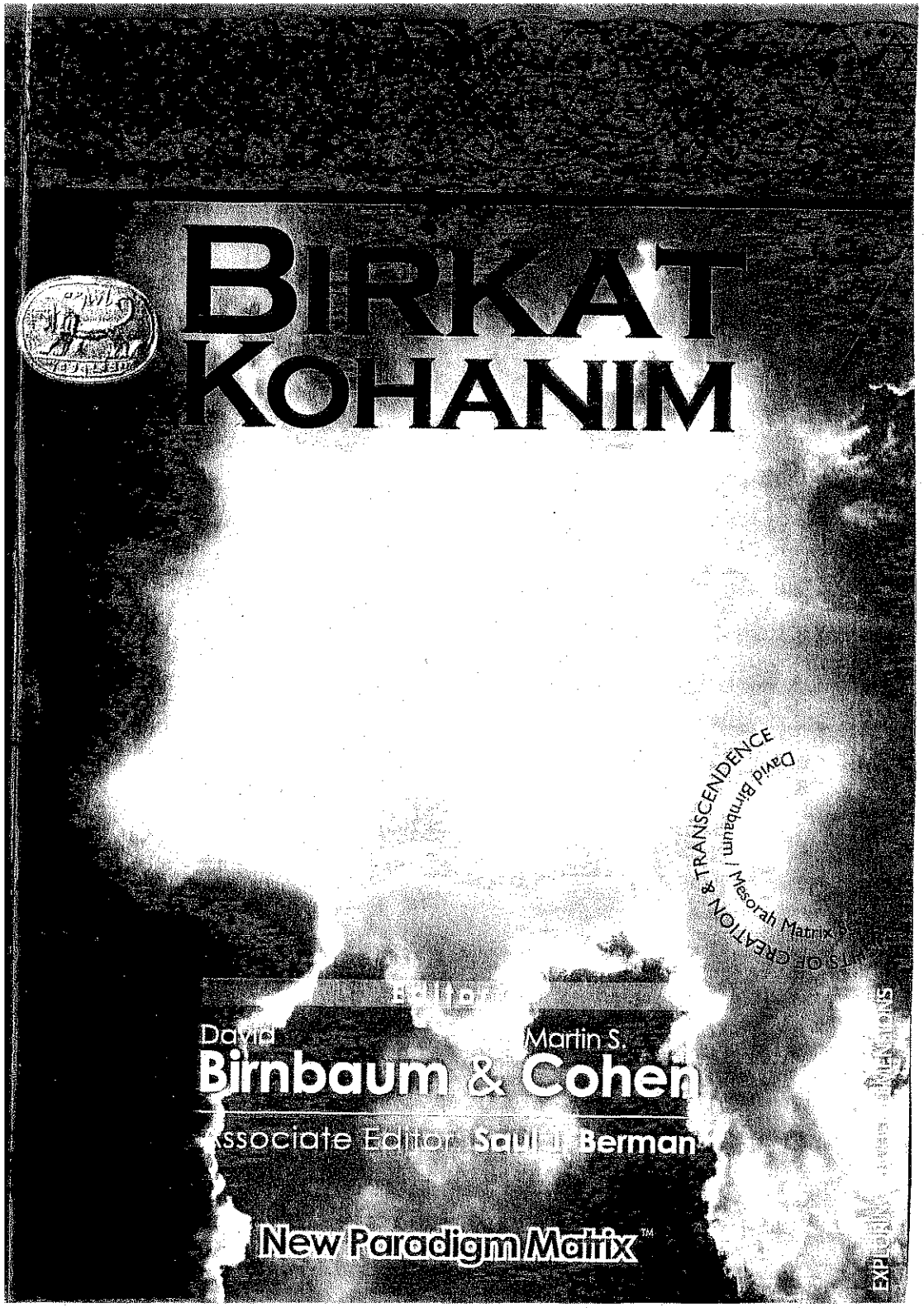

David Birnbaum & Martin S. Cohen

Birkat Kohanim

The Priestly Blessing

with essays by

Howard Avruhm Addison, Michael J. Broyde & Mark Goldfeder, Reuven P. Bulka, Shalom Carmy, Aryeh Cohen, Martin S. Cohen, Yeshaya Dalsace, Elliot N. Dorff, Alon C. Ferency, Aubrey L. Glazer, Michael Graetz, Daniel Greyber, Robert A. Harris, James Jacobson-Maisels, Michael Knopf, Admiel Kosman, David Mescheloff, Nehemia Polen, Avram Israel Reisner, Jonathan Sacks, and Shohama Harris Wiener & David Evan Markus

