**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Halakha and Jewish History**

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**Shiur #24: 1808 *Aliya* of the Gra’s students**

***Customs of Eretz Yisrael***

In a letter to his family, Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman Kramer, better known as the Vilna Gaon or Gra (1720 – 1797), expressed his intention to make *aliya* to *Eretz Yisrael*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Leaving his hometown of Vilna, he made his way to the Austrian border. However, for reasons unknown, he decided to abort his trip.

Rav Yehuda Leib Maimon lists many theories to explain why the Gra turned back and suggests that the main reason was that at the time, the majority of religious Jews living in Yerushalayim were *Chasidim*, whom the Gra opposed. Their halakhic rulings as well as their religious customs were at odds with those of the Gra and his followers.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Ten years later, in 1808, the first group of the Gra’s students made *aliya* to Israel. They were led by Rav Menachem Mendel of Shklow, a student of the Gra. A year later, two more groups made their way to *Eretz Yisrael*, accompanied by the Gra’s student Rav Yisrael of Shklow.

The travelers settled first in Teverya and Tzfat but ended up moving to Yerushalayim, where they established a large and prominent community. The community was referred to as *Perushim*, a name still used today.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What was the reason for this wave of *aliya*? Was it fueled by some messianic attempt at returning the Jewish people to the Land of Israel, or was it just another story of Jews making their way to the holy land due to their love of Tzion?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Scholars and historians debate this question.

Professor Yisrael Bartel argues that this group of *olim* was motivated by theological reasons related to the religious uniqueness of the land of Israel. The group wanted to learn Torah in Israel, as they attached greater value to this mitzva being practiced in the Land of Israel.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Others, however, such as Professor Arie Morgenstern, attribute messianic fervor to the community of the Gra’s students. He shows that when permission was given to the community to build a synagogue in the old city (today the Churva shul), they viewed it as a sign of the beginning of the redemption.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Whatever their reason for *aliya*, the settlement of the Gra’s students in Yerushalayim during the 19th century, along with their establishment of religious institutions there, had an enormous impact on the religious traditions and customs of the entire religious community in Israel.

Much of their impact was in matters of debate between the *Shulchan Arukh* and the Rema. As the Ashkenazi community usually follows the Rema’s rulings while the Sefaradim follow the *Shulchan Arukh*, these customs are practiced differently in each community outside of Israel. However, the following rulings are examples of customs practiced by ALL communities in Eretz Yisrael (or at least the vast majority) in accordance with the Gra’s opinions:

1. The daily recital of *Birkat Kohanim*
2. Refraining from laying *tefilin* during *Chol Ha-moed*
3. Reciting *Shehecheyanu* at a *brit mila*
4. Omitting *Baruch Ado-nai Le-Olam* from *Ma’ariv*

In this *shiur*, we will discuss two of these halakhic rulings of the Gra that have become (even today) the common practice of all Jews living in Eretz Yisrael.

***Birkat Kohanim***

There is a positive mitzva for a *kohen* to recite *Birkat Kohanim*. The Rambam states clearly that this mitzva must be performed daily,[[7]](#footnote-7) during both *Shacharit* and *Mussaf* but not at *Mincha*.[[8]](#footnote-8) This ruling is also mentioned in the *Shulchan Arukh*.[[9]](#footnote-9) Theoretically, the mitzva should not be limited to Israel; however, there has long been a difference in practice in and out of Israel.

The custom outside of Israel (in Ashkenazi communities) has been to recite the *berakha* only on *Yamim Tovim*. This tradition has been subject to many challenges, as there does not seem to be a clear source or reason for cancelling this daily biblical mitzva!

The *Beit Yosef* quotes Rav Yaakov Landau (15th century), author of the *Agur*, who explains that the *Kohanim* had the custom to immerse themselves in a *mikveh* prior to the recital of the *berakha*. He thus justifies forgoing daily recitation due to the difficulty of entering a *mikveh* during the cold winters of Europe.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The Rema offers an alternative explanation. He suggests that *Birkat Kohanim* requires being in a state of *simcha* (happiness). Daily mundane life in *chutz la’aretz* is difficult, as people work very hard for their livelihood and their minds are occupied with worries.[[11]](#footnote-11) On *Yamim Tovim*, explains the Rema, *simcha* is naturally achieved due to the nature of the holiday’s *kedusha*, and the *berakha* can therefore be recited.

