

***People with Communication Disabilities Taking on Liturgical Honors and Leadership***

כל עצמותי תאמרנה

All my limbs shall speak (Psalms 35:10)

*Approved on November 17, 2025, by a vote of 20-0-0. Voting in favor: Rabbis Aaron Alexander, Pamela Barmash, Emily Barton, Chaya Bender, Suzanne Brody, Nate Crane, Aviva Fellman, David J. Fine, Joshua Heller, Barry Leff, Amy Levin, Daniel Nevins, Matthew Nover, Micah Peltz, Joel Pitkowsky, Karen Reiss Medwed, Robert Scheinberg, Miriam T. Spitzer, Stewart Vogel, and Raysh Weiss. Voting against: None. Abstaining: None.*

**שאלה (Question)**

May individuals with communication disabilities, such as the inability to vocalize, unclear speech, or involuntary verbal tics not manageable by medication, perform vocal liturgical roles, whether receiving honors (*aliyot, kri'at hatorah*, etc.) or serving as *shelihei tzibbur* (prayer leaders)? May they use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices in vocal liturgical roles? May they utilize AAC devices to communicate in general on Shabbat and *hag* (holidays)?

**תשובה (Response)**

Communal prayer and ritual have always demanded balancing the religious needs of the community in general and the varying needs of the individuals who comprise the community.<sup>1</sup> The need to balance is part and parcel of the religious work that individual and communal prayer is intended to do, as prayer educates those who pray and inspires them to seek and encounter the Divine as well as to experience the self as part of a larger whole. At times, the individual's needs come first; and at times, an individual's needs must be subordinated for the sake of others.

---

*The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. Individual rabbis, however, are authorized to interpret and apply halakhah for their communities.*

<sup>1</sup>This teshuvah builds on a draft teshuvah of Rabbi Micah Peltz and Rabbi Joel Seltzer on young adults with developmental disabilities in halakhah. This teshuvah follows a different path: rather than seeking to categorize people based on developmental disabilities and then analyzing how they may participate in Jewish communal life, I address issues in functioning that may serve as obstacles to participation in Jewish communal life and observance. I want to extend my appreciation to Rabbi Ruti Regan and Rabbi Jan Uhrbach for this approach, which emerged out of conversation with them, and to Rabbi Micah Peltz and Rabbi Joel Seltzer for taking the difficult first steps in tackling this challenging question.

Because communal prayer and prayer leadership always involves meeting a wide range of needs and values, the appropriate balance depends greatly on the context. Therefore, rather than set forth a single answer applicable in all cases, what I aspire to do in this teshuvah is to articulate and affirm the values and needs at issue, set forth factors to be taken into account, increase awareness and sensitivity as to the contours of those factors, and address halakhic parameters that may limit or open up the range of possibilities in crafting liturgical experiences.

My focus here is on halakhic questions arising from disabilities that affect communication. Accordingly, I am not concerned with medical diagnoses or etiologies but rather with functional capacity. The communication disabilities under discussion may result from congenital conditions—neurological or mechanical in nature—physical illness, injury or trauma (whether emotional or psychological), or the natural effects of aging. The halakhic implications arise in cases such as developmental communication disorders, speech aphasia following dementia or stroke, mechanical impairment of speech due to ALS, or temporary conditions such as Bell’s palsy.

A distinction should be drawn between speech and language, and it should be noted that an individual may have an issue with one or both. A speech disorder is when a person has trouble uttering sounds, stutters, slurs words together, speaks hoarsely or very softly, or has other voice problems. Language disorders fall into two categories: A receptive language disorder is when a person has trouble understanding what others say. An expressive language disorder occurs when a person has problems sharing thoughts, ideas, and feelings using exact phrases or sentences.<sup>2</sup> A person may have both a receptive and an expressive language problem. However, even if a person has trouble finding the right word or formulating a cohesive sentence spontaneously, this does not mean that person’s intellectual ability in language is impaired but only in expressing language. In fact in the context of liturgy, when a person is reading aloud and declaiming or chanting and singing a text, being able to do so is easier than constructing sentences and remembering words.

