

Guidelines for *Birkat Kohanim* (Duchaning) During the Rainy Season Heshvan 5781

Prepared by the Halakha Committee of the
Rabbi Jacob Berman Community Center – Tiferet Moshe Synagogue

Over the past several summer months, the “Berman Shul” has been davening outside of the shul in the amphitheater of the *Midreshet Yaakov* Teacher’s Seminary. The Kohanim have asked the Halakha Committee for guidance regarding how to proceed with *Birkat Kohanim* during the cold rainy season. We note that presently, the *Kohanim* congregate on the concrete floor in front-center of the amphitheater for *Birkat Kohanim*, not on any raised platform (*Duchan*). Considering that the concrete floor of the amphitheater in Winter is likely to be cold and wet, *Duchaning* without shoes will be extremely uncomfortable, to say the least, and could at times present a serious health threat. As of this writing, a dry covered raised platform (wooden/rubber/plastic) area is not available – perhaps near the “pergola” - though this should be considered.

We begin our proposal by citing the comments of R. Eliezer Melamed in his “*Peninei Halakha*”.¹ [Additions in brackets and bolding for emphasis are ours]

One of the nine enactments instituted by Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai (who lived at the time of the destruction of the Second Temple) pertains to the law of *Birkat Kohanim*. He decreed that the *Kohanim* must not ascend the *duchan* [raised platform] to bless the nation while wearing sandals or shoes. There are a number of reasons for this enactment, one being out of respect for the congregation, for it is **not appropriate for the *Kohanim* to bless the nation with mud on their shoes**. Likewise, the Temple services were performed by the *Kohanim* without shoes, due to the sanctity of the site. The halachic reason for this enactment is that the laces of **the *Kohen’s* shoes might become loose**, causing him to feel uncomfortable standing on the ***duchan***, which is a high place, where he can be seen by the whole nation. To hide his embarrassment, he would have to bend down and tie his laces, and the people might misinterpret his bending and not reciting *Birkat Kohanim* as his admission of not actually being a *Kohen* (*Sotah* 40a).

Based on these reasons, **a *Kohen* may not ascend the *duchan* with shoes or sandals, nor with slippers that have laces**. Regarding slippers, if they are made of leather, even without laces, it is prohibited to ascend the *duchan* in them as well, since ordinary shoes are generally made of leather, and all leather shoes are included in the enactment of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai. **However, it is permissible to ascend the *duchan* in non-leather slippers that do not have laces**.

In cases of extenuating circumstances [e.g., illness, aged, Army boots]... some poskim are lenient and allow a *Kohen* to bless the people [in their shoes] while standing on the floor of the synagogue, not ascending the *duchan* ... **provided that their shoes are clean** (... see Tzitz Eliezer 14:11 and Yechaveh Da’at 2:13).

¹ R. Eliezer Waldman, *Peninei Halakha, Tefila*, Chapter 20 - *Birkat Kohanim* – The Priestly Blessing, Section 8 – The *Kohen’s* Obligation to Remove His Shoes Before the Blessing; available online at <https://ph.yhb.org.il/en/category/tefila/20-birkat-kohanim-the-priestly-blessing/>

Several poskim² point out that while non-leather house slippers are fundamentally permissible, the general custom of *Kohanim* under normative conditions (e.g., Yom Kippur and Tisha beAv) is to remove these before *duchaning* as well. It would seem, however, that this stringency can certainly be set aside under harsh weather conditions or other extenuating *שעת הדחק* circumstances.

Based on the cited Responsa we conclude that:

(1) The preferred solution is for the *Kohanim* to switch before *Birkat Kohanim* from their everyday shoes or sandals to clean non-laced, non-leather house slippers. It might be advisable for the shul to purchase several sets of cheap slippers for this purpose.

(2) If the Kohen is wearing non-leather non-laced/slip-on shoes and these are inconvenient for him to remove – during the cold rainy weather he may say *Birkat Kohanim* in these as well, **provided they are clean**. This is all the more true because *Birkat Kohanim* at the outdoor Berman amphitheater minyan is performed at ground level and not on a raised platform (*duchan*).

(3) If the weather is particularly cold and wet, and the above non-laced non-leather slippers are not suitable or available, there is room to permit the *Kohen* to say *Birkat Kohanim* in his shoes at the outdoor Berman amphitheater minyan. This is because *Birkat Kohanim* at the amphitheater minyan is not performed on a raised platform. This is not the desired option, however, and the *Kohen* should be strongly encouraged to obtain non-laced, non-leather house slippers for the future.

We reiterate that these leniencies are for the present *שעת הדחק* Corona situation, where the congregants will be gathering outside the synagogue during the very cold and wet winter season. These leniencies are specifically not suitable for normative situations.

We trust that we have supplied The Board with sufficient information to approach the issues raised wisely and effectively. We remain willing to assist the Board in its future deliberations.

Be-Khavod Rav,

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² R. Ben Zion Rabinowitz, *Piskei Teshuvot*, II, sec 128, no. 14; R. David Yosef, *Halakha Berura*, VI, sec. 128, no. 16; R. Yechiel Avraham Zilber, *Birur Halakha, Tlita'a*, sec. 128, *Shulhan Arukh* no. 5. The *Arukh haShulkhan*, sec 128, no. 12 is lenient, even *lekhatehilla*, as far as non-leather shoes that do not have laces.