

CORRECTING THE BA'AL KOREH

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

A discussion of Halachic topics related to the Parsha of the week. For final rulings, consult your Rav.

Every adult male⁽¹⁾ is obligated to hear a portion of the Torah read from a kosher Sefer Torah every Shabbos. While this is an ancient obligation dating back to the days of Moshe Rabbeinu,⁽²⁾ it is considered a Rabbinical mitzvah.⁽³⁾ Initially, there were various customs as to the length of the portion to be read every Shabbos,⁽⁴⁾ but eventually it became universally accepted to complete the entire Torah each year, beginning from Shabbos Bereishis and ending on Simchas Torah.⁽⁵⁾

The reader must read every single word of the weekly parshah. Even if one word was omitted, the reading must be repeated.⁽⁶⁾ This is true even if the missing word did not in any way alter the meaning of the phrase or verse.⁽⁷⁾

The ba'al koreh should read each word clearly, with the proper accentuation (mileil and milra), vocalization (nikud) and cantillation (trop). In order to read the Torah properly he must prepare thoroughly⁽⁸⁾ so that the reading will "flow out of his mouth." The reading itself should not be hurried, lest he swallow a word or a letter.⁽⁹⁾

The reader must be careful to read every word from inside the Torah, and not recite any words from memory. But as long as he saw every word, it does not matter if he did not look inside when actually reciting each word.⁽¹⁰⁾

CORRECTING THE READER'S MISTAKES

It is important for the ba'al koreh to read carefully so that he makes no mistakes, not even small, insignificant ones. But if he did make a mistake, there is a difference of opinion among the Rishonim if he must be stopped and corrected or not. The Tur⁽¹¹⁾ is of the opinion that as long as the word was recited, even if it was seriously mispronounced, it does not matter and the reading is valid. There is no requirement to go back and correct the mistake, and indeed it may be prohibited to do so since it will needlessly embarrass the ba'al koreh who will appear incompetent or ill-prepared. Rambam, however, disagrees and maintains that even the smallest mistake should be immediately corrected.

Shulchan Aruch seems to make a compromise between the two views. Whether or not the ba'al koreh needs to be corrected when mispronouncing a word depends on the type of mistake he made. A "major" mistake requires correction while a "minor" mistake does not; therefore, the ba'al koreh should be publicly corrected only for a "major" mistake. Privately, however, the reader is rebuked for his lack of preparedness or inattentiveness to detail.(12)

The issue to decide, therefore, is what constitutes a "major" mistake and what is considered a "minor" mistake. Rama maintains that if the mistake alters the meaning of the word it is considered "major", but if it only affects the trop or the nikud then it is considered "minor". The latter authorities debate what, exactly, the Rama meant, as there are various opinions as to what constitutes an altered meaning and what does not. In the final analysis there are three group of mistakes: major, minor and midsize. Major mistakes include:

When a word is completely misread; e.g., bereishis is read berushies or barshyas, etc.

When the nikud of a word is pronounced in a manner which alters the translation of the word. For example, the word chalav with a komatz (milk) is read with a tzeirei (fat), or the word ya'aseh (he should do) is read yie'aseh (it should be done).

When the trop is completely wrong, to the degree that the reader combines two unrelated words or phrases, or separates two words or phrases which should be read together. The trop indicates not only the musical note on which the syllable or word should be sung, but also the punctuation of the pasuk, as the Torah has no punctuation marks. For example, one could read all of the constants and vowels of the first pasuk in the Torah correctly, and still mangle the trop so that the pasuk would read: In the beginning created, Hashem the, heaven and earth.(13)

According to some opinions, when the mileil or milra is read completely wrong, to the degree that it alters the meaning of the word; e.g., the word bahah (milra) means 'she is coming,' (present tense) while the same word accented bahah (mileil) means 'she came' (past tense).(14) Similarly, the word binah can mean either 'understanding' or 'perceive', depending on which syllable is accented, binah or binah.(15)