I am only tangentially concerned with the issues arising from cognitive deficits significantly affecting comprehension, that is, understanding the *mitzvot* and the concept of responsibility for observing the *mitzvot* (*hiyyuv*). Communication difficulties and comprehension deficits are separate functional issues, and the existence of the former should never lead to inferences about the latter. Rather, as Rabbi Edward Friedman has observed:

Today, the assumption should always be that a person is competent and responsible, unless it is plainly obvious that the case is otherwise. Also, people without psychiatric training should always avoid applying psychiatric labels to others; we should always make every effort to include all Jews in the performance

---

<sup>2</sup>For helpful information, see <https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/aphasia/>. Special appreciation to Professor Yi-Fang Chiu.

of *mitzvot*. Exemptions from obligations based on mental disability should be granted only when absolutely necessary.<sup>3</sup>

In a separate teshuvah of mine, “Jews with Special Needs,” I rule that:

1. Jews who have special needs are not in the category of *shoteh*.
2. Once they have reached the age of *mitzvot*, Jews who have special needs are responsible for observing the *mitzvot*, with the proviso that there could be specific *mitzvot* beyond their capacity for which they are exempt.<sup>4</sup>

The provision about exemption from specific *mitzvot* might apply in the case of severe brain injury, where comprehension could be impaired, and such an injury might result in a receptive and/or expressive language disorder as well.

#### *A. The Conceptual Basis of this Teshuvah*

Every morning we thank God for creating us as human beings who are members of *am yisra'el*, as individual Jews and as part of the Jewish people. We value our Jewishness as a privilege, honor, and responsibility. The reason we are obligated to create communities that are inclusive and welcoming to Jews with disabilities is because they are Jews, ***because they are us***. There is no “they” but only “we”. We are obligated to create communities that include the whole community. The community as a whole is diminished by the exclusion or marginalization of some of its members: our ethics are deficient if we are not inclusive, and our collective Torah and fulfillment of *mitzvot* are incomplete without those individuals’ contributions.

All Jews are obligated to perform *mitzvot* based on two criteria, age and *da'at*, and Jews with communication difficulties are no exception. Thus, the very same reasons that obligate us to provide *minyanim* and *kehillot* for *any* Jew obligate us to provide *minyanim* and *kehillot* for *all* Jews, to provide *all* Jews the opportunity to fulfill those *mitzvot* that require community and a *minyan* for their fulfillment.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Rabbi Edward Friedman, *The Observant Life* (ed. Rabbi Martin S.Cohen; New York: The Rabbinical Assembly, 2012), p. 838.

<sup>4</sup><https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/2025-04/jews-special-needs-2025-final.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>None of the three classical categories of those exempted from *mitzvot*, a minor, a *heresh* (the deaf whom hearing people mistakenly do not think communicate), or a *shoteh* (mentally deranged) automatically apply to those with communication disabilities. A person with communication issues may also be a minor, a *heresh*, or a *shoteh*, but that has nothing to do with the communication difficulties addressed in this teshuvah. For more on *heresh*, see my teshuvah on “*The Status of the Heresh and of Sign Language*.”

<<http://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/Status%20of%20the%20Heresh6.2011.pdf>>

Thus, the relevant category for inclusion is *tzedek*, justice and equity, not mercy, pity, or generosity.

### *B. Participation*

Halakhah presents no barriers to the full participation of disabled Jews in synagogue life and ritual, the only exception being disabilities that require use of electronic devices, or carrying those devices, on Shabbat and festivals. Unfortunately, in practice, there has long been significant and at times insurmountable barriers to participation, whether arising from inattention, prejudice, misunderstanding or social stigma, inaccessibility or other practical considerations that make fully equal participation difficult or impossible, or from the lack of appropriate education opportunities necessary for meaningful participation.

The use of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) methods, such as interpreters, has existed since ancient times. What has changed dramatically in recent years is the variety, accessibility, and effectiveness of such technologies. Today, a person who is non-verbal may communicate not only basic needs but also complex thoughts or ritual expressions through devices such as a Tobii Dynavox, an iPad, or other speech-generating tools.<sup>6</sup> A person may employ patterns of breath or eye movement that a computer translates into audible speech, enabling the community to hear and respond accordingly. In light of these possibilities, communities should be proactive in welcoming and encouraging the use of AAC technologies, ensuring that individuals with communication disabilities are fully and regularly included in public Jewish ritual life. *It must be emphasized that while those with communicative disorders may use such devices, and other Jews may assist them in doing so on Shabbat and festivals, this does not mean that Jews in general who do not have communicative disorders may use such devices (or all or any electronic devices) on Shabbat.*<sup>7</sup>

The question of the permissibility of use of these augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technological devices on Shabbat is one that is largely answered by Rabbi

<sup>6</sup>Consulting the manufacturers' online materials can be useful for understanding how these systems operate. Because website addresses change frequently, a simple web search for the device names will readily yield current sources

Technological development continues apace. Current advances in artificial intelligence and in speech brain-computer interfaces (BCI) or neuroprosthetic devices may soon enable individuals not only to generate speech but also to access and express semantic content directly through neural signals. I am grateful to Rabbi Daniel Nevins for drawing my attention to this emerging field.

