

ALIYOT FOR COUPLES

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This paper was approved by the CJLS on February 17, 1993, by a vote of eleven in favor, seven opposed, and three abstaining (11-7-3). Voting in favor: Rabbis Kassel Abelson, Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Ezra Finkelstein, Arnold M. Goodman, Jan Caryl Kaufman, Reuven Kimelman, Aaron L. Mackler, Mayer Rabinowitz, Joel E. Rembaum, and Gordon Tucker. Voting against: Rabbis Samuel Frint, Howard Handler, Judah Kogen, Lionel E. Moses, Avram Israel Reisner, Chaim Rogoff, and Joel Roth. Abstaining: Rabbis Stanley Brammick, Jerome M. Epstein, and Gerald Skolnik.

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

שאלה

Many Conservative congregations have instituted the practice of calling couples to the Torah for an *aufruf*, for baby namings, and to celebrate anniversaries. In other congregations the practice has developed of calling the parents of the bar/bat mitzvah or of the bride and groom to the Torah for an aliyah. Are these acceptable Conservative practices?

תשובה

The Torah reading is the focal point of the service. It functions not only as an opportunity to hear the Torah read, and to study, but it also serves as a community bulletin board keeping the members of the congregation informed about what is happening in the lives of their fellow members. And it provides the congregation with the opportunity to reinforce values it holds to be important. The Torah reading has had a long and revealing history, and understanding that history will help us to answer the שאלה, the question.

Origins of the Torah Service

The origins of the Torah service are traced by tradition to Moses and to Ezra. The Rambam summarizes the tradition in the Mishneh Torah.

משה רבינו תיקן להם לישראל שיהו קורין ברבים בשבת ובשני ובחמישי
בשחרית כדי שלא יהו שלשה ימים בלא שמיעת תורה. ועזרא תיקן שיהו
קורים כן במנחה בכל שבת משום יושבי קרנות. וגם הוא תיקן שיהו קורין
בשני ובחמישי שלשה בני אדם. ולא יקראו פחות מעשרה פסוקים.

Moses our teacher decreed that Israel should read the Torah publicly on Shabbat and on Monday and Thursday mornings so that three days should not pass without the Torah being heard. And Ezra decreed that the Torah should be read every Shabbat at Minhah for the sake of the idlers. He also decreed that on Mondays and Thursdays three people were to be called to the Torah, and that not less than ten sentences were to be read.¹

Additional Blessings

Originally the person who received the first aliyah recited the opening blessing over the Torah and the one who received the last aliyah recited the concluding blessing.

הפותח והחותם מברך לפניו ולאחריו.

He that begins and he who concludes the reading from the Torah recite a blessing, one at the beginning and the other after it.²

Each recipient of an עליה thus read a section from the Torah, but only the first and the last readers recited benedictions. But conditions changed, and in Amoraic times it was decreed that the same person recite the blessings before and after each עליה. Why the change? The reason given in the Talmud is:

גזירה משום הנכנסים ומשום היוצאים.

It is a decree so that those arriving [during the Torah reading] and those leaving [before its conclusion could hear both blessings].³

It would seem then, that the Rabbis made a great effort to accommodate congregants who were tardy or who were impatient to leave services before the Torah reading was over. They instituted the blessings over the intermediate aliyot even though it seemed to contradict the basic principle of לבטלה לברכה, not reciting an unnecessary blessing. Since the only required blessings were the ones to be recited at the beginning of the Torah reading and at the end, the in-between blessings are not necessary. Nonetheless, the rabbis found reasons to allow blessings to be recited by each עולה, so as not to mislead those casual worshippers whose brief stay at services might lead them to think that only one blessing was required. This practice was also presumably meant to give honor to the Torah (משום כבוד התורה).

The Torah Reader

As already indicated, the ancient practice was to have the portion read by members of the congregation who would divide the portion to be read that day and would read it without any assistance. In some congregations, however, there may not have been seven people who knew how to read the Torah properly. This would probably be the case in small communities, or in communities outside of Eretz Yisrael, where most people were not fluent in Hebrew.

והעליות לא נהגו כן. אלא אחד קורא את כל הפרשה.

¹ M.T. Hilkhot T'fillah 12:1.

² M. Megillah 4:2.

³ B. Megillah 21 a-b.

[In such cases] it was not customary to have individual aliyot. Rather, one person would be assigned to read the entire portion.⁴

The realities of congregational life forced the development of a new stage in the Torah reading. In those congregations where there were few skilled Torah readers an expert Torah reader would be assigned to assist those who had trouble reading the portion assigned to them. This is probably reflected in the Talmudic debate as to whether two persons may read together from the Torah. One baraita holds that it is forbidden for two persons to read together:

מפני שאין שני קולות נכנסין באזן אחת.

