

HAZAK, HAZAK, v'NITHAZAK

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שאלה

When doing the triennial Torah cycle, is it permissible to pronounce **חזק חזק ונתחזק** for each of the five books every year (even though only one-third of each would have been read that year), or must one wait until the three-year cycle is completed?¹

תשובה

The earliest reference to the custom of saying **חזק** to one who reads from the Torah is found in *HaManhig*, written by Abraham ben Nathan ha-Yarhi who wrote at the end of the twelfth and beginning of the thirteenth centuries regarding the customs of Jews of France, Germany and Spain. He writes:

מה שנהגו בצרפת ובפרובינצא לכל הקוראים בתורה כשסיימין שאומר להם החזן בקול רם חזק, מצאתי סמך לדבר בבראשית רבה לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפך, אין אומרים הזה אלא למי שתולה החפץ בידו, מלמד שהיה ספר תורה בחיקו שליהושע, ואומר לו הקב"ה חזק ואמץ מכאן למסיים בתורה אומרים לו חזק. אב"ן.²

As was the custom in France and Provence that all who read from the Torah, as they concluded, the hazzan would say to them in a loud voice, **חזק**, I have found support for this in Bereshit Rabbah, "Let not this Book of Teaching cease from your lips." The word **חזק**

¹ For a comprehensive analysis of the recitation of **חזק**, see Yaakov S. Speigel, "אמירת חזק ויישר כח" *ספר השנה למדעי היהדות והרוח* 26 and 27 (5755): 343-370.

² *Hilkhot Shabbat* 56, ed. Rafael, p. 182.

is used only to the one who holds the object in his hand, from which we learn that the Sefer Torah was in Joshua's lap. And God said to him, "Be strong and resolute." From here, to the one who concludes the Torah reading we say to him, חזק.

According to the custom, חזק was recited to each person who read from the Torah. At that time, Torah reading customs were in flux. It was customary for each person who was called to the Torah to read for himself. As fewer people were able to read the Torah, especially with the appropriate trope, a designated reader replaced the congregant. The blessing of חזק was addressed to the reader. (*HaManhig* refers only to the reader and does not distinguish a separate individual receiving an aliyah.)

The citation from Bereshit Rabbah is used as prooftext that the person reading from the Torah (or reciting the blessings) should be holding on to the Torah. By inference, since God said חזק to Joshua while he was holding the Torah, we should also say חזק to one who holds the Torah:

אמר ר' שמעון בן יוחאי ספר משנה תורה היה סיגנם ליהושע, בשעה שנגלה עליו הקב"ה מצאו יושב וספר משנה תורה בידו, אמר לו חזק יהושע אמץ יהושע לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה וגו' (יהושע א:ח), נטלו והראה לו גלגל חמה, אמר לו כשם שלא דממתי מזה כך אתה דום מלפני מיד וידם השמש וגו'.³

R. Shimon b. Yohai said: The Book of Deuteronomy was an ensign for Joshua. When the Holy One, blessed be He, revealed Himself to him, He found him sitting with the Book of Deuteronomy in his hand. Said He to him, "Be strong, Joshua, be of good courage, Joshua; This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth," (Josh. 1:8). Thereupon he took it and showed it to the orb of the sun which he apostrophised thus: "Even as I have not stood still from (studying) this, so do thou stand still before me!" Straightaway, "And the sun stood still," etc.

The next source to report on this custom is *Orhot Hayyim* by Aaron ben Jacob HaKohen of southern France writing in the beginning of the fourteenth century:

ובכ"ר לא ימוש ספר תורה הזה מפין מלמד שהיה ספר התורה בידו של יהושע שאין אומרים הזה אלא שמי שתופס החפץ בידו. וכשסיים אומרים לו חזק ואמץ. ומכאן יצא המנהג לומר למסיים לקרות בתורה חזק וכך המנהג בצרפת ובפרובינצה אבל בספרד אין אומרים אותו אלא בסיום התורה בלבד והכל הולך אחר המנהג.⁴

In Bereshit Rabbah, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth," teaches that the Sefer Torah was in Joshua's hand since one only uses הזה when one is holding the object in his hand. And when he concludes, we say to him, חזק ואמץ. From here the custom derives to say to the one who concludes his reading in the Torah, חזק, and thus is the custom in France and Provence. But in Spain, we only say this at the conclusion of the Torah exclusively, and each behaves according to his custom.

