

HONOR AND RESPECT FOR THE SEFER TORAH

by Rabbi Doniel Neustadt

A Sefer Torah, which is the living testimonial of God's covenant with the Jewish people, must be treated with the highest degree of respect and dignity. Accordingly, there are special halachos which are associated with the removal and returning of the Sefer Torah when it is taken out of the Aron ha-Kodesh for Kerias ha-Torah, the Reading of the Torah. The following is the proper procedure:

The sheliach tzibbur should not be the one to take the Torah out of the aron. To accord the Torah due respect, another person is appointed to open the aron, ¹ take out the Torah and hand it to the sheliach tzibbur to carry to the bimah. ² If no one was appointed to the task, the sheliach tzibbur may "rush to grab this mitzvah for himself." ³

The Torah is taken out of the aron with one's right hand although the left hand may be used to help. A left-handed person may take out the Torah with his left hand. ⁴ But the Torah is always handed, received and held with one's right hand⁵ even if it is being given, received or held by a person who is left-handed. ⁶

At the time that the Torah is being taken out of the aron, it is customary⁷ to recite Berich Shmei, ⁸ which is a section of Zohar written in Aramaic. ⁹ Some recite Berich Shmei before the Torah is removed from the aron, ¹⁰ while others insist that Berich Shmei be said only after it has been taken out. ¹¹ One who neglected to recite Berich Shmei at the proper time may recite it until the Torah is unrolled. ¹²

When the sheliach tzibbur recites Shema and Echad he should face the congregation. He then turns to face the aron, bows slightly, and recites Gadlu. ¹³ He should raise the Torah slightly when reciting each of these verses. ¹⁴

One is required to stand, ¹⁵ without leaning, anytime the Torah is "in motion." [Many poskim attempt to give the benefit of the doubt to those who sit on Simchas Torah during the hakafo even though the Torah is in motion. ¹⁶ Still, it is proper for a God-fearing person to stand during the hakafo unless he

himself is holding a Torah.¹⁷] Thus when the Torah is being carried from the aron or being raised for hagbahah, one is obligated to stand until it is placed on the bimah or until it is no longer within view.

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[When the Torah is not "in motion" the following rules apply¹⁹ : 1) If the Torah is in the aron and the aron is closed, if it is placed on the bimah or is being held by someone who is sitting down, there is no reason to stand. 2) If it is being held by someone who is standing up (e.g., during Keil maleh rachamim), or it is standing upright in the aron and the door of the aron is open, it has become standard practice to honor the Torah by standing—even though one is not required to do so.²⁰ 3) If, while being carried, the person carrying the Torah stops to rest, one is required to remain standing, as this is considered "in motion" ²¹ .]

As the Torah makes its way through the right-hand side of the shul towards the bimah, it is considered proper for the congregants to honor it by following behind and escorting it²² as it passes by them.²³ Others hold that it is considered "haughty" to do so and it should not be done.²⁴ All agree that there is no point for those who are not in the path of the Torah (e.g., their seat is behind the bimah) to come to the front of the shul so that they can follow the Torah.

It is customary and considered correct chinuch for people to bring their young children forward so that they can respectfully kiss the Torah mantle.²⁵ Some have the custom that adults also kiss the Torah when it passes,²⁶ while others frown upon this custom and allow only touching or pointing at the Torah and then kissing that hand.²⁷

When some people carry the Torah to the bimah, they detour or bend down to allow those who are not within reach of the Torah to kiss it or touch it. Some poskim refer to this as an act of degradation, and those who do so should be strongly reprimanded.²⁸

When two or more Sifrei Torah are taken out of the aron, the ones that are not currently being used are entrusted to a responsible individual to hold until they are to be used. It is improper to allow a child to hold the Torah,²⁹ and it is prohibited to leave a Torah unattended even if it is left in a safe place.³⁰

It is prohibited to turn one's back to a Torah.³¹ Accordingly, those who sit in front of the shul directly in front of the Torah must turn around during Kerias ha-Torah. When, however, the Torah is read from a bimah³² [or from a table which is over forty inches high³³], this prohibition does not apply.

Often, those holding a second or a third Sefer Torah (e.g., on Yom Tov) sit behind the Torah reader or

the person being called to the Torah, who are then turning their backs towards those Sifrei Torah.

While some poskim disapproved of this,³⁴ the custom to do so is widely accepted.³⁵ All agree that while reciting Yekum Purkan, Av Harachamim or Ashrei the sheliach tzibbur should be careful to move to the side of the bimah so that his back does not face the Sifrei Torah³⁶.

After the keriah is over, a half-kaddish is recited. Whenever there is a maftir aliyah the kaddish is recited before maftir; when there is no maftir the kaddish is recited after the last aliyah³⁷. This kaddish should be recited by the Reader.³⁸ If a mourner or one who has a yahrtzeit received the last aliyah (shelishi on a weekday or the last aliyah on Shabbos or Yom Tov) he may recite this kaddish³⁹. Other poskim maintain that this kaddish belongs to a mourner or one who has a yahrtzeit even if he was not called up for the last aliyah⁴⁰, and some congregations follow this opinion.⁴¹

If, by mistake, the kaddish was omitted before maftir, it is recited after the final blessing after the haftarah.⁴² If, on a day that three Sifrei Torah are used, the kaddish was mistakenly recited after the keriah of the first sefer, the kaddish is repeated before maftir.⁴³

Sources:

1. It is considered a segulah bedukah for an easy labor, for the husband of a woman in her ninth month of pregnancy to receive the honor of opening the aron; Chida, Avodas ha-Kodesh, Moreh B'etzba 3:4.
2. Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:1, based on Mishnah, Yuma 68b.
3. Sha'arei Efrayim 10:2.
4. Sha'arei Efrayim 10:2.
5. Rama, O.C. 134:2.
6. Mishnah Berurah 282:1. The Chazon Ish held that the "face" of the Torah should be towards the person who is holding it (Tefilah K'hilchasah, pg. 312), but many people hold the Torah facing away from themselves.
7. German communities do not recite Berich Shmei; Siddur Avodas Yisrael, pg. 122. Many Sefaradim recite it only on Shabbos; Ben Ish Chai, Toldos 15.
8. Several Kabbalists attach great importance to the recital of Berich Shmei, since the time when the Torah is removed from the aron is considered an eis ratzon (auspicious time) in which one's prayers are more readily answered; see Yeshurun Torah Journal, vol. 2, pg. 579.
9. Since Aramaic prayers may be recited only b'tzibbur, it is important to recite Berich Shmei together with the congregation; see Mishnah Berurah 101:19. See also Yesod v'Shores ha-Avodah 5:8 who says that an individual should recite Berich Shmei even in middle of Ve'hu rachum (during the week). Other poskim disagree with that; see Ishei Yisrael 25, note 48. All agree that during Pesukei d'Zimrah

- or Birchos Kerias Shema one should not stop to recite Berich Shmei; Teshuvos Maharshag 1:52.
10. Darchei Chayim v'Shalom 196. This also seems to be the view of Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:1, and is the custom in many places.
 11. Mateh Efrayim 619:48; Rav Pealim 3:8; Igros Moshe, O.C. 4:70-9, based on Sha'arei Efrayim 10:1; Az Nidberu 8:48. Rav S.Z. Auerbach (Halichos Shelomo 1:12-9) maintains that either way is acceptable.
 12. Mishnah Berurah 134:13. Pischei She'arim to Sha'arei Efrayim 10:1 maintains that it may be said during hagbahah as well.
 13. Aruch ha-Shulchan 282:1. See Ketzos ha-Shulchan 25:6.
 14. Mishnah Berurah 134:13.
 15. "Stand" means that if one is sitting he must stand up and if one is walking he must stand still (until the Torah passes by); Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 282:3.
 16. See Aruch ha-Shulchan, Y.D. 282:5; Shulchan ha-Tahor 149:2; Minchas Shelomo 1:33; Halichos Shelomo 1:12-13; B'tzeil ha-Chochmah 5:139; Teshuvos v'Hanhagos 2:319 and Tzedakah u'Mishpat 16, note 37.
 17. Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 2, pg. 308.
 18. Mishnah Berurah 146:17, based on Y.D. 282:2. According to some opinions, the requirement is to stand as long as one can sense that the Torah is being carried, even if it is not visible to him.
 19. Based on Sha'ar ha-Tziyun 146:18; Igros Moshe, O.C. 5:38-4; Minchas Shelomo 1:33.
 20. Accordingly, a weak or ill person may sit; Meishiv Halachah, O.C. 248.
 21. Shach, Y.D. 282:2.
 22. Some poskim mention that it is proper to follow until it reaches the bimah (Chayei Adam 31:42), while others write that it is sufficient to follow along "a bit" (Sha'arei Efrayim 10:4; Halichos Shelomo 1:12, note 17).
 23. Mishnah Berurah 149:7.
 24. Aruch ha-Shulchan 149:3; 282:1.
 25. Rama, O.C. 149:1.
 26. Sha'arei Efrayim 10:4; Kaf ha-Chayim 134:10; 149:10.
 27. Pischei She'arim 10:4 quoting Kitzur Shelah; Siddur Tzelosa d'Avraham, pg. 375; Rav Y.E. Henkin (Eidus l'Yisrael 63); Rav Y.S. Elyashiv (Ashrei ha-Ish, vol. 1, pg. 133).
 28. Teshuvos Yad Yitzchak, quoted by Beis Baruch 31:171; Teshuvos Rivam Shneituch, quoted in Tzitz Eliezer 12:40. [Possibly, if the detour is for the sake of a person who is unable to come to the Torah, i.e., a handicapped person, it would be permissible.]
 29. Mishnah Berurah 147:29.
 30. Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:38.
 31. Y.D. 282:1.
 32. Rama, Y.D. 242:18; Mishnah Berurah 150:14.
 33. Taz, Y.D. 242:13. See, however, Pischei Teshuvah, Y.D. 282:2, who seems to imply otherwise. See also Minchas Yitzchak 5:78.
 34. Mishnah Berurah 147:29.

35. Halichos Shelomo 1:12, note 21.
36. Eimek Berachah, pg. 43.
37. Whenever a keriah takes place before Shemoneh Esrei, the kaddish is delayed until after the Torah is returned to the aron.
38. Mateh Efrayim (Kaddish 3:1); Sha'arei Efrayim 10:9.
39. Ibid. Rav S.Z. Auerbach explains that this kaddish was specifically reserved for those who passed away and do not have a relative to say kaddish for them. This kaddish, therefore, is not be recited by an individual mourner or someone who has a yahrtzeit, unless he was called for the last aliyah (Halichos Shelomo 1:12-27). See Sdei Chemed (Aveilus, 163).
40. Elef ha-Magen (Kaddish 3:3).
41. Orchos Rabbeinu, vol. 1, pg. 72; Shevet ha-Levi 8:163-3.
42. Mishnah Berurah 282:29.
43. Igros Moshe, O.C. 1:101.

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