



# The Chazan's Pre-Birkat Kohanim Practice

לעילוי נשמת  
 יואל אפרים בן אברהם עוזיאל זלצמן ז"ל

**Question:** In *chutz la'arezt*, I was taught that the *chazan* says the whole *Elokeinu Veilokei Avotainu* prayer quietly except for calling out the word “*kohanim*.” In Israel, someone else says “*kohanim*.” Does the *chazan* still recite the whole prayer quietly? What is the logic of the two practices?

**Answer:** The main point of the prayer of *Elokeinu Veilokei Avotainu* (=EVA) is to beseech Hashem for the benefits of the *berachot* that constitute *Birkat Kohanim* in lieu of the *kohanim* carrying out their *mitzva* (Rav Amram Gaon, cited in the Tur, Orach Chayim 127). Although EVA is apparently a post-Talmudic institution (see Tosafot, Berachot 34a), it is accepted that this is not a *hefsek* in *chazarat hashatz*. Realize that *Birkat Kohanim* is supposed to be incorporated in *chazarat hashatz*, with the *gemara* (Megilla 18a) explaining its appropriateness at that exact juncture. The *chazan* is expected to recite the *berachot*'s words to prompt the *kohanim*, and that too is not a *hefsek* (Rashi, Berachot 34a; Rambam, Tefilla 14:8). Similarly, the *Birkat Kohanim* stand-in is appropriate for the *chazan*. Tosafot (Berachot 34a) also infers

from the *mishna* (ad loc.) that were it not for concern that he might confuse himself, the *chazan* could have answered *amen* to the *Birkat Kohanim*.

The disagreement begins in regard to the *chazan*'s involvement when **there is** *Birkat Kohanim*. Rabbeinu Tam (cited by Tosafot, *ibid.*; Rosh, Berachot 5:17) posits that despite the fact that leading *Birkat Kohanim* is not a *hefsek* for the *chazan* and that someone needs to call the *kohanim*, a *gabbai* should call them instead of the *chazan* (note that in the *gemara* and other early sources, the word *chazan* is what we call a *gabbai*).

The Rosh (*ibid.*) cites the argument of the Ri that the objection to the *chazan* calling the *kohanim* may have disappeared once the prayer of EVA was instituted. That is because now the *chazan* can use the recitation of the word “*kohanim*” within the text of EVA to call them. The Tur (OC 128) and others report that the Maharam MeiRutenberg used to do this, and that he said all of EVA silently except for “*kohanim*.” Perhaps when only that word is said out loud, it is more discernable as a call to the *kohanim* in addition to part of a prayer. (When someone other than the *chazan* prompts, he immediately says that one word, so that the Maharam's system slightly delays

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the beginning of *Birkat Kohanim*). On the other hand, others report (see Hagahot Maimoniot Tefilla 14:7) that the Maharam changed his practice, and as *chazan*, no longer recited *EVA* or called out to the *kohanim*.

Concerning practical Halacha, the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 128:8), following the Rambam (ibid.), has the *chazan* calling out *Kohanim* without *EVA*, and this is the Sephardi *minhag* (Yalkut Yosef, OC 127:2 and 128:35). The Rama (ad loc.) cites as the *minhag* the earlier practice of the Maharam, that the *chazan* says *EVA* quietly, except for “*kohanim*” out loud. This is the *minhag* that you grew up with in *chutz la'arets*, where it is still prevalent for Ashkenazim. The Gra (Ma'aseh Rav 168) follows Rabbeinu Tam – a *gabbai* should call out *kohanim*, whereas the *chazan* just recites the *Birkat Kohanim* itself before the *kohanim*. As not infrequently happens, the *minhag* of the Gra became the *minhag* of the Ashkenazim of *Eretz Yisrael*.

It is theoretically possible to posit that even according to the *minhag* that a *gabbai* calls out *kohanim*, the *chazan* still says *EVA* quietly. One can even argue that this has an advantage in making the *chazan's* word-by-word prompting of *Birkat Kohanim* less of a *hefsek*, as it is incorporated into the text of *EVA*. However, since the consensus is that in the time of *Chazal*, before the prayer of *EVA* was used at all, the *chazan* led the *kohanim* in *Birkat Kohanim*, it

must not be a problem of *hefsek* at all. Such a practice does not fit in with any of the three main *minhagim*. (Perhaps, some *chazanim*, especially those who are used to the *minhag* of *chutz la'arets*, say all of *EVA* quietly before *Birkat Kohanim*. However, this is a mistaken practice, albeit, not a critical one.) ■

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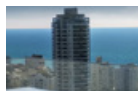
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