

Torah Reading During COVID-19

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Please note that this is not an official responsum of the CJLS.

The Torah reading poses special issues in the COVID-19 era. Torah reading typically involves a Torah reader, a person called up for an aliyah, and gabbai'im standing around the same table. The Torah scroll is usually carried around the congregation, bringing many people into close proximity with the person carrying the Torah scroll, with many people touching the Torah (often with tzitzit or a siddur that will also come into contact with their lips). Hagbahah and gelilah also involve multiple people handling the same objects and coming into physical proximity with each other. Additionally, the act of chanting from the scroll, like all singing, risks the expulsion of aerosols, and standing in a location in proximity to someone who is singing or has recently sung can risk the inhalation of aerosols.

The following are suggestions for an in-person Torah service, whether on a weekday, Shabbat, or Yom Tov, that reduces risks associated with physical proximity and aerosol expulsion and inhalation. Our goal in offering this guideline is to maintain the symbolic ritual power of the Torah service while accommodating the special needs of the congregation imposed by the coronavirus.

For services taking place via live streaming or video conferencing: if there is a minyan physically present in one place, the guidelines in this letter apply. The [CJLS guidance](#) that a minyan may be constituted over Zoom intentionally does not include a Torah reading in which the Torah reader, gabbai'im, and those having an aliyah are in separate places. Communities not having a minyan physically present in a single location may proceed with Torah study, considering that the conventional public reading of the Torah is required only in the presence of a minyan in person, by reading the Torah portion from a Humash or from the Torah scroll (as it is permissible to engage in individual Torah study from a Torah scroll in the absence of a minyan). This Torah study could be preceded by the blessings for Torah study, "la'asok bedivrei Torah," and/or all those who would have otherwise had an aliyah could join in the "asher bahar banu" berakhah at the end.

Importantly, those involved in the Torah reading should engage in hand disinfection prior to, and at the conclusion of, the Torah reading. They should also wear a face mask and eye protection. (Eyeglasses do not provide adequate eye protection.) Those who are singing may have to remove their mask while singing but they must put it back on afterwards. ***Considering that medical knowledge about the virus's transmission is developing, the advice of a synagogue's medical advisors should be sought.***

Hotza'at hatorah and hakhnasat hatorah:

1. Only one person should open the ark and remove the Torah scroll from the ark or put it back. This person could be the Torah reader, who would then be the only person to handle the Torah scroll.
2. Carrying the Torah scroll around the congregation, while a long-standing custom, should be omitted. (Arukh Hashulhan O.H. 134:4; Rabbi Kenneth Berger, *Tradition, Interpretation, and Change: Developments in the Liturgy of Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenaz*, chapter 3)
3. In order to minimize the touching of objects, no rimmonim or keter should be used on the Torah scroll that will be read.
4. If an abbreviated procession around the congregation is still included, there needs to be suitable space to maintain social distance between the Torah carrier and the congregation at all times. The Torah scroll should not be touched by anyone other than the Torah carrier.

Torah reader:

1. We recommend that all Torah readings on any one day be read by a single Torah reader.
2. If the Torah reading is read by multiple readers and they are not very experienced, they might have difficulty finding the place in the scroll without a gabbai or someone else to help. This is a טירחא דציבורא (tirha detzibura) and also a potential embarrassment for them. It is advised to place sticky note flags in the space between the columns of text that point to the beginning of each aliyah. Sticky notes should not touch the letters, and because residue can remain on the scroll, the amount of time a sticky note is left on should be minimized. It should be noted that some kinds of sticky notes have more adhesive than others. Sticky note adhesive is temporary enough that this could even be done on Shabbat.
3. If there are multiple Torah readers, each one should be asked to bring their own yad/etzba, whether they already own their own personal one or not. Chopsticks might be an easy way to supply individual readers with a personal yad/etzba.

Use of a see-through barrier

One option for protecting the Torah reader, gabba'im, and those having an aliyah is the use of a see-through barrier with physical distancing. Considering that medical knowledge about the virus's transmission is developing, the use of a barrier should be used only with the approval of a synagogue's medical advisors.

