Kohanim if we grew up in a synagogue that preserved that tradition. I can still feel the texture of my father’s tallis draping over my head. I still remember the shoving back and forth between me and my brothers under what was left over of the tallis that my parents were holding. I remember staring really hard through the fabric, trying to see the kohanim. And I remember listening. I remember the Cantor’s voice calling out those words, and the kohanim responding, and then the hundreds of worshippers in the congregation saying Amen.

Birkat Kohanim is a lot easier than tefillin. Nothing complicated to wrap around the arms. And, at least outside of Israel, it only happens a few times a year at synagogue, unlike putting on tefillin every morning. There is no item to purchase. It is easily handed down. This is an experience, something shared. A way of standing together and praying. The object of the Priestly Blessing are the words themselves, and those words have a much longer history than the particular black boxes that my grandfather wore before they

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came down to me. Let us not lose this powerful ritual the way I almost lost my grandfather's tefillin.