

In a recent responsum, Rabbi Joseph B. Serfaty of the Portuguese Community of Amsterdam discusses the effect of the interruption of synagogue services on the minhag of reciting Birkat Cohanim on Saba. The question stems from a tradition received from previous generations of cohanim that if the recitation stops, the cohanim may then only continue to duchan on festivals.

The recitation of the priestly blessing on Saba was introduced in Amsterdam in the seventeenth century, when the community fell under the spell of Sabbetai Sebi. At first, the cohanim had only blessed the community on yamim tobim. Duchenen on Saba was meant to prepare congregants for the Temple service. When the false messiah was exposed, the community had a problem: Birkat Cohanim is a mitzva, and the community had adopted it; yet the original minhag was different and the change had been introduced by a charlatan. While the chief rabbi Chacham Isaac Aboab advised that the weekly blessing should continue, a community member, Itschak Nunes Henriques, solicited the opinion of Chacham Jacob Sasportas, former rosh yeshiva of Ets Chaim. Replying from Hamburg, he recommended the community revert to the minhag which had existed before Sabbetai Sebi.¹ The opinion of Chacham Chaim Benvenisti in Smirna (Izmir) was sought on the matter. He upheld Chacham Aboab's view that the weekly blessing should continue and halevai if it were recited daily.² The parnassim passed a resolution approving the chacham's decision, thus establishing and confirming the consensus in the community.

Meanwhile, a tradition exists among the cohanim in our community that if the weekly recitation is interrupted, we are required to return to the earlier minhag. Indeed, even in wartime when services continued to be held in secret, no interruption occurred until Covid-19 forced us to halt services in the summer of 2020. So now the question is: should we continue, or revert to the former practice?

In his responsum, Rabbi Serfaty refers to another instance of an opinion transmitted from one generation to the next and becoming a tradition. Namely, that Jews are forbidden by a cherem to enter Spain. He notes that while Rabbi Eliezer Waldenberg wondered whether it is possible for a ban that is not found in writing to have halachic authority,³ Chacham BenZion Uziel held that every Sephardi Jew knew about the ban and obeyed it. By contrast, Chacham Obadia Yossef doubted the existence of the cherem and explained that, in the event of a doubt, a tradition is no more than hearsay.

It is significant that Chacham Shem Tob Gaguine does not mention the tradition that the cohanim should stop reciting Birkat Cohanim on Saba if the practice is interrupted.⁴ That the Keter Shem Tob remains silent on the matter indicates that the tradition is also no more than hearsay and not binding.

In his discussion, Chacham Sasportas writes that if the weekly recitation is deliberately stopped, it may be resumed when the practice is no longer connected to Sabbetai Sebi. According to this opinion there is no inherent objection to resuming the weekly blessing, or even to instituting a daily blessing. At the same time, according to Chacham Aboab's opinion that the weekly recitation should continue, an interruption would not require a cessation of the practice.

Unravelling this mystery, Rabbi Serfaty cites his introductory address to a rabbinic conference held in Madrid in 2007, in which he finally disposed of the notion that Jews are forbidden under halacha from

¹ See Teshuva by Chacham Sasportas in Ohel Jacob, caps 68 to 71, and Kitsur Tsitsat Nobel Sebi, p. 113.

² See Shi'urei Knesset Hagedolah, cap. 128.

³ See Tzitz Eliezer, vol. 5, cap. 17.

⁴ See Keter Shem Tob on Birkat Cohanim, vol. 1, p. 222 to 227.

entering Spain. There is no such rabbinic ban. The only ban is the edict issued by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella on 30 March 1492, barring Jews from entering Spain on pain of death because they had converted Christians to Judaism. After the Spanish government annulled the decree, no foundation remained for the supposed rabbinic ban.

The rabbi then quotes an article written by Chacham Shlomo Rodrigues Pereira in honour of Rav Aaron Schuster,⁵ referring to the situation in The Hague before the Second World War. The story begins in 1866, when cholera had struck and Rabbi Issachar Baer Berenstein had decided that the cohanim should duchan on Saba to strengthen the community in imploring G-d's help against the epidemic. After the danger had passed, it was decided not to suddenly stop the weekly duchan as if G-d's protection were no longer required, but to continue until a natural break occurred, after which the cohanim would revert to their original minhag. In the event, the practice continued without interruption until the Second World War, when synagogue services were brought to an end. This rule spread confusion among cohanim elsewhere in the Netherlands. In Amsterdam, the cohanim thought that it also applied to them, even though this was based on hearsay and not on a rabbinical decision.

In the Bet Joseph, Birkat Cohanim is given as a daily mitsva. The Rama explains that in practice the recitation is limited to yamim tobim because these are days of simchah and especially suited to the priestly blessing. Note that the idea of reciting the blessing on Saba does not stem from Sabbetai Sebi. The medieval Kol Bo mentions that the blessing is recited on yom tob and Saba because these are not workdays: during the week, the mitpallelim have to work and are pressed for time.⁶

Rabbi Serfaty explains that there are therefore two reasons to duchan on Saba: Saba is not a workday, and as the Rama says, we duchan on yom tob because it is a day of simchah, and the Sifri says that Saba is also a day of simchah.⁷ He points out that there is a difference between these two reasons: if the reason is that we don't work, it has no impact on Rosh Chodesh, because that can fall on a workday; but if the reason is that it is a day of simchah, then we should also duchan on Rosh Chodesh.

Just as Rabbi Berenstein introduced the recitation of the priestly blessing on Saba during an epidemic, Rabbi Serfaty proposes to introduce the Birkat Cohanim on Rosh Chodesh following the Corona intermission of 2020. As he notes in a deraas delivered on Lag Langomer, Rosh Chodesh is the most appropriate time to pray for Divine intervention during an epidemic.⁸

Introducing Birkat Cohanim on Rosh Chodesh will finally reconcile the opinions of our two chachamim, Isaac Aboab and Jacob Sasportas. Chacham Sasportas stated that we could resume the weekly recitation after an interruption, and even commence the daily recitation. From this it is clear that we have his agreement to introduce the priestly blessing on Rosh Chodesh. Indeed, it disconnects the recitation from the false messiah because Sabbetai Sebi only introduced it on Saba as a non-workday, and we propose to introduce the recitation on Rosh Chodesh as a day of simchah. This way, we both confirm Chacham Aboab's opinion, while respecting the opinion of Chacham Sasportas.

⁵ See M. Bolle (ed), *Liber amicorum voor Opperrabbijn A. Schuster* (1971).

⁶ See Rabbi Aharon Hacoheh of Lunel, *Kol Bo*, cap. 125.

⁷ See Sifri, *Behangalotecha*, cap. 77.

⁸ See *Tosafot Bamidbar* cap. 28, v. 9.