<sup>7</sup>For more on the permissible or prohibited use of electronic devices on Shabbat and festivals, see Rabbi Daniel Nevins, "The Use of Electric and Electronic Devices on Shabbat," <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/electrical-electronic-devices-shabbat.pdf>

Daniel Nevins' in his teshuvah, "The Use of Electrical and Electronic Devices on Shabbat." Rabbi Nevins notes that:

"Conservative rabbis have...permitted the use of assistive devices to allow people with various physical disabilities to participate more fully in communal life. For this reason we would permit the use of devices which could be considered rabbinically prohibited such as an infrared radio transmitter to allow people who are hard of hearing to participate in prayer and Torah study."<sup>8</sup>

Rabbi Nevins goes on to clearly articulate the general halakhic approach to issues regarding use of electronic devices on Shabbat for the sake of individual's more full participation in Jewish ritual:

"Positive halakhic values such as protecting human dignity, avoiding excessive strain, financial hardship, and not wasting natural resources may supersede the rabbinic restraint on using electricity as indicated by *shvut*. The use of electrical motors to assist frail and disabled people to move around, and the use of assistive devices to enhance hearing, speech and vision may be justified based on the demands of human dignity despite the possibility that such tools might lead one to an activity which is rabbinically banned."

Surely an individual who is obligated in the *mitzvot*, but for whom participation in a mitzvah is all but impossible save for the use of an augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technological device, is not only permitted to use that electronic device on Shabbat and festivals but may be required to. Indeed the augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technological device should be considered as an extension of their body and therefore accepted as their verbal participation in Jewish ritual.

It is important to note, however, that not all augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technologies are created equal with regard to *halakhah*. For example, some augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) technologies could approach a violation of Shabbat and *ḥag* in the category of *koteiv de'oraita*, such as writing with an electronic stylus. Additionally, all necessary materials and resources must be uploaded to the device in advance of Shabbat and *ḥag*, and the device must be charged sufficiently before Shabbat or *ḥag* begins (even if a device may not hold a charge long enough to last for an entire Shabbat or *ḥag*). It must also be noted that while a number of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices operate without the need for an internet connection, they do have apps and cloud storage that connect with the internet, and if unneeded for direct communication on Shabbat and *ḥag*, the internet connection needs to be turned off.

---

<sup>8</sup>Rabbi Daniel Nevins, "The Use of Electrical and Electronic Devices on Shabbat, p. 56 <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/assets/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/electrical-electronic-devices-shabbat.pdf>

*It is also essential to emphasize that being included in a kehillah does not mean just sitting in a place of prayer passively and, in the case of an adult, being counted in the minyan. Genuine inclusion entails active participation—being invited to accept liturgical honors such as an aliyah to the Torah, and, where appropriate, to lead communal prayer. It is to these matters of liturgical honor and prayer leadership that we now turn.*

### *C. Liturgical Honors and Leadership of Communal Prayer for Those With Communication Disabilities*

Certain physical limitations or disabilities give rise to specific halakhic questions about vocal participation in liturgical honors and prayer leadership. These questions may emerge when speech is naturally produced but difficult to understand, when it is electronically generated (through computer-assisted devices, pre-recorded audio triggered by a button, or synthetic voice boxes), or when it is interrupted by involuntary vocal tics. Such situations present distinct halakhic issues separate from general questions of ritual and prayer participation. They focus specifically on leading prayer services or performing ceremonial honors, particularly whether electronically or mechanically generated speech can fulfill the requirement of *kavvanah* (intentional devotion in prayer).

Those with difficulties spontaneously producing exact words or sentences most likely retain their ability to read aloud, chant or sing a printed text. They may also have motor issues in enunciation.

Inclusion does not consist merely of sitting passively in the place of prayer. True participation requires the opportunity to receive and exercise liturgical honors, such as being called for an *aliyah* to the Torah.

Beyond liturgical honors, we must consider the question of serving as *shaliah tzibbur*. Our tradition provides classic formulations regarding who is most suitable to lead prayer. At the same time, these requirements have always been balanced with an individual's desire to lead. While we hold ideals for skill, self-awareness, communal sensitivity, and humility for those who serve regularly as *shaliah tzibbur* or Torah reader, in practice sometimes communities make do with leaders who have an unpleasant voice, make frequent errors in Hebrew, or cannot chant on pitch. We also recognize that it is not always possible to find a leader who embodies all of these ideals, and that different communities weigh these qualities differently. These considerations should be applied consistently to all individuals, whether or not they have a disability.