Two voices together cannot be heard distinctly.⁵

Another baraita however holds:

שנים קוראין בתורה. ואין שנים קוראין כנביא.

Two can read together from the Torah, but two cannot read together from the Prophets.⁶

One skilled person could read the haftorah, but among the seven readers of the Torah portion, there would be some who required an expert to assist them – hence two voices. This baraita from the Yerushalmi is a key teaching, for it gives Talmudic support to those who believe that joint aliyot are permissible. A further development is recorded in the Shulhan Arukh:

לא יקראו שנים. אלא העולה קורא וש"ץ שותק, או ש"ץ קורא והעולה לא יקרא בקול רם ומכל מקום צריך הוא לקרות עם הש"ץ כדי שלא תהא ברכתו לבטלה. אלא שצריך בנחת שלא ישמיע לאזניו.

Two do not read together. If the עולה [person called to the Torah] reads then the ש"ץ [official reader] keeps quiet, but if the ש"ץ reads then the עולה does not read aloud. But he is required to read with the official reader so that his blessing will not be a ברכה לבטלה [a redundant blessing]. But he must read quietly, so it will not be heard.⁷

There are two issues which are interconnected. The first issue is that of two voices reading together, and the second is that of the ברכה לבטלה [unnecessary blessing]. The practice of having the עולה mouth the reading was recommended, as a way to avoid the problem “of two voices together,” while technically conforming to the Jewish practice of having the person who says the blessing perform the act. Here the blessing and the act are done by two different people. The עולה recites the blessing, but the ש"ץ does the reading. The practice of having the ש"ץ assist an inexperienced reader soon became our present practice of having the ש"ץ read for every עולה so that no one called to the Torah would be embarrassed by being unable himself to read the Torah. The law as it later developed ignores the question of לבטלה [a redundant blessing], separates blessing from deed, and no longer even requires the עולה to mouth the reading.

⁴ J. Megillah 4, 75a.

⁵ J. Megillah 4:1, 77d.

⁶ Ibid., 4:1, 77d.

⁷ S.A. Orah Hayyim 141.

Additional Aliyot

The number of aliyot is fixed by the Mishnah:

זה הכלל: כל שיש בו מוסף ואינו יום טוב קוראין ארבעה, ביום טוב חמשה, ביום הכפורים ששה, בשבת שבעה, אין פוחתין מהן אבל מוסיפין עליהם, ומפטירין בנביא.

This is the general principle: any day where there is musaf [additional service] but is not a Yom Tov, four read; on a Yom Tov, five; on Yom Kippur, six; on the Sabbath, seven. They must not reduce the number but they may increase it, and they conclude with a reading from the prophets.⁸

The Mishnah gives permission on Shabbat to add aliyot to accommodate those congregants who have **הירובים** (entitlements) by giving them an aliyah. And this seems to have been the method used by congregations to solve the problem of there being more people who were entitled to aliyot on the Sabbath than there were statutory aliyot. The Mishnah, however, rules differently for weekday mornings:

בשני ובחמישי ובשבת מנחה קורין שלשה, אין פוחתין ואין מוסיפין עליהם, ואין מפטירין בנביא.

On Monday and on Thursday, and on Shabbat at the Minhah [afternoon] service three persons read; they must not reduce the number nor add to it; nor do they conclude with a haftorah [reading from the prophets].⁹

The reason given for this stringent limitation is that there were people present at weekday mornings services who had to get to work.¹⁰ But when there was a pressing need for additional aliyot, a way was found to evade the limitation and meet the need:

ואם היו שני חתנים בבית הכנסת והם ישראלים, מותר להוסיף לקרות ד' דלדידהו הוי כיו"ט שמותר להוסיף, ונראה שהוא הדין לשני בעלי ברית.

If there were two grooms in the synagogue and they were Israelites, [and could not receive the kohen or levi aliyah] it is permitted to add a fourth reader, because it is like a Yom Tov [holiday] when it is permitted to add, and apparently the same ruling would apply if there are two **בעלי ברית** [celebrants of a Brit] present.¹¹

The element of **שמחה** (celebration) was sufficient reason to change the rules governing aliyot, a suggestive precursor of what follows.

Simhat Torah

The extreme flexibility of the developing Halakhah of the Torah service was utilized by one modern posek to justify calling two people for one aliyah and having them recite the blessings together. Rabbi Joshua Hirschhorn was Chief Rabbi of Montreal several decades ago.

