

Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, November 2011

Concurring Opinion to Rabbi Pamela Barmash's Responsum, "Reading Torah in Sign Language" by Rabbis Daniel Nevins, Adam Kligfield and Susan Grossman HM 35:11.2011c

We are grateful to Rabbi Barmash for the scholarship, sensitivity and persistence that yielded her fine responsum, "The Status of the Heresh and of Sign Language" and of its appendix, "Reading Torah in Sign Language." We voted yes for both papers and are pleased that the Jewish deaf community has received a strong and comprehensive message of inclusion from the CJLS. As rabbis, our greatest responsibility is to teach Torah; with these decisions we have increased the access of the Jewish people to our sacred heritage. We share Rabbi Barmash's agenda to provide Jews who do not have access to the vocal chanting of Torah with an experience of *kriat ha-Torah* through the signing of blessings and of the text itself. There are, however, several important issues that require clarification:

First, we understand that sign language is a distinctive form of communication with all of the range of nuance available in spoken language. It expresses ideas in ways that are not identical to the conventions of Hebrew. As such, the interpretation of the Torah text into sign language is, we believe, a *targum*, or translation. One implication of this designation of sign language as *targum* is that for congregations which include both deaf and hearing members, the communal obligation to chant the Torah may be satisfied only via a reading which includes *both* the chanting of the text *and* its interpretation in sign language.

A second issue regards the status of the Torah blessings. If an *oleh laTorah* (person called up to bless the Torah) is hearing, then the blessings and designated *parashah* should be chanted orally as well, though the texts of both the blessings and the Torah portion could be signed simultaneously. If the person who is *oleh la-Torah* is deaf or hearing-impaired and signs the blessings, then it would be appropriate for the reading also to be in sign language. As long as the medium of Torah blessings and reading is consistent—both either in voice or in sign—there is no issue of *brakhah li-vatalah*, an ineffectual blessing.

A third issue concerns the physical presentation of the signed *kriat ha-Torah*. As Rabbi Barmash noted, the public reading of the Torah is a communal obligation, not an individual obligation. For a community that is entirely deaf, there can be no communal obligation to *hear* the Torah read, but there is arguably an obligation to *see* the Torah chanted from the scroll. In such a case *kriat ha-Torah* would be a sonically silent but visually expressive recitation, with the reader transforming the words in the scroll into sign language. Still, such a practice raises important questions. On a very practical level, where does such a reader look? The Talmud states that one who reads Torah must look at the script of the Torah scroll as s/he

reads (B. *Gittin* 60b). Even if the reader knows a passage by heart (for example, the Shema) it is mandatory that every word be read from the text. But eye contact and facial expressions are important components of sign language. Where should the reader look, in the scroll, or at his or her congregation? We are not sign readers, so all we can do is flag the issue and trust that people interpreting the Torah into sign language will develop a method of looking into the Torah for every word that they sign. This practice would be assisted by a *gabbai* who is trained to hold the *yad* (pointer) so that the reader can proceed fluidly in the text after forming each sign.

The fourth issue is the most complicated since it gets to the core of what is meant by *kriat ha-Torah*. What makes Torah chanting a ritual reenactment of the Sinaitic revelation is the high level of precision. The text is not paraphrased but is read precisely as it is found in the scroll, the same way every time and in every place. *Gabbaim* are expected to stop and correct the reader if s/he makes any mistake in the pronunciation of words. While each community accepts a certain variety in accents and cantillation, the words must always be the same. If sign language is being presented as a simultaneous *interpretation* of the chanted text, then a close paraphrase may suffice. But if it is being presented as the exclusive medium for *kriat ha-Torah* for a deaf congregation, then the reading should be presented with the same level of precision demanded of a conventional chanted rendition.

Would it be possible to prepare such a precise rendition of the Torah chanting in sign language? Again, we are not sign language experts, and therefore it is not possible for us to anticipate every challenge or solution. We trust that Torah reading experts in the deaf community will take the lead in developing solutions for how to sign the Torah reading with precision. However, as rabbis we wish to flag some of the issues that we can anticipate: The reader and the *gabbaim* would need to know precisely which signs are to be used for each word in the text prior to the chanting. This would require study and consultation with Bible translations and commentaries. Synonyms like *vayomer* and *vayidabeir* would each need a consistent rendering in sign language. Moreover, phrasing would need to reflect the traditional *ta'amei ha-mikra* (musical notations). Attention would be paid to conjunctive and disjunctive *ta'amim* since they indicate which words are linked and which are separated; these phrasing instructions would be reflected in the signing. When the Ten Commandments are read, the *ta'am elyon* (which organizes the verses into distinct commands) would need to be followed. The various names for God would each have consistent and distinct signs, and proper names would have to be spelled out. Such a detailed protocol would replicate the rigors of *kriat ha-Torah* as a ritual act.

In essence, what would be desirable for a signed *kriat ha-Torah* is the formation of a team of expert sign interpreters to develop a video presentation of the entire text of each Torah reading that will become the basis of preparation by sign language Torah readers. Signing readers would prepare to read from the Torah in consultation with this tool, just as hearing readers prepare for a traditional chanting by memorizing the musical notations from a printed Bible.

Designing such a system would be quite onerous, but it does not seem to be impossible. Indeed, the [ASL Shakespeare Project](#), begun in 1999 at Yale University, went through precisely such a process to present the plays of William Shakespeare in a consistent and professional format. Here are excerpts from the description of their process:

A team of four people, two deaf and two hearing, came together to translate Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* into ASL... It took over a year to translate and videotape the full play.... Sometimes it took us days to find the right translation for just one line. Sometimes it took only a minute or two. It all depended on how complicated Shakespeare's language was.

The web site describes one particular challenge in translating Shakespeare into ASL: the bard's use of homonyms such as "hart" and "heart" to form puns and add layers to the meaning of his text. The ASL Shakespeare project sought to translate these into "visual puns."

Anyone who has studied Torah knows that each verse presents opportunities for allusions, leading words, and parallel phrases. Rendering these verses into sign language would be a massive project, but surely the text of the Torah is worthy of similar or greater efforts granted to Shakespeare in order to interpret and present its text to the deaf community with fidelity.

This system would be necessary only in the case where the signed Torah reading is being presented as a ritual Torah service with no parallel chanting from the scroll. In other situations, a spontaneous signed Torah reading could be presented as an interpretation of the Torah, either in parallel to the chanted text or on its own as a study tool—essentially as a visual d'var Torah with the standard blessing for Torah study recited, but without aliyot. In such scenarios, each sign reader would interpret the text to the best of his or her abilities, and there would be no concern about variations between readers.

But if our goal is to make available to sign language congregations a ritualized reading parallel to the experience of *kriat ha-Torah* as it is traditionally presented, then it behooves the Jewish community to organize an "ASL Torah Scroll Project." The full apparatus of Torah *aliyot* and blessings should be reserved for a signed recitation that means this high standard of consistency.

This position is in concurrence with Rabbi Barmash's responsum and its appendix since she too offers the method of signing in conjunction with an oral recitation and has raised no objection to the creation of a standardized presentation of the Torah in sign language. We believe that this system would truly raise the status of a sign language *kriat ha-Torah* to the level of dignity and significance that this ritual reenactment of revelation deserves.