1. A tall physical barrier, like a plexiglass or plastic shield, can be placed around an amud, and the Torah reader and the person called for an aliyah should remain on opposite sides of the barrier. This barrier would be set up from the floor to 7-9 feet high and would form a box around the amud with a gap of 2-3 feet on one side to allow the Torah reader to enter, and perhaps one or two or three sides might be attached to the amud.
2. A Torah reader chanting the Torah or those having an aliyah and saying berakhot would be aerosolizing, so the gabba'im and those having an aliyah should remain outside the barrier (even though the resonant ritual of holding onto the atzei hayyim is omitted). If those having an aliyah would be let in just to touch the atzei hayyim, they might contaminate the atzei hayyim and/or might accidentally start singing the berakhot and possibly aerosolize on or near the Torah reader.
3. The procedure with this barrier would be as follows: the Torah reader goes inside. The gabba'im stand outside, even at a distance. Bean bags or wood blocks would help the Torah reader keep scroll open. The person coming up for an aliyah would stand outside the barrier and, when done, would move at least 6 feet away as the next person comes up. This is no more complex than when people who are not used to having an aliyah come up when there is no pandemic.

Gabba'im:

1. Gabba'im should not stand in proximity to the Torah scroll. They can fulfill their roles (calling up the people having aliyot, assisting the Torah reader, and announcing the page in the Humash) from a safe distance.
2. Wood blocks, bean bags, or other objects may be placed at the atzei hayyim to hold the scroll open, and they may also be placed at the atzei hayyim as well as at the sides of the shulhan to prevent the scroll from rolling off the table.
3. The Torah scroll should be such that one person can handle it and remove the cover without assistance.

Aliyot: We suggest two possible approaches for aliyot that will enable physical distance to be maintained:

1. Whereas normally a person having an aliyah stands next to the Torah reader, holds on to the Torah rollers, and ideally follows along with the Torah reading from the scroll, these are not absolute requirements, so it is recommended that the person having an aliyah recite the Torah blessings from a distance or behind a barrier. (Arukh Hashulhan O.H. 139:15) An appropriate distance or the use of a barrier should be determined by a synagogue's medical advisors. Alternately, the Torah reader can be the one to recite all the aliyah blessings for all aliyot. (in a variation on S.A. O.H. 143:5)
2. It should be noted that wearing gloves to touch a Torah scroll is not an effective option: wearing gloves may give a false sense of security because most people do not know how to remove them without contaminating themselves.
3. It is desirable to structure the Torah reading so that the person having an aliyah can follow along quietly as the reader is reading or, at a minimum, follow the reading in the Torah. This is, of course, difficult if the person having an aliyah is standing at a distance from the Torah. Therefore, if possible, the Torah reader may prop the Torah scroll in an upright position, or at least tilted up somewhat, so it can be seen from a distance as the reader points with a yad. If this is not possible, safety concerns take precedence, even if it means that the lines read from the Torah scroll cannot be seen.
4. Communities that will be conducting the Torah service in person with honorees linking in via video conferencing may consider doing so in the following ways: (1) A congregant accessing the service electronically could recite the Torah blessings simultaneously with another congregant who is physically present in the room where the Torah reading is taking place; (2) A congregant accessing the service electronically could be honored with reading the Torah portion out loud in English (or in Hebrew, if they are knowledgeable enough to do so); (3) the person leading the Torah service could start with "la'asok bedivrei Torah" and then invite all those who would have otherwise have had an aliyah to join in the "asher bahar banu" berakhah at the end. The persons linking in for an aliyah should stand as a sign of respect, as they are able.

Special considerations regarding Maftir when one person has taken all the aliyot and plans to read the Haftarah

1. When there is just one Torah reader who reads all aliyot and will also read the Haftarah, it is appropriate to skip the Maftir aliyah. (See O.H. 282:5 Rema, and O.H. 282:6, which indicate that the additional Maftir aliyah was instituted to ensure that one who read from the Prophets was also giving appropriate honor to the Torah.)

2. This approach could also be employed on days when the Maftir would normally be read from a second scroll, such as Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mornings, thereby eliminating the need for a 2nd torah scroll.
3. If the Maftir aliyah will be skipped because one Torah reader will be doing all of the Torah reading and having all aliyot and reading the Haftarah, then the appropriate time for the Hatzi Kaddish (that would normally come immediately before the Maftir) would be following the Haftarah.

Hagbahah / Gelilah:

We recommend that *hagbahah* and *gelilah* are done in a way that allows for only one person near the Torah at a time. The optimal option is for the Torah reader to be the only one to handle the Torah scroll. A second option is to combine *hagbahah* and *gelilah* into a single action done by one person other than the Torah reader. A third option, the most risky: the person doing *hagbahah* could simply raise the Torah a bit from the reading table, and then place it down. The person doing *gelilah* would then come forward and dress it as it sits on the table with nobody else nearby. In all cases, anyone who touches the Torah scroll should observe proper hand hygiene before and after.