⁸ M. Megillah 4:2.

⁹ M. Megillah 4:1.

¹⁰ B. Megillah 23a.

¹¹ Rema, Orah Hayyim 135.

A בני תשובה in his book *Mi-ma'aynei Ha-yeshua* [no. 32], deals with the question of two בני מצוה on the same Shabbat.

Rabbi Hirschhorn begins by citing the widespread practice of calling a number of men to the Torah at Simhat Torah for the same aliyah. They recite the ברכות together, and the ש"ץ (Torah reader) reads the פרשה (Torah portion). He reasons that this custom is not a violation of לבטלה ברכה (redundant blessing), or of תרי קלי (two voices cannot be heard distinctly), because a violation of the Torah would not have been permitted on Simhat Torah, which is the celebration of Torah. And he tries to prove his claim with a carefully reasoned argument in which he cites early authorities in support of his case. Rabbi Hirschhorn's reasoning leads him to affirm that since group aliyot are permitted on Simhat Torah, it is permissible to have group aliyot during the rest of the year. And in the case of the two בני מצוה:

אם יש שני בר מצוה בביהכ"נ ורוצים ששניהם יברכו אם אי אפשר בענין אחד אין להכביד עליהם ויש להתיר להם לברך שנים על התורה. והחזן יקרא או שאפילו אחד הנערים יקרא והשני ישמע קריאתו ויוכלו לברך שניהם ברכה שניה. כי יש בזה לסמוך על הראשונים הסוברים דאין בזה משום ברכה שאינה צריכה.

If there are two bar mitzvahs in the synagogue and it is desired that both of them say the blessing, and no other way is possible, we can permit both to say the blessing together over the Torah, and the hazzan [cantor] will read, or even one of the boys will read and the other will hear his reading, then both can recite together the second blessing. For this we can rely on those Rishonim [early authorities] who hold that this would not be an unnecessary blessing.¹²

Joint Aliyot

Until the development in the Middle Ages of Simhat Torah, the rabbis seemed to consider single aliyot as normative. Rabbi Avram Reisner, in his responsum entitled "Joint Aliyot," maintains that the normative tradition, through the years, has not endorsed joint aliyot, and there is no compelling reason that we should permit them. He writes that,

Given the unwillingness of our precedents to recognize dual or mass aliyot save on Simhat Torah, though subject to many of the same pressures that we face today, I believe that we should rule against dual aliyot. The forces that drive consideration of the issue are neither new nor overwhelming. Aliyot are conceived, correctly, as individual honors to the honorees, as well as honors to the Torah. If the latter, only, the procedure permitted on Simhat Torah should reign every time the Torah is read, and we have seen that it does not. Especially in our age of heightened sensitivity to the radical dignity of the individual, to begin a custom which treats individuals as corporate entities is, I believe, incorrect.¹³

¹² *Mi-ma'aynei Ha-yeshua*, p. 114.

¹³ Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, "Joint Aliyot," above, pp. 29-30.

Rabbi Reisner goes on to discuss congregations that have already instituted shared aliyot:

To those congregations I would advise that that custom should preferably be rolled back as soon as possible. Where it does not appear possible to roll back the extant custom, it is possible to defend that custom as *מנהג המקום* (local custom), where the custom is for the couple to split the blessings, one fore and one aft, relying on the BaH's interpretation that the bar to such blessings is a matter of intention which is resolved in this case, or where the blessings are shared jointly, relying on the rejection of R. Zeira's dictum by the Yerushalmi. Both cases rely on the precedent of Simhat Torah.¹⁴