³ Genesis Rabbah 6:18, ed. Theodor-Albeck, pp. 49-50.

⁴ *Orhot Hayyim*, Halakhot 2 and 5, 19.

Orhot Hayyim reiterates what was stated in *HaManhig*, but adds a conflicting custom from Spain. The custom in Spain is to recite חזק only at the completion of the Torah as opposed to reciting it after each reader.

David ben Joseph of 14th century Spain, in his *Abudraham*, cites *HaManhig* in his opinion, although his attribution of the Spanish custom is not to be found in *HaManhig*. He explains the Spanish custom a little further:

ובספר לא נהגו לאמרה אלא כשסיימם כל ספר וספר מחומשי התורה
ואולי סוברים למסיים בתורה מן הספר ממש קאמר.⁵

In Spain, they are only in the habit of saying it [חזק] when they conclude each book of the five books of the Torah and perhaps they believed that it referred to the one who concludes a book of the Torah explicitly.

We see here the custom of reciting חזק at the conclusion of each book of the Torah, although it is addressed to the person who reads and not the event of the conclusion.

The interpretation of the word למסיים contributes to variations in custom. It may refer to each person called to the Torah who concludes his own reading, or to the one who concludes the reading at the end of the book.

The matter of reciting חזק is first mentioned in the codes in the Bet Yosef (1522-1542) on the Tur. Here he quotes from *Orhot Hayyim*:

בבראשית רבה (סוף פרשה ו) לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפּיך (יהושע
א:ח) מלמד שהיה ס"ת בידו של יהושע שאיך לומר הזה אלא למי שתופס
החפץ וכשסיים אומרים לו חזק ואמץ מכאן יצא המנהג לומר למסיים לקרות
התורה בכל פעם חזק עכ"ל.⁶

In *Bereshit Rabbah*, "This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth" teaches that the *Sefer Torah* was in Joshua's hand since one only uses הזה when one is holding the object. And when he concludes, we say to him, חזק ואמץ. From here the custom derives to say to the one who concludes his reading in the Torah each time, חזק.

The Bet Yosef cites the custom of France and Provence and stops short of mentioning the alternative custom of Spain. When codifying law in the *Shulhan Arukh*, Joseph Karo does not mention the matter of חזק. Moses Isserles, in his gloss to the *Shulhan Arukh*, inserts the custom from the Bet Yosef:

הקורא בתורה צריך לאחוז בספר תורה בשעת ברכה. הגה: וסמכו מנהג זה
על מה שנאמר ביהושע לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפּיך חזק ואמץ (יהושע
א:ח-ט) ומזה נהגו לומר למסיים לקרות בתורה בכל פעם חזק (ב"י בשם
ארהות חיים).⁷

The one who reads from the Torah must hold the *Sefer Torah* at the time of the blessing. Gloss: This custom is based upon what is said in Joshua, "This book of law shall not depart out of thy mouth. . . . Be resolute and of good courage." From here we have the custom to say to the one who concludes the reading of the Torah each time, חזק.

⁵ *Abudraham*, *Shaharit* for Shabbat, p. 171.

⁶ Bet Yosef on *Orah Hayyim* 179:11, s.v. כתב בעל.

⁷ S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 139:11.

The inclusion of this gloss would lead us to believe that this was a prevalent Ashkenazic custom. Rabbi Jacob Moses Toledano, the Chief Sephardi Rabbi of Tel Aviv, expressed his surprise in an article in *Bet HaKnesset* in 1947:

וזה פלא, שבימנו רואים אנו שבארצות המזרח נוהגים לומר לעולה המסיים לקרות בתורה "חזק", או "חזק וברוך" ובסיום התורה לא נוהגים לומר כך, כ"א במקומות אחדים, ואצל האשכנזים נהגו לומר בסיום התורה "חזק, חזק", ולעולה לתורה אומרים ברוב המקומות "יישר כח" ולא "חזק", ואם כי, מובן אחד לשניהם, רואים אנו כבר מימי הרמ"א ועד כה, שינוי במנהג.⁸

And this is surprising, since in our day we see that in eastern countries they are accustomed to saying to the one who concludes the reading of the Torah, חזק, or חזק וברוך and at the completion of the Torah they are not accustomed to saying that, and so it is in several places. And among the Ashkenazim they are accustomed to saying at the completion of the Torah, חזק, חזק, and to the person called up to the Torah they say in most places, יישר כח and not חזק. And although, the understanding is the same for both of them, we see already in the days of the Rema until now a change of custom.

