

Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, November 2011
HM 35:11.2011e

Concurring Statement for the Teshuvah on the Status of a Heresh by Rabbi Pamela Barmash

Rabbis Elliot N. Dorff and Elie Spitz

Along with the overwhelming majority of the CJLS who voted for this responsum, I want to thank Rabbi Barmash for formulating a sensible, sensitive, and inclusive stance on the issues facing deaf Jews, one that is well rooted in both Jewish law and modern science. I want to add just one philosophical point to the issue of whether signing the Torah is another way of reading it or a translation.

Hearing people all too easily assume that the way they orally articulate the words of the text of the Torah is one and the same with the meaning of the text itself. Actually, from a philosophical point of view, the text contains a meaning. It takes considerable training for children and adults to learn how to understand that meaning, and people can have a “reading knowledge” of the language without being able to pronounce or speak it. Some autistic children and adults can understand the text perfectly well, as evidenced by what they write about it, but they are unable to articulate it orally. In addition, of course, hearing people pronounce the Hebrew of the Torah in many different ways. Thus if rendering the text orally counts as a direct reading of the Torah, rendering it in sign language should, it seems to me, count as the same thing. Each is one step removed from the text itself.

Signing is very different from a translation of the text of the Torah to another language. In that process a person understands the meaning of the text and consciously translates it into another language with a different set of words and a different grammar. In signing, on the other hand, the person intends to convey the original meaning of the text directly. He or she just renders it in visual symbols rather than oral ones. Thus signing and translation differ in both the intent of the person involved and the process the person uses to convey the meaning embedded in the text. Signing thus is, in my view, simply another way of reading the text of the Torah, one that renders its meaning in visual symbols rather than oral ones.