Saul J. Berman
Associate Editor

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in Abraham Ibn Ezra), or the contextual sense (as in Rashbam). In all these interpretive approaches, the text is read as it appears visually and spatially on the page." David Stern, "The First Jewish Books and the Early History of Jewish Reading," in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 98:2 (2008), pp. 163–202 (quoted material appears on p. 199). For a recent provocative thesis about how twelfth-century study of the Talmud factored into the changes I am describing with respect to Bible study, see Talya Fishman, *Becoming the People of the Talmud : Oral Torah as Written Tradition in Medieval Jewish Cultures* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), especially pp. 91–155.

[43] The classic study of this phenomenon remains Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), although much has been written since, as would be expected.

[44] A recent and brilliant book on the composition of the Gloss is Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2009). For a different, yet still insightful, approach to the Gloss in the context of medieval literary theory, see David A. Salomon, *An Introduction to the Glossa Ordinaria as Medieval Hypertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012).

[45] A recent attempt to systematically compare Rashi and the Gloss is Devorah Schoenfeld, *Isaac on Jewish and Christian Altars: Polemic and Exegesis in Rashi and the Glossa Ordinaria* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

[46] For a more detailed accounting of this, see Robert A. Harris, *Discerning Parallelism: A Study in Northern French Medieval Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2004), pp. 35–40.

[47] The famous teaching of Pirkei Avot 5:21: "Ben Bag Bag would say: turn it over and turn it over (perpetually), for all is in it; see with it; grow old and worn in it; do not budge from it, for there is nothing better."

Birkat Kohanim in the *S'fat Emet*

Nehemia Polen

The root *bet-resh-kaf* in its various forms appears about 450 times in the Hebrew Bible, and the Priestly Blessing may be seen as the highest expression of this core concept. Powerful in its simplicity and elegance, the increasing sequence of three-five-seven words bespeaks assurance of divine protection, grace, and peace. While the family narratives in Genesis are propelled largely by siblings' struggles to receive their parents' blessing, the Priestly Blessing is striking in its universal scope and equal applicability to every individual. Composed in the second-person singular, each listener is addressed individually and hears the "you" of the blessing as meant for himself or herself. The patriarchal blessings in Genesis seem to be a zero-sum game, provoking envy because the special favor bestowed on one brother appears to detract from what remains for the others. By contrast, in its sweeping generality and embracing language, the Priestly Blessing prompts benevolence rather than competition, dissolving much of the dynamic tension of the Genesis story.

Yet there are aspects of the Priestly Blessing that seem alien to moderns. There is the fact that in the Bible, the mandate to bless the people is awarded to Aaron and his children: the right to invoke these potent words appears to be limited to them. This of course is part of the wider puzzle of the election of Aaron in the Book of Exodus (28:1). As Jeffrey Tigay has observed, "The Bible never explains why Aaron was granted the priesthood."[1] The priesthood is hereditary, promised to

Aaron's sons and later descendants: "And the priesthood shall be theirs for a perpetual statute" (Exodus 29:9). The Aaronides are the ones who, the first-person voice of God says in Numbers, should "place My name upon the Children of Israel" (Numbers 6:27).

The notion of a hereditary priesthood is perplexing in our day and age. We are suspicious of inherited privilege of all kinds, and many people find the idea of innate distinction between individuals to be troubling and problematic. Yet while the special election of Aaron and his progeny is a central feature of all the priestly texts, hardly anything remains in today's Judaism of the priestly sacrificial system; since the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple almost two thousand years ago, Rabbinic Judaism has placed prayer and Torah study at the center of religious life. But the rite of the Priestly Blessing is still practiced in traditional synagogues, chanted by those claiming descent from Aaron. It is almost the only surviving element of ancient Temple-based, priestly-centered ritual in contemporary Jewish practice. What are we to make of this sacred endowed prerogative in our egalitarian society? To be sure, the tendency in Jewish tradition has been to democratize the Blessing, widening the circle of those authorized to pronounce it. It is a long-standing custom for parents to bless their children using these words, and in many congregations it is the rabbi who invokes the Priestly Blessing at life-cycle events and during services. Yet the question remains: are these uses of the Blessing disruptive adaptations, appropriations of an ancient biblical practice but largely discontinuous from it, or is there a way to understand them as natural and organic extensions of the ancient biblical (and Second Temple) rite?

