

"Hazak, Hazak" in the Triennial Cycle

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This teshuvah was approved on May 12, 2015 by a vote of nine in favor, eight against, and two abstaining (9-8-2). Voting in Favor: Rabbis Aaron Alexander, Pamela Barmash, Elliot Dorff, David Hoffman, Jeremy Kalmanofsky, Gail Labovitz, Daniel Nevins, Elie Spitz, Jay Stein. Voting against: Rabbis Baruch Frydman-Kohl, Susan Grossman, Reuven Hammer, Joshua Heller, Amy Levin, Micah Peltz, Paul Plotkin, Avram Reisner. Abstaining: Rabbis Noah Bickart, Adam Kligfeld.

Question: For those synagogues reading Torah according to the triennial cycle, what should be their practice with regard to the custom of saying "hazak, hazak, v'nithazek"? Should they say that phrase only at the end of each book – and thus only when they are reading the last third of each of the annual Torah readings – or may they say it also when reading the first and second portions of the annual Torah readings? If the latter, how should they do that?

Answer: On March 8, 2000, the CJLS approved (21-1-0) a responsum on this subject by Rabbi Nechama D. Goldberg in which she masterfully traced the history of the custom of reciting *hazak, hazak, ve'nithazek* after the reading of each book of the Torah from the custom's origins in the twelfth century through many variations of it in later centuries in both the Ashkenazic and Sephardic communities. She concludes her responsum as follows:

The variety of interpretations of the meaning and purpose of reciting *hazak*, and the ample precedent of variations in practice allow for reexamination of current day practice. It is not mandatory that one recite *hazak* each year, but it is permissible.¹

She notes that in the prodigious work by Rabbi Richard Eisenberg in working out exactly how the annual Torah readings should be divided for congregations using the triennial cycle, Rabbi Eisenberg wrote this:

2. The proclamation of "*hazak*." Since no skipping [from one place in the Torah reading to another] is allowed on the same day, the concluding verses of each book are read only during year 3. Therefore, "*hazak*" 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

¹http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19912000/goldberg_hazak.pdf.

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.

are completed only in the third year; it is not desirable to proclaim their completion before that point.²

In concluding her responsum as she did, Rabbi Goldberg was saying that the history of the custom of reciting *hazak* indicates that it was used more widely than only after reading a full book of the Torah, and so restricting the recitation to the time we end a book of the Torah, as Rabbi Eisenberg does, is not necessary. She does not, however, explain how congregations using the triennial cycle and reading either the first or second third of each Torah reading may recite *hazak* when they finish reading the section of each of the Torah's books that they are going to read that year without running afoul of the principle that Rabbi Eisenberg cites, namely, that one may not skip from one place to another in the Torah reading during any given reading of it. In this responsum I want to explain how that might be done.

First, I should point out that there are good reasons why a rabbi and congregation might want to restrict the saying of *hazak, hazak* to the time when they finish reading a book of the Torah and thus say it only during the year that congregations following the triennial cycle read the third section of each annual reading. As Rabbi Eisenberg says, despite the other times that Rabbi Goldberg documents when *hazak hazak* was said, we are now used to the custom of saying the phrase only when we complete reading a book, and if we have not done so, it seems illegitimate – cheating, almost -- to announce that we have done so.

On the other hand, there are also good reasons why a rabbi and congregation might want to say *hazak, hazak* when completing what they are going to read from a given book of the Torah, even if that does not include the end of the book. They are, after all, transitioning to the next book of the Torah the following week, and so they have indeed completed what they are going to read from the book that they have been reading for the past few months. Rituals often mark transitions, even if they are not complete; we say, for example, that Bar and Bat Mitzvah marks the transition into adulthood for liturgical purposes, even though thirteen-year-olds are not really adults in most other ways.

What, then, should the practice be with regard to saying *hazak, hazak*, in congregations using the triennial cycle? As I developed in my 1987 responsum on the triennial cycle,³ the principle in the Mishnah and in later Jewish law is that “One may skip [from one place to another when reading] from the Prophets, but one may not skip [when reading] the Torah” (M. *Megillah* 4:4).⁴ Given that “*hazak, hazak*” is commonly said only when completing a book of the Torah, that principle would seem to demand, as Rabbi Eisenberg concludes, that synagogues using the

²http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/eisenberg_triennial.pdf.

³http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/dorff_reading.pdf.