Thus, the analysis of questions regarding communication difficulties and prayer or ritual leadership will depend greatly on the context. They may be different for one-off situations such as *benei mitzvah*, *aufruf*, *yahrzeit*, celebrations of personal and professional milestones, and family celebrations in contrast to ongoing regular leadership. What may be appropriate and celebrated on a special occasion might not be the case for ongoing or professional leadership. What may be distracting in one *kehillah* may be inspiring in another.

Certain responsibilities are incumbent upon all who assume liturgical leadership roles. Anyone seeking a leadership role should possess self-awareness regarding their own constellation of talents and skills as well as challenges and limitations. They must be aware of, and have respect for, the community they are serving. Everyone makes errors, but if a person cannot perform a particular ritual role without making many errors or can do so only poorly, whether due to a disability or lack of skill, knowledge, or caring, then that individual probably should not perform that role, except perhaps in special circumstances. This is so even for *benei mitzvah* — as Rabbi Ruti Regan has noted, doing something poorly is hardly the best way to mark and celebrate coming of age.<sup>9</sup> The parents and guardians of children and young adults need to work with (and inform) teachers and *kehillah* leadership to find appropriate ways of celebrating milestones. No one is obligated, nor should they be, to do all the tasks that others do. They should do what is meaningful to them and appropriate for them.

It is in the bracketing of self and one's needs for the sake of the other – even, or perhaps most especially, in the midst of seeking God – that prayer is translated into action not only after praying but in the moment of prayer itself. It is manifest in the religious genius of the requirement that certain prayers be recited only with a *minyan* and that the individual must join in communal prayer when the community is reciting specific liturgy.

The classic requirements for *shaliah tzibbur* are clear pronunciation with differentiation between letters:

אָמַר רַב אֲסִי: חִיפְנֵי וּבִישְׁנֵי — לֹא יִשָּׂא אֶת כַּפָּיו. תִּנְיָא נְמִי הָכִי: אִין מוֹרִידִין לְפָנֵי הַתִּיבָה לֹא אֲנָשִׁי בֵּית שְׁאָן וְלֹא אֲנָשִׁי [בֵּית] חִיפָה וְלֹא אֲנָשִׁי טְבַעוֹנִין, מִפְּנֵי שְׁקוֹרִין לְאַלְפִין עֵינִין וְלַעֲיִנִין אֲלָפִין.

Rav Asi said: A priest from Haifa or Beit She'an may not lift his hands to recite the Priestly Benediction [because he does not know how to properly pronounce the guttural letters]. This is also taught in a baraita: One may not allow the people of Beit She'an, nor the people of [Beit] Haifa, nor the people of Tivonin to pass before the ark in order to lead the service because they pronounce alef as ayin and ayin as alef [distorting the meaning of the prayers].

(Babylonian Talmud Megillah 24b)

---

<sup>9</sup>In regard to *benei mitzvah*, the community's obligation is to ensure that 1) a young person is afforded a full, rich, and age-appropriate Jewish education and is not treated as incapable; 2) the young person's agency is fully respected; and 3) the celebration of becoming *benei mitzvah* is one in which both the young person and their family move significantly forward in recognizing the emerging adulthood of the young person. Some parents may make "feeling normal" their primary goal, but that is not necessarily what the young person needs, nor is it the primary function of the celebration. The power of a coming-of-age ritual is that it encourages agency and transforms the way family, friends, and community see that young person and how that young person undergoes self-transformation. Special appreciation to Rabbi Ruti Regan for developing this point. (private communication)

אָמַר לִיה רַבִּי חֲיִיא לְרַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן בֶּר רַבִּי: אֲלֵמְלִי אַתָּה לְוִי — פָּסוּל אַתָּה מִן הַדְּיוֹקָן, מִשּׁוֹם דְּעַבִּי קָלָךְ.  
אַתָּא אָמַר לִיה לְאַבּוּהָ. אָמַר לִיה: זֵיל אֵימָא לִיה: כְּשֶׁאַתָּה מַגִּיעַ אֶצְלֵךְ וְחַפְתִּי לָהּ, לֹא נִמְצְאָת מְחַרְףַּר  
וּמְגַדְףָּר!?