Another problem relates to the very idea of blessing, whose efficacy is based on pronouncing certain words. From the days of classical antiquity's philosophical schools, we have been taught to be suspicious of claims that words in themselves have power; it is considered a mark of archaic, unenlightened thinking to confuse

words and things. Jacob Milgrom, the late and renowned Bible scholar, acknowledges that some narratives in Genesis assume that the patriarchal blessings have "inherent powers of fulfillment"; once uttered, they take effect ineluctably.[2] Yet in an essay on our topic, he asserts that in general blessings are nothing more than prayers, and that the Priestly Blessing specifically should be understood as the priests' prayer on behalf of Israel.[3] This position appears to be motivated by apologetic considerations and is difficult to maintain: when biblical narrative wishes to have an eminent figure pray on behalf of another, it says so explicitly.[4] While they may be closely related and sometimes overlap, prayer and blessing are really different concepts; each is too important in the biblical world for the two to be confused or for one to be collapsed into the other. How then do we understand the Priestly Blessing? Does the implied biblical theology of this practice take the words to have magical efficacy, and if so, how do we relate to this claim?

These issues are addressed in a series of teachings by a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter, known as the Gerer Rebbe (1847–1905).[5] Perhaps the most prominent rebbe of his day, he was a noble exemplar of the Przysucha school of Polish Hasidism, which emphasized intellectual attainment in talmudic study, cultivated a certain independence of thinking, demoted the centrality of belief in paranormal powers, and stressed (as Abraham Joshua Heschel put it) a "passion for truth."[6] As Arthur Green has pointed out, Rabbi Aryeh Leib developed a language at once devout and sophisticated, which spoke to not only the pious faithful but also to the newly urbanized and somewhat acculturated Jewish residents of large population centers such as Warsaw. The collection of his Torah discourses, the *S'fat Emet*, published shortly after his death, is widely considered one of the greatest hasidic Torah commentaries, distinguished by mastery of classic sources, profundity and freshness of insight, literary flair, and economy of expression. Eschewing technical kabbalistic terminology, it

is elusive without being arcane or esoteric—a breathtaking combination of concise exposition and sublime spiritual vision.

Like nearly all hasidic masters, the S'fat Emet follows in the footsteps of the founders of Hasidism, especially the Baal Shem Tov, in emphasizing the presence of God everywhere. God is the essential reality of the cosmos, and the human religious task is to become ever more fully aware of this reality. The omnipresence of God might be taken as a theological doctrine, an article of faith whose truth requires assent. But it is closer to the spirit of Hasidism to think of omnipresence as a way of seeing the world, an inner disposition and perspective on life to be constantly cultivated rather than a theological proposition commanding agreement once and for all. The S'fat Emet stands firmly within this early hasidic tradition, but he develops his own characteristic language to express and enhance it.

Rabbi Aryeh Leib was situated at the very center of a large and devoted hasidic community of the most traditional stripe, the kind that today would be called *ḥaredi*. Indeed, he was its leader. Yet in his *S'fat Emet*, he avoided the rhetorical tropes typical of pietistic books of the time: exhortations to more meticulous fulfillment of the commandments, calls to belief in the classic articles of faith, threats of punishment and promises of reward in the afterlife, and even traditional God-language. His piety and holy devotion were exemplary, but his discourse cast a much wider net. By highlighting the centrality of mindful awareness in daily life, by stressing the importance of inner preparation for every religious act even more than the act itself, by softening if not collapsing the distinctions between the holy and the profane, by emphasizing the interdependence and interpenetration of Sabbath and weekday, he sounds remarkably contemporary, having anticipated and articulated a modern and even postmodern religious sensibility.

In the *S'fat Emet*, polar opposites are not collapsed or absorbed one into the other, but rather come into full mutuality as each faces the other dialogically, respectfully acknowledges the other, and beckons

the other to more sublime possibility. This theological posture is often referred to as monism, the assertion of ultimate unity beyond the multitudinous, contentious surface that the world seems to present. But it is important to note that for the S'fat Emet, polar positions do not disappear; rather, they are acknowledged as they are brought into ever-closer proximity and dialogue with each other. Boundaries are bridged, rigid categories are tunneled through, without erasing the boundaries or destroying the categories. Spirit crowns but does not replace the physical; the sacred caps the mundane without trumping it.