⁴ B. *Megillah* 24a (printed as part of Chapter Three in the Bavli); cf. B. *Yoma* 69b. Based on the latter source, the codes permit skipping some verses in the Torah reading when the section is all about one topic, but not when it is about two or more topics: M.T. *Laws of Prayer* 12:8, 13; S.A. *Orah Hayyim* 144:1. See Rashi on B. *Yoma* 69b, s.v. *b'inyan ehad* for his explanation as to why it is prohibited to skip in the Torah reading from one topic to another.

triennial cycle should say “*hazak, hazak*” only when completing each book in the third cycle, for it is only then that the congregation is hearing the end of each book.

However, on fast days other than Yom Kippur we have a long-standing custom of skipping from Exodus 32:11-14 to Exodus 34:1-10, so the Mishnah’s principle has not been observed completely because other sources cited on B. *Yoma* 69b interpret the Mishnah’s principle to permit skipping in the Torah reading if it is all about one topic but not from one topic to another. Furthermore, on Sabbaths occurring during Festivals, Shabbat Rosh Hodesh, Rosh Hodesh during Hanukkah, and Shabbat Hanukkah, we say *hatzi kaddish*, which marks the ending of a Torah reading, and we open another Torah scroll and read from a completely different place that is set ahead of time. The use of another scroll is only to avoid burdening the community (*tirha d’tzibura*) so that we do not keep everyone waiting while the first Torah is rolled to the proper reading for the special day if we used only one scroll. Because, however, the two readings on fast days are close to each other and do not require much time to roll from one to the other, we do not use two scrolls then.

Taking out Torah scrolls, however, is usually restricted to the special days mentioned above and to the four *parshiyot* in preparation for Purim and Passover. Taking out two Torah scrolls, in fact, is one of the liturgical features that marks those special days, and so it does not seem appropriate to do so when reading the last portion of one of the Torah’s books just to be able to say *hazak*.

Therefore it is preferable to use an alternative option that builds on both practices mentioned above. Specifically, one should read the Torah portion for the week and then recite *hatzi kaddish*. Then, because the end of the book is only a few columns away from the end of the readings of the second and even the first cycle so that it is not especially burdensome on the community to wait the minute or two for the Torah to be rolled to the last three verses of the book, even for what are commonly double portions at the end of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, roll the Torah to the end of the book and read the last three verses as *maftir*, followed by the proclamation of *hazak, hazak ve’nithazek*. This follows our practice of taking out only one Torah scroll on fast days because the two sections that we plan on reading are close to each other, but it has the advantage over our practice on fast days of inserting *hatzi kaddish* between them so as to mark the end of one reading and the beginning of another, in fulfillment of the Mishnah’s principle.^{5 6}

⁵ This would have no effect on the rituals of Simḥat Torah because congregations that read all the rest of the Torah on a triennial cycle read the whole of *V’zot Ha-Berakhah* on Simḥat Torah – and often many times – before calling up the *hatan or kallat Torah* and the *hatan or kallat Be’reishit*.

⁶ Another possibility would be for congregations reading on the triennial cycle to set aside that practice for the last of the Torah readings in each book so that the congregation does in fact conclude the reading of each book each year even if they did not read all of it in previous weeks. The problems with this approach are these: (1) This creates an inconsistency in the congregation’s practice, and (2) presumably the reason for reading on the triennial cycle in the first place was to shorten the reading in order to shorten the service or leave more time for discussion of the Torah

P'sak:

Congregations using the triennial cycle may do either of the following with regard to saying *hazak, hazak, ve'nithazek*:

- 1) Proclaim "*hazak, hazak, ve'nithazek*" only when completing each of the Torah's books during the third cycle.
- 2) When the last *parashah* of one of the Torah's books is being read during the first or second years of the triennial cycle, take out only one Torah scroll, read the week's Torah reading from it, say *hatzi kaddish*, roll the scroll to the end of the book, read the last three verses as *maftir*, followed by the congregation proclaiming "*hazak, hazak, ve'nithazek.*"

Because both of these practices are acceptable, someone reading the Torah portion ending a book of the Torah in a community not his or her own should be sure to ask what the community custom is on this matter. Also, those preparing Bar/Bat Mitzvah celebrants in congregations that follow practice (2) above must be sure to teach the celebrant the last verses of the book if the congregation is reading the first or second cycle that year and the celebrant is reading the *maftir* Torah reading.

portion, but at the end of Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers there are often double portions that end the book, and so this would add considerably to the length of the Torah reading and the service, which is precisely what the triennial cycle was trying to remedy.