Along the same lines of concern with preoccupation, Rav Moshe Sofer adds that reciting the *berakha* without proper intention may be parallel to doing the *Avoda* in the *Mikdash* (daily Temple service) with the wrong intentions, which would make the *Avoda* invalid.[[12]](#footnote-12)

There were rabbis who strongly opposed the common Ashkenazi custom and attempted to practice *Birkat Kohanim* daily. However, all these attempts failed. There are even stories of tragedies that befell those who tried!

Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (Netziv) writes that his father-in-law, Rav Itsele Volozhiner (1780 -1849, son of Reb Chaim Volozhiner), told him that the Gra ruled that in his *beit midrash*, *Birkat* *Kohanim* should be recited daily – however, his ruling was not put into effect because the Gra was arrested the next day by the Lithuanian government.[[13]](#footnote-13) Following this, Reb Chaim Volozhiner, student of the Gra, tried to give the same ruling – but unfortunately, a great fire began. The Netziv explains that these events were seen as signs from heaven that *Birkat Kohanim* should not be practiced daily outside of Israel.

The Netziv’s father-in-law from his second marriage, Rav Yechiel Michel Epstein, explains that although there is no rational reason for cancelling this daily *berakha*, it is understood that a voice from heaven objected. He refers to two great rabbis of the previous generation who attempted and failed.[[14]](#footnote-14)

One of these great Rabbis is obviously the Gra; the second is probably Rav Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the first [Rebbe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebbe) of [Chabad](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chabad), who praised the Jews living in Israel for practicing *Birkhat Kohanim* every day.[[15]](#footnote-15) There are sources that indicate the Rebbe also voiced his opinion to recite the *berakha* daily but that, for various reasons, he failed as well.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Rav Yisrael of Shklow, the Gra’s student and leader of the *Perushim* community, published a book on the laws of the Land of Israel, called *Pe’at Ha-Shulchan*. In this book, he quotes Rav Yosef Karo, author of the *Shulchan Arukh*, who praised those who dwell in Israel for practicing *Birkat* *Kohanim* every day. Rav Yisrael testifies that when he and his group made *aliya*, they also accepted this opinion. He adds that this was the opinion of the Gra.[[17]](#footnote-17)

Thus, the custom of the *Perushim* became the normative tradition for all Ashkenazim in *Eretz Yisrael* today.

**The custom in the northern parts of Israel**

There are some communities, especially up north in Haifa and Tzfat, that still follow the Rema’s opinion and recite *Birkat Kohanim* only on holidays. Rav Yechiel Michel Tucazinsky mentions this as the common accepted tradition.[[18]](#footnote-18)

*Poskim* have discussed what the practice should be in those cities today.

Rav Yitzchak Yaakov Weiss (1902–1989) ruled that the current custom should remain. Among his reasons is the fact that the Gra’s students changed the custom only in Yerushalayim and not in Tzfat.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Rav Seraya Davlitzki ([1926](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/1926) – [2018](https://he.wikipedia.org/wiki/2018)), however, argued that the custom of the Gra’s students should be adopted by all communities in Israel. He pointed out that the *Perushim* adopted the *Shulchan Arukh*’s opinion when they first arrived in Tzfat. Following a terrible earthquake in Tzfat (1837), they left for Yerushalayim; the remaining Ashkenazim in Tzfat reverted to their previous custom and recited the *berakha* only on *Yamim* *Tovim*. We see from here, claims Rav Davlitzki, that the Gra’s students were never concerned with the fact that the Rema’s custom was practiced in Israel before their time. The same way they changed the tradition, so should we do today.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The Chief Rabbi of Haifa, Rav Sha’ar Yashuv Cohen, together with Chief Rabbi Bakshi Doron of Israel, published a ruling that in Haifa, all Kohanim should recite the blessing daily.[[21]](#footnote-21)

**Omitting *Baruch Ado-nai Le-Olam* from *Ma’ariv***

Ashkenazim who live (or lived) in *chutz la’aretz* are familiar with the *berakha* of *Baruch Ado-nai Le-Olam*,which is recited after the *Birkhot Keriyat Shema* of *Ma’ariv*. This prayer, which is already mentioned by the Geonim, is made up of *pesukim* that mention God’s name a total of eighteen times, which is the same number of *berakhot* in the *Amida*.

The reason for this additional *berakha* is debated. Although it is clear that the prayer was intended as some sort of alternative to the *Amida*, it is not clear why it was composed.

