

Committee on Jewish Law and Standards

Reading Torah in Sign Language: A Concurrence

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In her teshuvah, Reading Torah in Sign Language, Rabbi Pamela Barmash writes the following as her legal conclusion:

In a deaf congregation, a Torah reading with aliyot may be conducted with a reader signing directly from a scroll or with a reader chanting orally from the scroll accompanied by either signing in sign language or electronic captioning.

We agree with her conclusion, but arrive at it by way of a different line of reasoning.

In the pages that precede it she argues that American Sign Language [ASL] is not merely a translation, but rather “a form of communication equal to oral language.” She needed to make that argument in order to distinguish a Torah reading in sign language from any other translation in any other language, because, in her estimation, “If sign language is merely a translation... the berakhah to be recited is the berakhah recited before any study of Torah, ... and there would not be aliyot”.

We believe that a Torah reading in American Sign Language cannot be described as other than a translation. Sign language is an independent linguistic system. There is not a one-to-one correspondence between its vocabulary and grammatical elements and those of the Biblical Hebrew found in the Torah scroll. As such it cannot fulfill the rabbinic requirement of reading the Torah from the scroll in the Hebrew language. Although the Revelation at Sinai was non-lingual, its representation in the Torah scroll in Hebrew language and Hebrew letters is uniquely sacred.

But we do not agree with her assessment of the implications of that fact. In our estimation, while a Torah reading conducted directly from the scroll into sign is indeed a Torah reading in translation, nothing prevents the use of the standard aliyot and blessings translated in sign.

In a deaf congregation, where a voiced reading of the Torah is not meaningful, the methods described in Rabbi Barmash’s legal conclusion are the proper procedure.

For a hearing community, the traditional obligation to hear the words of the Torah read aloud in Hebrew stands.