Rabbi Ḥiyya said to Rabbi Simon, son of Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi: If you were not a Levite, you would be disqualified from singing on the platform [in the Temple courtyard] because your voice is thick. [Offended by this remark,] Rabbi Simon went and told his father [what Rabbi Ḥiyya had said]. [His father] said to him: Go and say to him: When you study and reach the verse: “And I will wait upon [וְחִכִּיתִי veḥikkiti] the Lord” (Isaiah 8:17), will you not be a maligner and a blasphemer? [Rabbi Ḥiyya, who was from Babylonia, was unable to differentiate between the letters *het* and *heh*, and he would therefore pronounce the word *veḥikkiti* as *vehikkiti* והכיתי, which means “I will smite”.]<sup>10</sup>

(Babylonian Talmud Megillah 24b)

Requiring the ability to enunciate is codified in the Shulḥan Arukh, O.H. 53:12:

אין ממנין מי שקור' לאלפי"נ עייני"נ ולעייני"נ אלפי"נ:

We do not appoint a person [to be leader] who reads alefs like ayins and ayins like alefs.<sup>11</sup>

Vocal ability and knowledge of liturgy (as well as ethical integrity) are also required in O.H. 53:4:

ש"צ צריך שיהיה הגון ואיזהו הגון שיהא ריקן מעבירות ושלא יצא עליו שם רע אפי' בילדותו  
ושיהיה עניו ומרוצה לעם ויש לו נעימה וקולו ערב ורגיל לקרות תורה נביאים וכתובים:

The leader must be one who is fit. Who is "fit"? One who is free of sin; who has never had a poor reputation, even in his youth; who is humble; who is acceptable to the people; who is skilled at [liturgical] chanting; whose voice is pleasant; who is accustomed to reading Torah, Prophets, and Writings (i.e. biblical text).

However, knowledge edges out aesthetics, according to O.H. 53:5:

<sup>10</sup>Tosafot on Megillah 24a

כשאתה מגיע אצל וחכיתי לה' – קשה כיון שלא היה יכול לומר חי"ת א"כ היאך הורידו רבי לפני התיבה כשגזר תענית כדתיא' בהשוכר את הפועלים (ב"מ דף פה) והא אין מורידין לא מאנשי חיפה ולא מאנשי בית שאן לפי שקוראין לאלפין עיינין ולעיינין אלפין וי"ל דכשהיה מתכוין לקרות החי"ת קורא אותה שפיר ע"י טורח אבל לא היה בקל ולפי שאמר ליה אליהו שעל ידו תמהר הגאולה לפיכך הורידו:

<sup>11</sup>The Arukh Hashulhan (Rabbi Yehiel Michal Halevi Epstein, 1829-1908, Russia) notes that in his country people are skilled making a distinction between *he* and *het* but not between *alef* and *ayin*, implying that to be a *shaliaḥ tzibbur*, a person must articulate a distinction between *he* and *het* but not between *alef* and *ayin*.(O.H. 53:14)



אם אין מוצאין מי שיהיה בו כל המדות האלו יבחרו הטוב שבצבור בחכמה ובמעשים טובים: הגה  
ואם היה כאן עם הארץ זקן וקולו נעים והעם הפצים בו ובן י"ג שנה המבין מה שאומ' ואין קולו נעים  
הקטן הוא קודם [מרדכי סף"ק דחולין]:

If there is no person that fits these qualifications, we should pick the one who has the most knowledge and good deeds in the community. Rema: If there was in a particular location an ignoramus who is an elder and his voice is pleasant and the people want him [as well as] a thirteen year old who knows what he is saying and his voice is not pleasant, the younger one takes precedence (Mordekhai, Hullin chapter 1).

And a beautiful voice must not be shown off for human glory, O.H. 53:11:

ש"צ שמאריך בתפלה כדי שישמעו קולו ערב אם הוא מחמת ששמח בלבו על שנותן הודאה להשם  
יתברך בנעימה תבא עליו ברכה והוא שיתפלל בכובד ראש ועומד באימה ויראה אבל אם מכוין  
להשמיע קולו ושמח בקולו ה"ז מגונה ומ"מ כל שמאריך בתפלתו לא טוב עושה מפני טורה הצבור:

A prayer leader who lengthens the prayer so that people will hear his pleasant voice: if it was because of the joy in his heart that he gives thanks to God, may God be praised, in pleasantness, a blessing shall come upon him. And this as long as he prays with weighty intention and stands in dread and fear, but if he intends to make his voice heard and rejoice in his voice, behold this is detestable. And in any case, anyone who lengthens his prayer [when serving as the leader] is not acting properly because of burdening the congregation.

The sources set forth clear ideals for prayer leadership: accurate Hebrew enunciation, vocal ability, humility, and a sense of gratitude to God. Yet these ideals are not always attainable for a variety of reasons. Individuals who embody these qualities may not always be present in a given liturgical community or may be absent occasionally due to other commitments. Moreover, when a person seeks to cultivate these skills, it may require significant time and effort to refine them.

