

VEBDE REBDE

Answering Birkat Kohanim when One Kohen Finishes Last

Question: *In my shul, one kohen regularly finishes Birkat Kohanim after the others. When should I answer AMEIN?*

Answer: The gemara (Sota 39b) says that the congregation should not answer AMEIN before the kohanim have completed each b'racha. Is this halacha referring to all the kohanim completing the b'rachot or is a majority enough?

Let us check parallel contexts. Rav Chisda (B'rachot 47a) says that while the one cutting the loaf of bread should wait until those present answer AMEIN to his b'racha, he does not wait for a minority who unnecessarily stretch out AMEIN. Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chayim 124:9) rules that during chazarat hashatz, a chazan needs to wait only for the majority to answer AMEIN and not for a minority that takes an unnecessarily long time. The Mishna Berura (ad loc. 38) says that an exception is in a context in which one is continuing with a b'racha that each member of the congregation has a personal obligation to hear. In our case, although the congregation's involvement may have importance (Sefer HaCharedim, Aseh 4:18), the kohen who is has not finished is apparently not deprived of any obligation. (On a practical note, the

introductory b'racha and the first two p'sukim end with a vowel, "ahava", "vyishmerecha", and "viychuneka", respectively, so that when it is stretched out, the last word is usually complete. The main problem is with the last b'racha, where the "o" of shalom is stretched out before the "m" is pronounced.

Why must the congregation not answer AMEIN to Birkat Kohanim too early? The B'er Sheva (Sota 39b) says that it is a simple application of a rule regarding b'rachot. The gemara (B'rachot 47a) refers to an improper AMEIN called AMEIN chatufa, which some say is answering before the b'racha is completed (see Shulchan Aruch, OC 124:8). This is probably worse than a chazan starting a new b'racha before all have finished AMEIN to the previous one, so perhaps a majority is not enough. However, it is hard to imagine that this would be a problem after most of the kohanim finished a b'racha, as the AMEIN is aimed on the b'racha of the majority, who have finished.

The Halachot Ketanot (II:48, cited in Mishna Berura 55:4), regarding Kaddish, talks about answering different reciters who finish at different times. He says that if they finish within toch kdei dibur (approx 1.5 seconds) of each other, one can choose to answer after the earlier or the later; if they are separated by more than that, one should answer both separately. The Birchot Horai (9:(9))

posits that the same is true for an unevenly finished Birkat Kohanim. He cites, without a source or explanation, Rav S.Z. Auerbach as preferring to wait until the later person is finished.

Should it make a difference that here there is a clear majority? We have seen that we follow the majority regarding the end of the recitation of AMEIN for Hamotzi and in chazarat hashatz. However, that is apparently because of the assumption that the majority, not the minority, is doing things correctly, but if the majority is fast and the minority is at a nice pace, one should wait for the minority (Be'ur Halacha to 124:9). This is because of a specific issue with stretching out AMEIN, which can distort the word (Tosafot, B'rachot 47a; Mishna Berura 167:85), and it is unlikely this is a problem for the words of Birkat Kohanim. Therefore, on a basic level, it is better to wait for the last person.

The kohanim are expected to recite Birkat Kohanim in unison (see Tosafot, Sota 39b), although they are not angels, who can do things exactly. However, it is not ideal for one to stretch out words significantly longer than his friends. Therefore, the lack of conformity could arguably make the slower person's recitation inappropriate and make it preferable to follow the majority. However, such a determination, especially with the potential for hard feelings it could cause, is not something we can make a call on from

a distance. It is also not appropriate for an individual congregant to "take a stand" in a publicly discernable manner.

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