Rabbi Toledano cites several other eastern sources who record the custom of saying חזק. He concludes that the multiple expulsions of the Jews in Europe contributed to the varying customs and the changes within the communities.

The words one uses and to whom it is said can change depending upon the purpose one sees to saying those words. Rabbi Moses ben Isaac Mintz in his *שאלות ותשובות* of the fifteenth century reasoned:

וכמו שאומרים הדרן עלך בסיום מסכתא כי יחזור שלא ישכחם, כך אומרים כאן חזק שסיימת החומש ויישר כחך ועוד בפעם תתחיל.⁹

And just as we say חזק עלך at the conclusion of a massekhet, that we will return so that we not forget, so too we say here חזק that you finished the Humash and יישר כח that you will start once again.

This focuses on the accomplishment of an event and not specifically on the individual.

The Peri Hadash, Hezekiah ben David Da Silva, in late seventeenth-century Jerusalem, in his commentary on the Shulhan Arukh, comments on the Rema's gloss:

בכל פעם חזק אולי יצא מנהג זה משום שהתורה נקראת תושיה שמתשת כוחו של אדם ועוד דאמרינן פרק אין עומדים ד' דברים צריכין חיזוק ואלו הן תורה ומ"ט וכו' שנאמר חזק ואמץ חזק בתורה ואמץ במ"ט.

Each time חזק: Perhaps this custom developed because the Torah is called a support that weakens the strength of man. Also it says in the chapter אין עומדים, there are four things that need strengthening and these are them: Torah and good deeds, etc. As it is said, חזק ואמץ in Torah, חזק ואמץ in good deeds.

The force of this is to focus the blessing on the individual, to gird up his strength.

⁸ *Bet HaKnesset* 3 (5708): 24.

⁹ Rabbi Moses ben Isaac Mintz, *She'elot u-Teshuvot*, 85.

The custom of reciting *חזק* on Simhat Torah varies widely according to community in practice and in reasoning. The phraseology and the number of times one says *חזק* varies as well. The origins of reciting *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק* are unknown, but the phrase is mentioned in the writings of Hatam Sofer (who lived in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Hungary) and in Arukh HaShulhan, Orah Hayyim, written 1903-1907 by Jehiel Michal ben Aaron Isaac HaLevi Epstein in Belorussia:

צריך לאחוז בעמודי הספר תורה בשעת ברכה ובשעת קריאתה יסמכו זה על זה שנתאמר ביהושע לא ימוש ספר התורה הזה מפיו דמשמע שתופסה בידו.... ודע דבקרא דלא ימוש כתיב חזק ואמץ ומזה נהגו לומר למסיים ספר חזק חזק ונתחזק ויש רוצים שיאמרו חזק ג' פעמים שהם מספר משה ונכון הוא.¹⁰

One must hold the handles of the Torah at the time of the blessing and at the time of its reading and this is based upon what is written in Joshua, "Let not this book of teaching cease from your lips," which means to hold it in one's hand. . . . And know that in Scripture where it is written *לא ימוש* it is also written *חזק ואמץ* and from this we are accustomed to saying to the one who concludes the book *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק*, *חזק*. And there are those who wish to say *חזק* three times because that is the number for Moses (in gematria) and this is correct.

Not only are the origins of this phrasing unknown, but few commentaries try to explain the reason for the addition of *חזק*.

In an analysis of the blessing of *חזק*, Israel M. Ta-Shma in an article in *Tarbiz*, 1987, states that a midrash in Bereshit Rabbah requires those standing near the one reciting the blessings over the Torah to strengthen him with the blessing of their mouths by saying *חזק* out loud just as God did for Joshua. Our custom of saying *חזק* at the end of the *חומש* and *חזק* after each aliyah are remnants of the earlier custom. Ta-Shma speculates that the reason for saying *חזק* to each individual who came to the Torah was that as each individual held on to the Torah, they were actually supporting it so that it would not fall – as in "perez Uzzah" in 2 Samuel. As those who actually read (and held onto) the Torah changed, those to whom the blessing was addressed and the purpose for the blessing changed.