Looking Back

From the days of Moses and Ezra there has been a continuing evolution of the Torah service in response to the changing needs of the congregation. Originally each recipient of an aliyah read a section from the Torah but only the first and last readers recited benedictions. In Amoraic times it was decreed that the *עולה* recite blessings before and after each aliyah read. And a reason was found for this change. The reason given was, "not to mislead those casual worshippers whose brief stay at services might lead them to think that only one blessing was required." To accomplish this the principle of *ברכה לבטלה* (redundant blessings) was ignored. When an expert Torah reader was introduced to enable those who were not skilled Torah readers to have an aliyah, the tradition of having the same person who says the blessing perform the act was overlooked, for the *עולה* recited the blessing while the *ש"ץ* read the Torah. And the Yerushalmi quotes a baraita which affirmed that "two can read together from the Torah," which gives Talmudic support to those who believe that joint aliyot are possible. The Mishnah affirms that additional aliyot are permissible on Shabbat, but not on weekdays. But the Rema declared a weekday Shaharit to be a Yom Tov to enable two *התנים* (who were neither Kohanim nor Levi'im) to both have aliyot. And, when it seemed desirable that joint aliyot be instituted, they were introduced. On Simhat Torah the custom developed of calling groups to the Torah and all together reciting the Torah blessings, rather than repeating the Torah reading and lengthening the service, or breaking up the congregation into smaller units and reading from several Torahs. Both "two voices" and "redundant blessings" were ignored in this development. When the number of *בני מצוה* increased in the congregation, Rabbi Hirschhorn, Chief Rabbi of Montreal, found adequate precedent in the words of the Rishonim and in the precedent of Simhat Torah to permit two *בני מצוה* to recite the Torah blessings together on a Shabbat.

Rabbi Avram Reisner, though he disapproves of dual aliyot, finds in his responsum "Joint Aliyot," that it is possible to defend the practice of those congregations that have introduced dual aliyot on the grounds of *מנהג המקום* (local custom). To sum up, when the need arose, previous precedents were found to be flexible enough to permit radical innovations in the Torah service. The question is then, "Are the needs of our congregations such as to make family and group aliyot a desirable development?"

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

In Our Congregations

In our congregations the Torah reading serves as a means of reinforcing the values of the congregation, and of keeping the congregation informed and involved in what is happening in the lives of the families of the congregation. A basic value of Judaism, which needs reinforcing in our generation, is the marriage tie. In an age that stresses the “radical dignity of the individual,” and in a society where individual happiness and self-fulfillment often are given priority over responsibilities to others, it is important to emphasize and celebrate the relationship of husband and wife, and appropriate to do so in the context of the Torah reading. Many of our congregations have already instituted joint aliyot for couples entering a marriage, observing an anniversary, naming a child, or celebrating a bar mitzvah. An important subliminal message is being conveyed to the congregation when a couple says the blessings together, figuratively “speaks with one voice,” as they enter a marriage, name a child, celebrate an anniversary or a bar or bat mitzvah. Even when there is a divorce in a family, if the parents of a bar or bat mitzvah have a joint aliyah, a statement is being made to the extended family and to the congregation that the parents continue to share responsibility for the raising of the child. In any event, the *מרא דאתרא* has the opportunity to discuss the situation with the parents, to talk about the issue of joint responsibility for the child’s welfare, and to work through a mutually satisfactory solution to the question of whether the parents’ aliyah is to be handled jointly or individually.

In cases where one of the couple is a kohen or a levi our congregations make a choice. Some may follow the approach of Rabbi Mayer Rabinowitz in his responsum, “Rishon or Kohen” and call the couple any place in the course of the Torah reading.¹⁵ Others follow the approach of Rabbi Joel Roth who rules that lineal sanctity for the *כהונה* (priesthood) adheres both to men and women, and that in the case of a mixed couple associative sanctity would apply.¹⁶ Hence the couple would be called either to the kohen or levi aliyah or among the *הוספות* (aliyot added to the customary seven on Shabbat).

Conclusion

The answer to Rabbi Reisner’s question – Are the needs of our congregations such as to make family and group aliyot a desirable development? – is a resounding “yes.” The instituting of aliyot for couples by Conservative congregations to mark family events can be seen as a response to the compelling need to recognize the community importance of marriage ties and to jointly celebrate family events.

Aliyot for couples can be justified halakhically by recognizing the readiness of the rabbis of past generations to find good reasons to meet the needs of their changing congregations, by the baraita found in the Yerushalmi permitting two to read together from the Torah, by the precedent of group aliyot on Simhat Torah, by the contemporary responsum permitting joint aliyot for *בני מצוה*, and by the *מנהג* (custom) in many of our congregations of giving couples joint aliyot. Hence though aliyot for individuals remains the norm, the practice in many of our Conservative congregations of giving aliyot to couples is acceptable.

Group aliyot for other members of a family or for communal occasions such as the installation of the officers of the congregation, honoring Hebrew school teachers, Volunteers for Israel etc., may be desirable, but each instance will have to be carefully examined and individually justified, utilizing an approach similar to the one used for joint aliyot for couples.

¹⁵ Mayer Rabinowitz, “Rishon or Kohen,” *PCJLS 86-90*, pp. 437-443.

¹⁶ Joel Roth, “The Status of Daughters of Kohanim and Levi’im for Aliyot,” *PCJLS 86-90*, pp. 419-434.