But several contemporary poskim maintain that this type of mistake is not considered a major mistake. In their view, the exact meaning of the word is decided by the context in which it is written; the meaning is not altered by the improper accentuation of the word.(16)

As stated earlier, Shulchan Aruch and most poskim(17) rule that major mistakes should be rectified immediately. The ba'al koreh, therefore, is stopped mid sentence - even if he said the Name of Hashem(18) - and told to correct his pronunciation.(19) Even if the mistake is realized after the aliyah is over, or even after the entire parshah is finished [but before the final blessing over the Torah is recited],(20) the word must be repeated and corrected.(21)

This ruling of the Shulchan Aruch is the accepted practice in most congregations. Note, however, that several poskim(22) disagree with the Shulchan Aruch and rule in accordance with the Tur that once a mistake was made, even if the meaning of the word was altered, it need not be corrected.(23)

Minor mistakes include:

Misreading of vowels which does not alter the basic meaning of the word, e.g., the word "eis" with a tzeirei under the aleph instead of segol (es); the word "kol" with a cholom instead of kal with a kamatz; the word "lecha" with a kametz instead of lach with a sheva(24); the word "aretz" with a kame tz under the aleph instead of eretz with a segol. There are many more such examples, and they account for most of the errors that the average ba'al koreh commits.

Misreading of the trop which does not alter the basic meaning of the verse. e.g., failure to stress the revii note over the word v'haretz in the second pasuk of this week's parshah.

The procedure concerning minor mistakes is clear: all of the poskim are in agreement that the reader is not corrected; he is allowed to continue.(25)

We have mentioned earlier that when there is no requirement to correct mistakes, it may very well be prohibited to do so, since correcting the ba'al koreh publicly embarrasses him. It is puzzling, therefore, why many congregations do not conduct themselves properly and correct even minor mistakes when they should not do so. There are two possible explanations (limud zechus) for their behavior: 1) The ba'al koreh has made it clear to the rabbi or officers of the shul that he does not mind being corrected and does not consider it an embarrassment; 2) If the ba'al koreh is paid for his services, it may be permissible to correct him for even minor mistakes since he is hired to do a perfect job.(26)

Midsized mistakes are significant changes in the pronunciation of the word or even in its exact translation, but not to the degree that it alters the basic meaning of the phrase or the verse. These include(27): When a letter is omitted, e.g., the name Aharon, which contains the sounds of an aleph and a hay, is read as Haron (with a patach), omitting the aleph.(28)

When a letter is added, e.g., the word Mitzrim (Egyptians), written with one yud, is read as if it were written with two yuds (Mitzriyim). While these two words are pronounced slightly different, they have the same meaning. When a letter is added as a prefix, e.g., the letter vov is added to a word, "v'im" (and if) instead of "im" (if).

When two letters are inverted but the mistake does not alter the meaning, e.g., the word keves is mistakenly read as kesev. Both words refer to a sheep.(29)

Regarding these types of mistakes there are two views. Some are of the opinion that they are not significant and do not need to be corrected. The ba'al koreh may continue reading [though he is rebuked privately].(30) Others maintain that these types of mistakes must be corrected immediately and one must follow the same procedure as when a major mistake is made.(31) While individual shuls may rely on the first view and allow such mistakes to go unchecked, many congregations have adopted the second, more stringent view. It is left to the rabbi and officers of each shul to establish their own standard for Kerias ha-Torah.

FOOTNOTES:

1 While some authorities maintain that women are also required to hear Kerias ha-Torah, the

accepted custom is that listening to the Torah reading is not a woman's obligation; Mishnah Berurah 282:12; Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:11. See Halichos Bas Yisrael 2, note 77*.

2 Rambam, Tefilah 12:1.

3 Mishnah Berurah 282:2.

4 See Megilah 29b that in Eretz Yisrael the custom was to finish the Torah once every three years. See Emes l'Yaakov, ibid. for the apportionment of the weekly reading segments based on a three-year cycle.