Some suggest that it was added for times when prayers were recited in the fields outside of a town. As these areas were potentially dangerous, the rabbis encouraged the participants to leave together. For that purpose, they omitted the full *Amida* and recited this short prayer instead. This explanation fits well with the opinion that the evening prayers were not obligatory. Another suggestion is that it was composed as an alternative to the *Amida* for times when there was a decree against the evening prayers.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The *Rishonim* were troubled, however: How is this additional *berakha* not considered a *hefsek* between the *berakha* of *ga’al Yisrael* and the *Amida*?

Tosafot answer that our *berakha* is just like the additional *berakha*, *hashkiveinu*, which is not considered a *hefsek* as it is a continuation of *ga’al Yisrael*.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Rashba mentions that there are those who oppose reciting the *berakha* because there is no longer a decree against evening prayers and therefore it would be considered a *hefsek*.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Although the common custom of Ashkenazi Jews was to recite the prayer, the Gra ruled that this prayer (as well as the *pesukim* added at that point in *Ma’ariv* on Friday nights) is considered a *hefsek* and should be omitted.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Gra’s students influenced the Ashkenazi community in Israel to omit this prayer in accordance with this *pesak*, and that is the common practice in Israel today.[[26]](#footnote-26)

What happens if an Israeli travels to *chutz la’aretz*? Should he say this prayer? Does it make a difference if the Israeli is the *chazzan*?

Rav Moshe Feinstein rules that in this situation, one should refrain from saying the prayer but only if it can be done without being noticeable. Therefore, a *chazzan* from Israel should say the prayer when outside Israel.[[27]](#footnote-27)

However, Rav Shlomo Min Ha-Har (Rav of Bayit Va-gan) ruled according to an alternative *pesak* of Rav Moshe’s,[[28]](#footnote-28) which argues that except for the *Amida* (which is recited quietly), one should always follow the *nusach* of the community they are in.[[29]](#footnote-29)

1. The letter, *Iggeret HaGra*, was printed in Avraham David Blach, *Cheshbon Olam*, Vilna, 1907 and can be found online at <https://www.hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36424&st=&pgnum=10>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Rav Maimon, *Yisrael, Torah, Tzion*, Mosad Harav Kook, p. 329. See also Yitzchak Ben Tzvi, *Ha-Gra Ve-Nesyonatav La’alot Le-Eretz Yisrael*, *Sinai* 34, 1954. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The explanation for this name is that it comes from the verb *parash*, meaning "to separate." The group sought to separate themselves – according to different interpretations of the name, either from the Chassidic community, then living in Yerushalayim, or from the common ways of secular life. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For my *bar mitzva*, I received a book called *Aliyot Eliyahu* by Yaakov Even Chen – an entire book about the *aliya* of this remarkable group. In his book, he describes the beliefs of redemption which motivated the group. He also describes how the movement in 1860 to build new neighborhoods outside the old city was organized by this community. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Galut Ba’aretz*, *Ha-Histadrut Ha-Tzionit Ha-Olamit*, p.52. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Hastening Redemption: Messianism and the Resettlement of the Land of Israel*, 1st Edition, Oxford University Press, chapter 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In his introduction to *Hilkhot Tefila*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Hilkhot Tefila* 14:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Shulchan Arukh* OC 129:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Beit Yosef* on *Tur* OC 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Shulchan Arukh* OC 128:44. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Chatam Sofer* OC 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Responsa *Mashiv Davar* Vol. 2 #104. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Arukh Ha-Shulchan* OC 128:64. See also *Piskei Teshuvot* Vol.2 pp. 48-49. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Shulchan Arukh Ha-Rav* OC 128:57. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Piskei Teshuvot* Vol. 2 p. 49, footnote 415, quotes the Chabad sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Pe’at Ha-Shulchan*, *Hilkhot Eretz Yisrael*, 2:16, footnote 23. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ir Ha-Kodesh V'Hamikdash* Vol. 3 25:6. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Minchat Yitzchak* 8:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. *Ha-ne’eman*, Vol. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See Rav Sha’ar Yashuv Cohen, *Techumin* Vol. 2 pp.345-361. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Abudraham, *Usha*, Jerusalem 1963 p.141. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Tosafot *Berakhot* 4b, s.v. *De’amar*. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Teshuvot Ha-Rashba* 1:14. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Ma’ase Rav* 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. As explained by Rav Moshe Feinstein. See *Iggrot Moshe* OC Vol.2 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Iggrot Moshe* YD Vol.3 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. *Iggrot Moshe* OC Vol.2 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. See Rav Uri Dasberg in *Techumin* 10 pp.371-376. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)