## A Guide to Birkat KohanimTemple Emanu-El of Palm Beach

*'May G‑d bless you and guard you.’
'May G‑d shine His countenance upon you and be gracious to you.’
'May G‑d turn His countenance toward you and grant you peace.'*

*Numbers 6:24-26*

## Washing the Hands of the Kohen

* The Kohen is required to ritually wash and sanctify his/her hands before *Birkat Kohanim*.
* The *al netilat yadayim* blessing is not recited after this hand-washing.
* The hands should be washed in the closest possible time-proximity to the *Birkat Kohanim*(typically after the *Kedushah*is recited in the Repetition of the *Amidah*).
* The Torah conferred upon the tribe of Levi the privilege of assisting the Kohanim. Thus, the honor of washing the Kohanim's hands belongs to the Levites.
* If no Levite is in attendance, the Kohen should wash his/her own hands.
* Before washing the Kohen's hands, the Levite should wash his/her own hands.
* The Kohen's hands are washed as is customary when washing for bread—right hand three times and then left hand three times.
* The Kohen should not speak between the hand-washing and the *Birkat Kohanim*.

## Removal of Shoes

* The Kohen removes his/her shoes before the *Birkat Kohanim*.
* The Kohen should remove his/her shoes before the washing of hands.
* Out of respect for the congregation, the shoes should not be strewn in the synagogue aisles. Instead, they should be neatly tucked out of sight, beneath a chair or table, for the duration of the blessing.

## Moments before the Blessing

* The *Hazzan’s* beginning the *Retzei* blessing is the cue for the Kohanim to rise and make their way to the front of the sanctuary (all hands should be washed *before* this point). The Kohanim *must* start making their way to the front of the sanctuary when the *chazzan* begins this blessing.
* The Kohanim stand in front of the congregation facing the Ark.
* As the *Hazzan* finishes the *Modim* blessing, the Kohanim then cover their heads and upper body with their *tallit* and awaits the start of the *Birkat Kohanim*.

## Calling Upon the Kohanim

* The *Hazzan* recites the prayer which precedes the *Birkat Kohanim* ("Our G‑d and G‑d of our fathers, bless us with the threefold [Priestly] Blessing…"), until he reaches the word "Kohanim"—which he proclaims out loud; officially summoning the Kohanim to discharge their priestly duty.
* The *Hazzan* then continues, "*am kedoshecha ka'amur*"
* At this point, the Kohanim – who are facing the Ark – rotate themselves clockwise to face the congregation and chant the blessing thanking God for "sanctifying us with Aaron's sanctity and commanding us to bless His nation Israel with love."



* *Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech HaOlam Asher Kid’shanu B’kidushato shel Aaharon, V’tzi’vanu Lvarech et Amo Yisrael b’ahavah.*

## Raised Hands

* Immediately *after* the blessing, the Kohanim lift their hands beneath their *tallits*—shoulder-high, palms outstretched and facing downwards.
* The fingers are positioned in a manner which leaves "windows" through which G‑d's blessings flow to the congregation.
* The Kohanim should not gaze at their hands during the *Birkat Kohanim*.

## The Chazzan Leads

* The *Hazzan* then leads the Kohanim in the *Birkat Kohanim*. He recites aloud the fifteen words of the blessing:



The Hebrew words are:

*Yivarechecha
Adonai
viyishmirecha*

*#*

*Ya'er
Adonai
panav
elecha
veechuneka*

*#*

*Yeesa
Adonai
panav
elecha
viyasem
lecha
shalom*

* **The Kohanim repeat after the *Hazzan* word-for-word.**
* The Kohanim must chant the words of the *Birkat Kohanim* in a loud voice—but not a shout.
* The Kohanim must wait for the *Hazzan* to completely conclude saying a word before repeating it.
* It is traditional in many communities for the Kohanim to precede the final word in each section with a short melody.
* After the conclusion of the *Birkat Kohanim,* the Kohanim remain facing the congregation until the *Hazzan* begins the *Sim Shalom* blessing. At this point they turn around – clockwise again – and only when they are once again facing the Ark may they bring down their outstretched hands.
* The Kohanim remain at the front of the sanctuary until the conclusion of *Kaddish Shalem* which immediately follows the Repetition of the *Musaf* *Amidah*.
* They then (put on their shoes) and file back to their places.