This stance is inherently difficult to maintain, insofar as it cannot struggle too vigorously with opposing views. Were it to fight against other perspectives, it would thereby confirm their dualism and undermine its own claim of unity. Hence the monistic viewpoint must be satisfied with speaking its own truth with clarity and vitality. When opposition emerges, it is viewed as a cutting edge of growth, the horizon of further opportunity. This is the way the *S'fat Emet* understands election and the special roles in space, time, and person of Temple, Sabbath, and priest. They are not defined in opposition to a presumed estranged Other but rather as vectors pointing asymptotically to unity, never fully attained and therefore always present, always dynamically attractive.

A key term conveying this approach is *n'kudah p'nimit*, the "innermost point." The *n'kudah p'nimit* is a beckoning to interiority, a reminder to avoid superficiality of all kinds. As Arthur Green has noted, the term has a range of meanings and can be variously translated "core of being," "inward reality," or, when combined with another key term, *ḥayyim*, "inner life-point."[8] The *n'kudah* is a fundamental element of consciousness that, when recognized and nurtured, opens the individual to more profound awareness of self, the world, and divinity. Rabbi Aryeh Leib's interest is more phenomenological than metaphysical, more call to awareness than theological assertion. He invites his readers (originally his audience)[9]

to develop sublime perception and inhabit a gracious, inclusive mode of seeing ever more securely, opening eyes to truth, the ultimate unity of all things. An important aspect of that truth is that the inner point was always within the individual who discovers it, waiting to be awakened; and the process of discovery and awakening never end. We already possess the *n'kudah p'nimit* but at the same time we need to work to make it manifest. Reaching for the *n'kudah p'nimit* is what today is often called a spiritual practice: the *n'kudah* is not a goal, a prize to be seized and captured, but a wisdom path of constant effort on which every milestone of success leads immediately to others, and in which no lapse is ever ruinous beyond recovery.

This brief introduction to the *S'fat Emet* will assist us in entering his thought on the Priestly Blessing, which departs radically from the traditional approach, and will be seen to speak to the questions that opened this essay[10]. He does this by a daring reframing of three key words: "face," "hands," and the final, all-important word of the Blessing, *shalom*.

Face

The Priestly Blessing refers twice to the "face [of God]," with the possessive pronoun, "His face" (*panav*): once in Numbers 6:25, and again in 6:26. In his comment to verse 25, "may the Eternal make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you," the S'fat Emet associates the word for "face," *panim*, with *p'nimiyut*, "inwardness." At first glance this move may seem unjustified philologically, a homiletical flight of fancy not grounded in the plain meaning of the words. But like many such exegetical associations, beginning with the classical midrash, what initially strikes the reader as an unconvincing act of lexical legerdemain may upon further consideration turn out to uncover deeper resonances of the text. The S'fat Emet directs us to

Deuteronomy 5:4, the verse introducing Deuteronomy's account of the revelation at Sinai, which states: "Face to face (*panim b'fanim*) the Eternal spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire." The language of "face to face" surely means to convey an unmediated encounter with God,[11] and that in turn suggests that the people confronted God in the totality of their being, without barriers, poses, or veils. One could hardly imagine a direct rendezvous with divinity with one's attention distracted. Indeed, that seems to be the point of the verse, even on the level of *p'shat*, the so-called plain or simple meaning of the text.[12] So while the notion of interiority surely underwent significant development over the millennia up to our own day, the S'fat Emet is persuasive in pointing to the Torah itself for the kernel of the notion that experiencing the divine Face directed toward oneself, shining and smiling, is meant to be a catalyst for total presence and touching the depths of one's own being.

By referencing Deuteronomy 5:4, Rabbi Aryeh Leib suggests that genuine revelation, aside from any specific communicative content (such as the words of the Decalogue), brings us face to face with the life-force of the cosmos—with, as he puts it, the source of vitality (*shoresh ha-ḥiyyut*). In the face-to-face encounter at Sinai, the people achieved a state of interiority, the fullness of their own being turned lovingly, joyously to the reality of supernal Presence. Since this is the Face that the Priestly Blessing pronounces as directed our way, it follows that, indeed, what is being elicited is our own inwardness.