Sentimentality, too, influences our decisions: the Ashkenazic pronunciation of Hebrew moves the stress from the ultimate or penultimate syllable to the initial syllable under the influence of European languages, thereby changing the meaning of a word, yet some *shelihei tzibbur* retain that pronunciation because of tradition and/or because Ashkenazic liturgical music is composed according to its rhythm (or because of ignorance).<sup>12</sup> Some may even pronounce

---

<sup>12</sup>The Ashkenazic pronunciation developed in the 14th century under the influence of the dialects of Middle High German that Jews spoke, and it may come as a surprise to many Ashkenazim that Rashi and the Tosafists (except perhaps the last generations) did not pronounce Hebrew in the (later) Ashkenazic pronunciation. See Geoffrey Khan, *The Tiberian Pronunciation Tradition of Biblical Hebrew. Volume 1: Including a Critical Edition and English Translation of the Sections on Consonants and Vowels in the Masoretic Treatise Hidayat al-Qari* 'Guide for the Reader,' (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2020), 1.112-113.

Hebrew correctly then switch to a tune that is composed according to Ashkenazic rhythm.<sup>13</sup>

One more principle is of the essence, *tirḥa detzibbura*, “a burden on the congregation.” Prolonging public liturgy overly much is considered a burden on the congregation and is forbidden.<sup>14</sup>

What is the significance of these rules? They serve as the ideal to which we must aspire. This means that professional or ongoing lay *sheliḥei tzibbur* must actively study Hebrew and liturgy to embody these ideals.<sup>15</sup>

Those with communication disabilities use different means to deal with those disabilities:

1. Many individuals with communication disabilities retain their ability to read aloud or sing without any limitation, and therefore leading public prayer or having an *aliyah* and other liturgical honors is not an issue because they have a printed text in front of them: they do not have to spontaneously create words and sentences in Hebrew or another language.

2. For those with unclear pronunciation or insufficient volume or similar disability, occasionally serving in vocal liturgical roles would generally be acceptable, especially given the tolerance we sometimes extend regarding Hebrew pronunciation. Ongoing participation in leadership roles, however, depends on the severity of the articulation difficulties, the availability of other qualified leaders, and the needs of the *kehillah*. Those who do not possess sufficient volume to be heard, even with a microphone, or have verbal tics not sufficiently manageable through medication, may have to limit their participation in vocal liturgical roles.

3. Those using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices may receive an *aliyah* or other vocal liturgical honors and may serve as leaders of public prayer, both on weekdays and on Shabbat and festivals.

---

<sup>13</sup>The 19th and 20th centuries did witness a vociferous debate in a number of Ashkenazic communities over switching to Sefardic pronunciation. Rare was the posek who understood the importance of which syllable in a word was stressed to the meaning of a word: Rabbi Eliezer Libermann did so in *Or Nogah*, p. 27c. Most focused on the differences in phonology, especially of *begeḏ kefet* letters and of vowels, which very rarely results in a change in meaning. See H.J. Zimmels, *Ashkenazim and Sephardim: Their Relations, Differences, and Problems as Reflected in the Rabbinical Responsa* (Revised Edition; Hoboken: Ktav Pub. House, 1993 <1958>), pp. 308-314.

<sup>14</sup>See Babylonian Talmud Berakhot 12b, 30b; O.H. 126:4; Mishneh Torah Hilkhos Tefillah 12:23.

<sup>15</sup>It is possible that a professional or lay prayer leader who developed speech difficulties could be the best person to lead on a regular basis. We could imagine a beloved and learned prayer leader who has experienced the onset of communication disabilities leading with a mechanical voice in a particular *kehillah* because people find that person’s leadership inspires *kavvanah*. (Personal communication of Rabb Jan Uhrbach)

4. If a person uses a communication board, then the person who vocalizes on their behalf must be of adult Jewish status.

Two important notes: First, communal leaders, in consultation with those with communication disabilities, may wish to assign an honor or prayer leadership role that is more appropriate to the circumstances, such as delivering a *devar Torah* rather than chanting a *haftarah*, leading *pesukei dezimra* instead of *musaf*, or carrying the Torah scroll rather than having a *aliyah* or reading Torah.

Second, we must consider whether the degree of automation affects the halakhic status of prayer. If a person presses a button or directs their gaze to an icon, thereby initiating short units of a prayer, are they doing so with sufficient *kavvanah* for the community to respond “amen” and fulfill their obligation of prayer? The answer lies in how we understand normal prayer practice. Even for someone without difficulty in articulating speech, it is uncommon to recite each word while reflecting on it individually. Prayer is generally spoken in phrases or thought units, rather than word by word.

