

TORAH READING FOR PARASHAS BECHUKOSAI

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

This week's public Torah reading of Parashas Bechukosai, though seemingly no different from any other, is, in fact, governed by a set of special halachos. Let us take the opportunity to review them. Bechukosai is sometimes read together with Behar and sometimes not. Several factors enter into this determination, among them Ezra ha-Sofer's ordinance that Bechukosai be read at least two weeks¹ before the festival of Shavuos. The reason for the two-week hiatus is based on our tradition that Shavuos is considered a New Year, a Day of Judgment for the fruits of the tree. We are particular, therefore, to be finished with Parashas Bechukosai—in which the Admonition, the tochachah and its curses, occupy a central role—before this Day of Judgment and New Year begin.² For the same reason we read Parashas Ki Savo, where the other portion of the tochachah is written, at least two weeks before Rosh Hashanah, so that "the old year may be ushered out along with its curses."

Question: Who is called to the Torah for the reading of the tochachah?

Discussion: In past generations, deciding whom to call to the Torah for the reading of the tochachah was a serious point of contention. Many people, even learned individuals, felt that being called to the Torah for this portion was a bad omen that would result in tragedy and misfortune.³ Over the years, the situation deteriorated to the extent that a congregant would have to be paid to accept the aliyah,⁴ and if no one would agree to be "hired", the Torah reading of the week (and of Parashas Ki Savo) was omitted altogether⁵. In other communities, shul decorum was shattered while congregants fought and bickered as to who, in their opinion, should be "punished" by being called up for this portion.⁶ In some communities, the gabbai publicly announced from the bimah that whoever wished to do so should volunteer for the aliyah,⁷ while in other communities this part of the reading was read by the Torah reader without anybody being called up.⁸ Most poskim were critical of and dissatisfied with all of these options.⁹

Consequently, it has become customary in many shuls for the Torah reader himself to be called¹⁰ upon to read the tochachah. Indeed, even if the reader is a kohen, the aliyos must be rearranged so that the tochachah is included in the aliyah of the kohen. Even when Bechukosai is read together with Behar, it should be arranged that the aliyah for the tochachah will be the last aliyah (acharon),

so that the Torah reader who is a kohen will be called for the aliyah of the tochachah. Although the general rule is that whenever two parashiyos are connected, it is proper to connect them at the fourth aliyah,¹¹ we do not follow the rule in this case.¹² If, mistakenly, the gabbai called a person other than the reader to the aliyah of the tochachah, that person may not refuse the aliyah. Even if he knows that the gabbai had malicious intentions when calling him up, he still may not refuse the aliyah once he has been called up. If, however, he knows in advance that he will be called, he may walk out of the shul before being called up.¹³

It is prohibited to "interrupt" during the reading of the tochachah, i.e., the portion cannot be broken into two or more segments to accommodate more aliyos¹⁴. If, however, a mistake was found in the Sefer Torah during the reading of the tochachah, a new sefer should be brought out and the reading continued. In the opinion of several poskim, this is not considered to be an "interruption" because the same person who was called to the Torah remains there.¹⁵

The custom is to read the tochachah in a lowered tone of voice,¹⁶ but not so quietly that it not be heard by the congregation.¹⁷

Chazak! Chazak! V'nischazeik!

At the end of this parashah, as with every parashah that completes the reading of an entire Chumash, the custom is for the congregation to call out "Chazak! Chazak! V'nischazeik!"¹⁸ Several reasons are offered for this custom.¹⁹ The person who was called up for this aliyah should not say Chazak. Since he must still recite the final blessing after the Torah reading, some poskim consider reciting Chazak as an improper interruption (hefsek).²⁰

The custom is that the reader repeats Chazak after the congregation. The Sefer Torah should be closed at the time so that it does not appear as if those words are being read from the Torah.²¹

Sources:

1. In the rare case of Rosh Hashanah falling on a Thursday at the beginning of a leap year, Bechukosai is read three weeks before Shavuot.
2. Beir Halachah 428:4, s.v. u'lolam, quoting the Levush, based on Megilah 31b and Tosfos.
3. There are a number of early sources who express this fear, see Magen Avraham 428:8 quoting Maharil; Kaf ha-Chayim 428:34 quoting Sefer Chasidim. See also Rama, O.C. 53:19.
4. Chelkas Yaakov 3:174 reports that this was the custom in Belz in Europe.
5. Beir Halachah, O.C. 428:6, s.v. b'pesukim.
6. In one community the gabbai, a tailor, "punished" a competing tailor with this "honor." The gabbai

did not live out the year (heard from Rav Y. Kamenetsky).

7. Rama, O.C. 428:6, according to the understanding of the Machatzis ha-Shekel. Divrei Yisrael 1:61 testifies that this was the prevailing custom in Hungary.

8. Sho'el u'Meishiv 5:9.

9. Ha-elef Lecha Shelomo 63; Minchas Elazar 1:66; Igros Moshe, O.C. 2:35.

10. Generally, when the reader himself receives an aliyah, there is no need to call him by name, since he is standing at the bimah regardless; Rama, O.C. 139:3 and Mishnah Berurah 8.

11. Mishnah Berurah 282:5.

12. Mishnah Berurah 428:17 and Beiur Halachah, s.v. b'psukim.

13. Mishnah Berurah 53:58; 428:17.

14. O.C. 428:6.

15. Kaf ha-Chayim 143:38; 428:32. There are dissenting opinions who hold that the reader should continue reading until the end of the tochachah; see Pischei Teshuvah 428:6 and She'arim Metzuyanim b'Halachah 78:3.

16. Magen Avraham 428:8.

17. Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 78:4; Kaf ha-Chayim 428:38.

18. Some say Chazak three times; Aruch ha-Shulchan 139:15.

19. See Maharam Mintz 85. See also Rama, O.C. 139:11 and Peri Chadash.

20. See Ketzos ha-Shulchan 84:22, Shevet ha-Levi 7:202 and Yagel Yaakov, pg. 141.

21. Bein Pesach l'Shavuos, pg. 145.

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