The S'fat Emet then addresses the second occurrence of the word panav in Birkat Kohanim, "May the Eternal lift up His face toward you" (*yissa Adonai panav eilekha*, Numbers 6:25). The midrash[13] understands this as a promise to treat Israel favorably—that is, preferentially. This leads to a midrashic exploration of the question of how preferential treatment is consistent with divine justice. The midrash has God say: "How can I not treat Israel preferentially when they do more than expected, going above and beyond the requirements of the Torah's

rules? I asked them to recite Grace after a bountiful, filling meal, but they bless Me even after the smallest morsel, even when they don't have enough to satisfy themselves and their families. In light of their graciousness to Me, how can I—God—not treat them with favor?"

Based on a tradition from his grandfather, the S'fat Emet frames this midrashic motif as associated with *p'nimiyut*, interiority. Awareness that food is a gift from God gives satisfaction and a sense of bounty, of blessedness. This promotes a feeling of satiety: the alertness to God's nourishing presence is a better channel of plenitude than the amount of food ingested. When we are connected to *p'nimiyut*, inwardness, and to *shoresh ha-ḥiyyut*, the source of vitality, then we know that food is divinity materialized, and that's what gives it its sustaining power. Eating can be an act that is primarily a quest for interiority, rather than a craving for taste and satisfaction of appetite. We are nourished by mindful awareness more than by ingestion. Eating is a paradigm of all our interactions with the physical world; what *p'nimiyut* calls for is a stance that does not seek to incorporate the objects of this world into the self. Rather than merely fulfilling desire, one can cultivate appreciative awareness of divinity in whatever it is that graciously provides nourishment. God indeed looks with favor at a person who constantly subordinates one's personal appetites in order to be attached to *p'nimiyut ha-ḥiyyut*, the vital force of interiority. Since the core being of such a person is Godly, occasional flaws and missteps are forgiven as not reflective of one's essence. So, responding to the midrash's question, God is quite justified in looking at us favorably when we refrain from chasing superficial desires, rather focusing on that "vital force of interiority." This is just what Numbers 6:26 promises: divine recognition of our own deep and sweet savoring of the Presence. That is not playing favorites—it is mutual attunement and sympathetic resonance, Divinity recognizing Itself.

Scripture often associates blessing with bounty and abundance, with images of overflowing granaries and flocks covering the hillsides.

There is a long and impressive interpretive tradition that understands the Priestly Blessing in precisely this way. Rashi's very first comment on Numbers 6:24 is: "May your possessions increase." This emphasis is not surprising in light of the fragile economic circumstances of biblical agrarian society, always on the edge. The situation in pre-war Poland was hardly much better: many Jews were never far from destitution, and starvation was a constant threat. Yet here, Rabbi Aryeh Leib completely reframes the meaning of blessing: there is no mention of material abundance, only of mindfulness, including the practice of mindful eating—which assures that every small morsel of food is savored not for gustatory delight but as divine gift, a delight of the spirit rather than the palate.

Hand

Another lexical focus of the *S'fat Emet* is the word "hands." His point of departure is Leviticus 9:22, "Aaron lifted his hands (*yadav*) toward the people and blessed them," which verse is understood by the midrash (as well as many modern commentators) to be identical with or closely associated with the Priestly Blessing.[15] Indeed, in rabbinic literature this priestly rite is often called *n'si·at kappayim*, "raising the hands (literally: palms)." Midrashic texts see this posture as one of channeling the Shekhinah toward the people; the Presence stands behind the priests and the effusion of blessing comes through the cracks formed by the characteristic finger-formation that the priests adopt. That is why the congregation is warned against gazing at the fingers of the priests: one should not look at the dazzling light of the Divine Presence.[16]

This approach, with its air of shamanistic transmission, is avoided by the *S'fat Emet*. Rather, he sees the raised hands as a posture of yielding, of receiving, of humility. He notes that Aaron's hands were

lifted "toward the people"—which he takes as a gesture of gratitude, acknowledging that the greatness and the distinction he had just attained (the passage refers to the inauguration day of the priests and Tabernacle service) are due to the people as a whole. That is: in Leviticus 9:22 Aaron was saluting the people, acknowledging the centrality of their role in his own elevation. Although in Leviticus 9 Aaron had himself offered an entire series of sacrifices, he realized, at the end of the day, that God had granted him authority only because of the people—which fact he acknowledged by lifting his hands, saluting them. Greatness comes from, and requires constant nurturance from, surrender.

