

Kol HaRav

The practice of "dukhening" (Kohanim, priests, blessing the congregation) has had no place in Conservative synagogues for as long as I can remember. Though I have heard of Conservative synagogues that have reinstated it, by and large its use has faded with the spread of egalitarianism. Paradoxically, the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative movement ruled years ago that the daughters of Kohanim are permitted to join their fathers in performing this ritual. And the traditional text is found in our siddur and Mahzor.

There have always been congregants who objected to this ritual. Their objections were often directed at some of the Kohanim who joined others on the bimah and whose personal life apparently left something to be desired. "Why should that [expletive deleted] bless me?" and they would walk out.

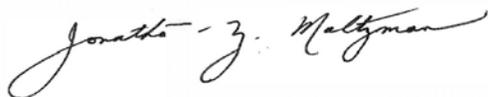
But it is not the Kohanim who do the blessing but rather God: "Thus they shall link My [God's] name with the people and I will bless them." "I will bless them" — note well. It is God who blesses, not the Kohanim. They simply channel God's blessing to God's people.

The contemporary objections to the ritual are somewhat more refined. I am as committed to an egalitarian worship service as anyone, but why not try it once or twice a year? It lends drama to a service that is singularly wordy and lacking in drama. The traditional nusach or musical chant for the blessing is hauntingly beautiful.

Theologically, what fascinates me about the text of the blessing is the double reference in the Hebrew version of the second and third blessings to God's "face," *panav*. We pray that God's face (or countenance) "shine upon us and be gracious to us," and then, that God "lift up God's face upon us and grant us peace."

But what does it mean to claim that God has a face? It is clearly a metaphor — God doesn't really have a face. But what does the metaphor convey? Probably, it is through the notion of God's face that we can have an interpersonal relationship with God. The face establishes the identity of that person, the sense of who that person really is. We can't relate to someone who doesn't permit us to see his or her face. These blessings express the wish that God look at us, smile at us, relate to and care for us.

If for no other reason, then, for those of us who seek a personal relationship with God, the blessing of the Kohanim is worthwhile. Look for it this year on Yom Kippur.



Rabbi Jonathan Z. Maltzman