5 Rambam, Hilchos Tefilah 13:1. See Igros Moshe O.C. 4:23 and 4:40-5 who explains that once this became universally accepted, it has turned into a full-fledged obligation.

6 O.C. 137:3 and 282:7.

7 Beir Halachah 142:1.

8 Even a ba'al koreh who is familiar with the parshah should review it at least twice; Aruch ha-Shulchan 139:2.

9 Mishnah Berurah 142:6.

10 Harav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 12:8). See Igros Moshe O.C. 3:19.

11 O.C. 142. The Tur quotes this view in the name of the Ba'al ha-Manhig, and according to most opinions, this is the Tur's view as well.

12 Rama O.C. 142:1. While Rama does not specify the details of how the ba'al koreh is rebuked, the Tur and Beis Yosef imply that the rebuke should not take place publicly so as to not embarrass the reader.

13 Mishnah Berurah 142:4.

14 As explained by Rashi, Bereishis 29:6. See Aruch ha-Shulchan O.C. 690:20 (concerning Megilas Esther) who mentions this example.

15 Reb Chaim of Volozhin in Keser Rosh (40).

16 Harav Y. Y. Kanievsky (Karyana D'igerta 1:138); Harav Y. Kamenetsky (oral ruling quoted in Emes l'Yaakov O.C. 142:1); Harav S.Z. Auerbach (written responsum quoted in Halichos Shelomo 12:24). See Dikdukei Shai, pgs. 160-165, for an explanation of this view. Note, also, that all the major poskim who discuss the laws of correcting a ba'al koreh do not mention this type of mistake as one that must be corrected.

17 Chayei Adam 31:31; Mishnah Berurah 142:4 and Beir Halachah; Aruch ha-Shulchan 142:3-4; Kaf ha-Chayim 142:2.

18 Chayei Adam 5:2; Mishnah Berurah 142:4; Sha'arei Rachamim on Sha'arei Efrayim 3:18. See Tzitz Eliezer 12:40 and Halichos Shelomo 12, note 79.

19 Preferably, he should start again from the beginning of the pasuk or - at the very least - from the beginning of the phrase (within the pasuk), see Mishnah Berurah 64:5 and Tehilah l'David 64:1 (concerning Kerias Shema). See also Igros Moshe O.C. 5:20-32 (concerning zeicher and zecher).

20 Chayei Adam 31:31 and Beiur Halachah 142:1.

21 See Mishnah Berurah 142:2 and Sha'ar ha-Tziyun for the correct procedure.

22 Bach O.C. 142; Eliyahu Rabbah 142:2, Siddur Derech ha-Chayim (15); Da'as Torah 142:1. See also Aruch ha-Shulchan 690:20.

23 While this view is not the accepted practice, the poskim rely on it if the mistake was realized after the final blessing on the Torah was recited.

24 Most often this depends on where in the verse the word appears and/or what the trop is. There is no alteration of meaning. Sometimes, however, lach is written for a nekeivah and lecha is written for zachar; in that case the meaning is altered.

25 As mentioned earlier, he is reprimanded in private.

26 See Eishel Avraham O.C. 142 who suggests a similar idea.

27 Based on Mishnah Berurah 142:4 and Beiur Halachah.

28 See Pri Megadim 142:1 who writes that the same applies to reading Avraham instead of Avram or vice versa.

29 See Mishnah Berurah 143:26.

30 Mishnah Berurah 142:4 and all the poskim mentioned earlier who rule in accordance with the Tur against the Shulchan Aruch.

31 Pri Chadash 142, Beiur ha-Gra 142, Chayei Adam 31:31, Aruch ha-Shulchan 142: 3-4; Kaf ha-Chayim 142:2.

Mazel Tov to Shui & Chavie Bressler on the birth of a daughter, and to grandparents, Rabbi & Mrs. Doniel Neustadt. May they be zoche l'gadlah l'Torah, u'l'ben Torah, u'l'chupa, u'l'maasim toviim!

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