Everyone can and should take on the role of the priest, affirming and confirming blessing for those who are not aware that they are already blessed. To the extent of one's certainty—in the place of clarity about blessedness—one is invited to bless those who are not yet clear that they are also already blessed. The role of the priest is to empower others to face forward and bless still others, ultimately inviting all into the great chain of united being, the cascading flow of blessing.

Shalom

Our attention now moves to the last word of Birkat Kohanim: *shalom*, "peace." It is axiomatic that peace is not just the absence of conflict but in fact a positive state of wholeness or well-being. The *S'fat Emet* takes this insight further, noting that *shalom* is called "the vessel that embraces blessing,"[17] and that Shabbat—the blessed capstone of creation (Genesis 2:3), is also associated with *shalom*. (To this day, the practice in many communities is to greet one another with the words Shabbat Shalom.) This enables the S'fat Emet to call *shalom* "inner vitality" (*ḥiyyut p'nimit*[18]), the "point that gives life to every living being" (*n'kudah ha-notenet ḥayyim l'khol ḥai*), "the fulfillment of everything"

(*sh'leimut ha-kol*). The Gerer employs his characteristic language of inwardness with generosity, linking it to *shalom* in a way that makes the Priestly Blessing a call to all-inclusiveness, an invitation to appreciate the soaring range and interconnectedness of all being. As Michael Fishbane has written in an important essay on the *S'fat Emet*, "to penetrate the mystery of *shabbes* is to bring to mindfulness the transcendental unity and totality of divine Reality that lies at the core of all things—despite the apparent multiplicity of the phenomenal world and the scattered perceptions of the unfocused mind."[19] Furthermore, he states: "The proper perception of divine unity behind the phenomenal obscurities of the world is the task incumbent upon the spiritual seeker in the here and now."[20] It is necessary "for the seeker to detach himself from the outer world of flux and form, and devote himself to the divine principle of vitality (*ha-bittul el ko·aḥ ha-ḥiyyut*), at the still center of all being. Only in this way may a person escape the frenetic externality of earthly existence—and return to God, who is the deep presence of the All in all [things]."[21] Fishbane notes that on Shabbat, "which has the stillness and wholeness of *shalom*, one perceives how 'all things complete' or perfect one another."[22]

It is striking that all this is accomplished in the *S'fat Emet* without recourse to the technical language of Kabbalah; some readers may be familiar with the connection between Shabbat and the last divine manifestation or *s'firah*, known as Malkhut ("Kingdom"). But the Gerer's exposition does not depend on this knowledge, and in some ways the teachings do their work of consciousness-transformation better without it.

It would not have been at all difficult for Rabbi Aryeh Leib to have provided precise kabbalistic terminology for his ideas, but he chose not to do so. Rather than definition, all is allusion and gesture. The fertile ground is encircled but is not surveyed with instruments. This may be to some degree a matter of disposition and sentiment—his style is essentially poetic and midrashic, not technical—but it also is utterly

determined by the essence of his views. For the inner point is to be nurtured, not manufactured. It is not a formula to be replicated, but an elusive quality that is slowly teased out of the soul and grasped as the fabric of reality. It cannot be measured by quantity or produced by algorithm; it emerges gradually, if at all.

Summary and Conclusions

The thread that unites the teachings of the S'fat Emet on Birkat Kohanim is that of interiority. The quest for the inner point, the *n'kudah p'nimit*, invites us to achieve suspended moments out of quotidian time when we inhabit the self more deeply and see above more acutely. The *n'kudah p'nimit* enables us to obtain a purchase on reality beyond the accidents of our geographical location, and to envision a self more richly aware of its sacred origins and vital possibilities. The focus is on God's "face" (*panav*), but rather than engaging the literal, anthropomorphic sense of the word, the S'fat Emet consistently links it with *p'nimiyut*, inwardness. There is also a focus on the "hands" of the priests (as in Leviticus 9:22), but here too the S'fat Emet confounds our expectations. One might have anticipated an exploration of "laying on of hands" and the power of hands to channel desired beneficence. Instead, hands elevated are a posture of receptivity and surrender, emblematic recognition that all our attainments derive from the One. The raised hands beckon the people to mindfulness and attachment to the cosmic unity. The hands of the priest tilt upward, above the head, opening the vessels of receptivity more capaciously, more generously, more robustly. We are bidden to loosen the hold that the surface appearance of things has on one's consciousness, to go both deeper and higher than the plane of the obvious, escaping the tyranny of the facade and its dazzle, linking heaven and earth.