But would this be a case for longer prayers? In this situation, a discussion between the person and a rabbi would be advisable, and an easy fix would be for a longer prayer to be divided into small units, each of which would receive its prompt, so as to facilitate the infusion of *kavvanah* for each unit. *A person without communication disabilities may not play the same recording and have it serve as their recitation of a prayer.*

We do not ascertain whether those without communication disabilities who recite a prayer during an honor or serve as *shaliah tzibbur*, who may not comprehend Hebrew or may not have studied the theology and spirituality of prayer, have the proper *kavvanah*. Therefore, we should not hold a person with communication disabilities to a different and higher standard.

Tourette’s syndrome, where a person may manifest a tic, presents a special case: tics are rapid, sudden, recurrent, non-rhythmic movements or noises, and the tic may be preceded by a sensation, a premonitory or tic signal. Some individuals may be able to suppress a tic for a while or even until they return home or are alone or with those who are used to tics, but for others, tic control may be impossible.<sup>16</sup> A person might have a vocal tic, uttering obscene, vulgar or swear words, or less often, a rude gesture: this may pose a special issue since the *kehillah* (and *kelei kodesh*) may be taken aback by the language or gesture in the context of public liturgy and celebration and commemoration. In such a case, the spiritual and lay leadership of a *kehillah* needs to weigh whether participating in public liturgy is more significant than the discomfort (of some) of the *kehillah*. In fact, for a number of individuals, leading public davening might be one context in which their tic does not manifest.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup>In the very unusual case of a prayer recited as a long verbal tic (or part of which is a tic), if for example it is a tic of erev Shabbat kiddush that manifests itself on Friday night and not at other times, it would seem to be infused with *kavvanah* and, therefore, we respond with “amen” and fulfill the mitzvah through its recitation by another. My appreciation to Rabbi Suzanne Brody for relating this to me.

<sup>17</sup>Special appreciation to Rav Hazzan Michael McCloskey for this insight.

Torah reading is a special case.<sup>18</sup> Torah reading must be accurate, and a Torah reader who errs does need to be corrected. Yet at the same time, we sometimes tolerate a professional or lay ongoing Torah reader who does not meet these standards because that person is the only one available. Ideally the words and *ta'amei hamikra* must be clear and accurate; however, if that is not possible as a result of a communication disability in speech, then it should not necessarily prevent a person from reading Torah on a special occasion. The extent of inaccuracy, however, may make it best for that person to refrain from reading Torah but rather engage in another liturgical role.

An important matter to emphasize: If a person reading Torah, leading prayer, or enjoying a ritual honor seems to be making an error, the “correcting” should be left for the (professional) *kelei kodesh* (rabbi or hazzan), (expert) lay leader, and (expert lay) gabbai to do so with common sense, knowledge, and sensitivity. Sometimes, people who are well-meaning but insensitive and far less knowledgeable than they think try to “correct” incorrectly.

We must acknowledge that for a number of individuals, no manner of accommodation or technology currently available will allow them to participate fully in a specific ritual but that they may, and should, still be included as participants, not only as observers sitting passively. They might, for example, carry the sefer Torah or do *hagbah* or *gelilah*.

Let me conclude this teshuvah with two quotes, one about Moses and one about Jeremiah:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־יְהוָה כִּי אֶדְבָר לֹא אִישׁ דְּבָרִים אֲנִי גַם מִתְמוּלָּה גַם מִשְׁלֵשָׁם גַּם מֵאֵז דְּבָרָךְ  
 אֶל־עַבְדְּךָ כִּי כְבֹד־פֶּה וְכִבְד לְשׁוֹן אֲנִי:  
 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֵלָיו מִי שֵׁם פֶּה לְאָדָם אֹו מִי־יְשׁוּם אֵלִים אֹו חֲרָשׁ אֹו פֶקַח אֹו עֹוֵר הֲלֹא אֲנִי יְהוָה:  
 וְעַתָּה לָךְ וְאֲנִי אֶהְיֶה עִם־פִּיךָ וְהוֹרִיתִיךָ אֲשֶׁר תְּדַבֵּר:

But Moses said to the LORD, “Please, o LORD, I am not a man of words, not today on which you have spoken to your servant, not yesterday, not the day before yesterday! I am slow of speech and slow of tongue.” The LORD said to him, “Who gives a mortal speech? Who makes a person mute or deaf or sighted or blind? Is it not I the LORD? Now, go! I shall surely be with you as you speak and shall teach you what to say.”