The custom of reciting *חזק* has changed over the centuries from place to place. One can only speculate as to the original or true purpose of this blessing. What is its purpose today and is it used uniformly in all places that recite *חזק*? If it has come to signify the conclusion of each of the five books of the Torah, and is universally understood and accepted that way, then the recitation of *חזק* should occur only on those occasions. If it is detached from that specific event, for which there is precedent, and viewed more broadly as a blessing associated with the reading of the Torah, it may be recited more frequently.

In his paper, "A Complete Triennial System for Reading the Torah" – which conforms to the system of triennial reading approved by the Law Committee in the paper by Rabbi Elliot N. Dorff, "Annual and Triennial Reading Systems for Reading the Torah" – Rabbi Richard Eisenberg addresses the question of reciting *חזק*: "Since no skipping is allowed on the same day, the concluding verses of each book are read only during year three. Therefore, *חזק* should only be recited during that year and not during the first two years of the cycle. This is indeed the only logical solution, since the Books are completed only in the third

¹⁰ Arukh HaShulhan, Orah Hayyim 139:15.

year; it is not desirable to proclaim their completion before that point.”¹¹ The question remains whether the purpose of reciting *חזק* is to proclaim their completion. Must it be attached only to those last verses?

We may take some guidance from our observance of Simhat Torah for those who read Torah on a triennial basis. Rabbi Lionel Moses, in his *תשובה*, “Is There an Authentic Triennial Cycle of Torah Readings?” quotes some observations of Benjamin of Tudela:

“Four days from thence [i.e. Fayum] brings us to Mizraim, or Memphis, commonly called Old Cairo. This large city stands on the banks of the Nile, called Al-Nil, and contains about two thousand Jews. Here are two synagogues, one of the congregation of Palestine, called the Syrian, and the other of the Babylonian Jews, or those of Iraq. They follow different customs regarding the division of the Pentateuch into parshioth and sedarim. The Babylonians read one parashah every week, as is the custom throughout Spain, and finish the whole of the Pentateuch every year, whereas the Syrians have the custom of dividing every parashah into three sedarim, concluding the lecture of the whole once in three years. They keep, however, the long-established custom of assembling both congregations to perform public service together, as well as on the day of the joy of the law [i.e. Simhat Torah] as on that of the dispensation of the law [i.e. Shavuot].”¹²

Without commenting on the precision of this information from Benjamin of Tudela, it is interesting to note that the Jews of the Palestinian congregation joined those of the Babylonian congregation for the annual celebration of Simhat Torah. Rabbi Moses further quotes from a source called *Hahillukim Shebein Anshei Mizrah Uvnei Eretz Yisrael* which states that the people of the east celebrate Simhat Torah every year while those of Eretz Yisrael celebrate every three and a half years. This would place the celebration of Simhat Torah not on the last day of Sukkot as was the custom for those who follow the annual cycle, but on whatever Shabbat the cycle of readings was completed.

It is the general practice of congregations reading on a triennial cycle to celebrate Simhat Torah annually on the day following Shemini Atzeret (*יום טוב שני של גלויות*). Technically, the Torah is read in its entirety only once in three years. We have broadened the interpretation of Simhat Torah so that we may celebrate with Klal Yisrael on an annual basis, even when we have completed only one third of the reading in a given year.

Summary

Our present custom of reciting *חזק*, *חזק ונתחזק* at the conclusion of each book of the Five Books of Moses has taken many various forms for a great variety of reasons since its first notation in the late twelfth century. There was not a single standardized custom among Ashkenazim nor among Sephardim. The custom among any particular group frequently shifted as historical circumstances dictated. The recitation of *חזק* is parallel in purpose to the recitation of *ישר כח* as can be witnessed by the Sephardic custom to say *חזק וברוך*

¹¹ Richard Eisenberg, “A Complete Triennial System for Reading the Torah,” *PCJLS 86-90*, p. 385.

¹² See Lionel Moses, “Is There an Authentic Triennial Cycle of Torah Readings?” *PCJLS 86-90*, p. 335. See p. 369, n. 8.

while Ashkenazim say **יִישַׁר כַּח** to one who has just received an aliyah to the Torah. The greeting is one of congratulations, a girding of strength and a wish for continued study.

Conclusion

The variety of interpretations of the meaning and purpose of reciting **חזק**, and the ample precedent of variations in practice allow for reexamination of current day practice. It is not mandatory that one recite **חזק** each year, but it is permissible.