It is striking that this approach leaves little room for a more conventional understanding of blessing as relational transaction, where the one giving the blessing bestows something (material or spiritual) onto the recipient. The S'fat Emet's focus is resolutely on the monistic aspects of the Birkat Kohanim: the task of the priests is to draw the people into the state of unity. This unity is the *n'kudah p'nimit*—the focal point, the point where everything comes into true perspective, where all things can be seen in bare integrity without distracting casings.

Nowhere does the S'fat Emet construe the blessing as promising a good in the sense of an advantage or commodity, whether material or spiritual. The Priestly Blessing is more solicitation than transmission. Since all that is offered is a mode of perception, the blesser cannot convey what he or she does not already have. Even more arrestingly, the blesser cannot bestow what the *receiver* does not already have, within, waiting to be awakened and cultivated.

The inner point is nestled in each of the three foundational axes of being: space, time, and person. Within each axis, the inner point is elect, chosen, distinct, special. At the very same time, the specialness is precisely the ability to transform everything else, to see the supposedly unchosen as brimming with the glow of emergent possibility. Time and again the S'fat Emet invokes the rabbinic exegetical maxim: *kol ha-yotzei min ha-k'lal...l'lammeid al ha-k'lal yatza*, "Whatever has been taken out of a general category, has been taken to teach about the category as a whole." Originally this appears as a technical hermeneutical rule,[23] but the S'fat Emet deploys it as an overarching theological principle: election is always for the non-elect. Moreover, it is not just for the benefit of the non-elect, but is in fact to enable a new view of what is perceived to be the non-sacred, the common, what remained in the cosmic urn and was apparently left over by the divine choosing Hand. Shabbat is for the week; the priesthood is for Israel; Israel's election is for the world; and the Holy Temple is to transform our view of place. The expansiveness we seek comes

not so much by widening boundaries as by rising to a place beyond worldly metrics, finding a purchase on reality that in its infinitesimal smallness holds limitless capaciousness.

In this light, it is not surprising that the S'fat Emet does not emphasize the unique qualities of the lineage of the Aaronide priesthood. Aaron and his sons are chosen to give blessing; that is true. But that chosenness is little more than the confidence to welcome others into the ever-expanding blessed circle. Only when the priests realize that their election is grounded in the supposedly non-elect, only when the priests surrender their sense of specialness—only then do they justify and secure their election. At the end of the day, we are all priests. By engaging in humble surrender to God and the putative "other"; by realizing that we must work to cultivate the sublime spirit, the inner point; and at the same time mindful that our attainments must immediately be offered back as gift—by this constant shuttling between struggle and assurance, between achievement and surrender, do we find ourselves worthy to be the resting-place for the name of God.

The view of the S'fat Emet is clearly mystical, but this is an unusual variety of mysticism. The doors of perception are flung open and what is revealed is not a cosmos of angels and demons, not a dewy paradise, nor even an intricate array of ten-spoked kabbalistic wheels-within-wheels. What comes into view is the world as it is and the person as he or she is: beheld in clarity, in sober truth, the better to do what we already know needs to be done, and to struggle to be what we hope to discover we already really are. That is truly a blessing.