(Exodus 4:10-12)

וַאֲמַר אֶהְיֶה אֶדְבָר יְהוָה הִנֵּה לֹא־יְדַעְתִּי דְבָר כִּי־נֹעַר אֲנִי: פ

<sup>18</sup>Reading Torah in public is not a biblical commandment, rather a decree of the sages upon the community. See Rabbi Pamela Barmash, “Reading Torah in Sign Language: An Appendix to ‘The Status of the Heresh and of Sign Language’”, <https://www.rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/2011-2020/status-of-heresh-appendix.pdf>.

וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ-הוֹיָה אֵלַי אֶל-תְּאֵמַר נַעַר אָנֹכִי כִי עַל-פִּלְאֲשֶׁר אֶשְׁלַחְךָ תִּלְךָ וְאֵת כָּל-אֲשֶׁר אֶצְוֶה תִּדְבֹּר: ...  
וַיִּשְׁלַח יְיָ-הוֹיָה אֶת-יָדוֹ וַיַּגֵּעַ עַל-פִּי וַיֹּאמֶר יְיָ-הוֹיָה אֵלַי הִנֵּה נָתַתִּי דְבָרִי בְּפִיךָ:

I said, “O Lord GOD, I do not know how to speak for I am but a youth.” The LORD said to me, “Don’t say that ‘you are but a youth,’ but wherever I send you — go! and whatever I command you — speak!”...The LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth, saying, “I have now put my words in your mouth.”

(Jeremiah 1:6-7, 9)

Our tradition holds that both Moses and Jeremiah had communication obstacles, Moses as “slow of speech and slow of tongue” and Jeremiah as one “who does not know how to speak”. One is reassured about his speech, and the other is corrected and cheered on. Moses is depicted as a man battered by time and circumstance. Having grown up in the palace, he is now a lowly shepherd, so he needs reassurance. By contrast, the young boy Jeremiah is just starting his prophetic office, one that others have also resisted, so he needs a push. Those with a communication disability (and indeed all of us) may need reassurance as well as gentle and firm encouragement when it comes to leading public prayer and having an aliyah and other liturgical honors. Indeed, they may be obligated to do so, the ultimate in *kavod* (respect and dignity).<sup>19</sup>

### **Pesak Din**

1. Professional and lay *shelihei tzibbur* and Torah readers must enunciate Hebrew accurately, study and understand the liturgy and Torah reading, and, to the extent possible, polish their vocal ability.

2. For those with unclear pronunciation or insufficient volume or similar disability, occasionally serving in vocal liturgical roles would generally be acceptable. Ongoing participation in leadership roles, however, depends on the severity of the articulation difficulties, the availability of other qualified leaders, and the needs of the *kehillah*. Those who do not possess sufficient volume to be heard, even with a microphone, or have verbal tics not sufficiently manageable through medication, may have to limit their participation in vocal liturgical roles. In general, communal leaders in consultation with those with communication disabilities may wish to assign an honor or prayer leadership role that is more appropriate to the circumstances, such as delivering a *devar Torah* rather than chanting a *haftarah*, leading *pesukei dezimra* instead of *musaf*, or carrying the Torah scroll or *hagbah* or *gelilah* rather than having a *aliyah* or reading Torah.

3. Those using augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices may receive an aliyah or other liturgical honors and may serve as leaders of public prayer, both on weekdays and on Shabbat and festivals. Each prompt they make, whether by pushing a button or focusing

---

<sup>19</sup>Special appreciation for assistance in writing this teshuvah to Rabbi Emily Barton; Eitan Bloostein, CJLS fellow in prophetic halakhah; Rabbi Suzanne Brody; Rabbi Amy Levin; Rabbi Eliana Mastrangelo, CJLS fellow in prophetic halakhah; Rabbi Daniel Nevins; Rabbi Micah Peltz; Rabbi Sharyn Perlman; Rabbi Ruti Regan; Rabbi Avram I. Reisner; Rabbi Joel Seltzer; Rabbi Robert Scheinberg; Rabbi Jan Uhrbach, and to Professors Kevin Black and Yi-Fang Chiu, faculty at Washington University in St. Louis.

sight on an icon, must initiate brief units of a prayer so as to infuse each of them with kavvanah. The *kehillah* answers “amen” when appropriate and fulfills the mitzvah of prayer.

4. Augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices may be used on Shabbat and *ḥag* by those with communication disabilities and those who assist them. All necessary materials and resources must be uploaded to the augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device in advance of Shabbat and *ḥag*, and the device must be charged as much as possible before Shabbat and *ḥag* begins.

5. A person without a communication disability may not play the same recording and have it fulfill the mitzvah of prayer.

6. If a person uses a communication board, then the person who vocalizes on their behalf must be of adult Jewish status.

7. Torah reading needs to be accurate, and the extent of inaccuracy may preclude those who cannot pronounce Hebrew accurately from reading Torah.