NOTES

[1] Jeffrey H. Tigay, annotations on Exodus in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Bretler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 171.
[2] Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 360.
[3] Ibid., "Excursus 13: The Priestly Blessing," p. 360.
[4] See, for example, Genesis 20:7 and 17, where Abraham prays on behalf of Abimelekh; and Numbers 12:13, where Moses prays on behalf of his sister Miriam. The former instance uses the verbal root *pei-lamed-lamed*; the latter, *tzadi-ayin-kof*.
[5] In this essay, I will refer to him by his full name, as "Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib," or simply as "the Gerer," or as the S'fat Emet.
[6] *A Passion for Truth* is the title of Heschel's 1973 work on the Kotzker rebbe.
[7] Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the S'fat Emet, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998), pp. xlvi–xlviii.
[8] Green, *The Language of Truth*, "Introduction," pp. xv–lviii. The discussion of the term *n'kudah* can be found on pp. xxxi–xxxix. My thanks to Rabbi Jonathan Slater for a fruitful discussion on *n'kudah p'nimit*.
[9] For an analysis of how the original orally delivered Yiddish discourses were shaped into the published Hebrew texts, see Daniel Reiser and Ariel Evan Mayse, "The Last Sermon of R. Judah Leib Alter of Ger and the Role of Yiddish for the Study of Hasidic Sermons" (Hebrew), in *Kabbalah: Journal for the Study of Jewish Mystical Texts* 30 (2013), pp. 127–160.
[10] In keeping with the traditional Jewish practice of referring to authors bn y the names of their most famous works, "the S'fat Emet" in this essay refers not just to the book but also to its author, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter. The title of the book is italicized; the phrase "S'far Emet" used to denote the book's author is printed in Roman type.
[11] Cf. Exodus 33:11, speaking of Moses' direct encounter with God.
[12] The point is so striking that the very next verse appears to qualify and perhaps even contradict it. As Bernard M. Levinson writes, the following verse ("I [Moses] stood between the Eternal and you at that time to convey God's word to you") "neither continues nor supplements v. 4 but presents an alternative perspective inconsistent with" it. Levinson's comment appears in his work on Deuteronomy in the *Jewish Study Bible* (supra, n. 1), p. 374. It is as if the notion of each individual Israelite having an unmediated encounter with God was so radical that the text could not let it stand. This of course does nothing to undercut the *S'fat Emet's* point—and, in fact, supports it.
[13] At Bemidbar Rabbah 11:7; cf. B. Berakhot 20b.
[14] See Deuteronomy 8:10, "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Eternal your God."

[15] For one example among many, see Sifrei Bemidbar §39.
[16] See, e.g., the midrashic comments based on Song of Songs 2:9, where the words *meitzitz bein ha-ḥarakhim* ("he peeps through the latticework") are immediately glossed with the phrase *mi-bein etzbe'oteihem shel ha-kohanim*, e.g. at Bemidbar Rabbah 11:2 or Shir Ha-shirim Rabbah 2:24.
[17] M. Uktzin 3:12.
[18] The original text reads *hiyyut p'nimiyut*, which I take for a typographical error for the text as presented here.
[19] Michael Fishbane, "Transcendental Consciousness and Stillness in the Mystical Theology of R. Yehudah Aryeh Leib of Gur," in *Sabbath: Idea, History, Reality*, ed. Gerald J. Blidstein (Beer Sheva: Ben-Gurion University of the Negev Press, 2004), pp. 119–129; quotation appears on pp. 120–121. *Shabbes* is a variant on the more usual *shabbos*, the Yiddish for Sabbath.
[20] Ibid., p. 123.
[21] Ibid., p. 124.
[22] Ibid.
[23] It is one of the Thirteen Hermeneutic Principles of Rabbi Ishmael, which introduces the tannaitic midrash on Leviticus known as the Sifra.

The Intense and Splendiferous Light of the Shekhinah as Reflected in the Ancient Priestly Blessing

Admiel Kosman
Translated from the Hebrew by Martin S. Cohen

In the footsteps of Martin Buber, who generally understood myths as fragments of spiritual events that took place in the inner lives of the ancients, I would like to direct my focus in this essay on something that the tradition forbids us to gaze on at all—that is, the priests as they bless the people with the words preserved at Numbers 6:24–26 and known liturgically as Birkat Kohanim ("The Priestly Blessing")—in an attempt to reconstruct some sense of the original core conception of a ritual that has morphed forward through many different versions and iterations over the course of the many years that separate the biblical period from our own day.[1]

Nevertheless, in contradistinction to Buber (who was at constant loggerheads with the intellectual world of his day, a world that strongly favored a positivist approach that discouraged accepting at face value information culled from ancient documents), I tend these days—after spending about three decades studying the aggadic testimony of Jewish antiquity—to accept this kind of material at face value, and thus to presume that this kind of ancient testimony was possessed in the distant past of a fully real, even tangible, dimension that can under certain circumstances still be recovered today. (Buber, like so many rationalist thinkers that preceded him, felt obliged to consider such information as merely metaphoric—that is to say, as the record of internal feelings or events; but that is precisely the approach I do *not* wish to take.)