

## When No One Can Read Torah

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### שאלה (Question)

When there is no one capable of reading from a kosher Torah scroll in the proper manner, what other options are available? May one read the Torah from a printed humash?

### תשובה (Response)

#### Torah Reading in Jewish Tradition

The Torah reading constitutes the central component of the Shabbat and festival morning service. The Torah reading provides the material for homiletical expansions, whether sermons, *divrei Torah* or discussions. Because the Torah cannot be read publicly (*betzibur*) without a minyan,<sup>1</sup> the Torah reading became the focal element of the service, as well as a highlight of the briefer services on Saturday afternoon, Monday and Thursday and minor holiday mornings. The requirement of a minyan to read the Torah in public may be what drew the first Jewish worshippers together, or it may be that the prominent role of the public Torah reading was what led the Rabbis to require a minyan. As Ismar Elbogen wrote in his classic study of the development of Jewish liturgy: “It is very likely that the reading of Scripture was the occasion for the first communal assemblies for the purposes of prayer.”<sup>2</sup> While likely the most ancient part of the liturgy, Torah reading is also the most demanding and mysterious.

Reading Torah is an acquired skill that requires a combination of knowledge and memory because the writing in the Torah scroll has neither vowel marks nor cantillation marks (*ta'amei hamikra*--trope). The requirement to read the Torah with cantillation is first articulated in the Talmud:

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<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Megillah 4:3.

<sup>2</sup> Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive History*, trans. Raymond P. Scheindlin (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1993), p. 129.

כל הקורא בלא נעימה...עליו הכתוב אומר "וגם אני נתתי להם חוקים לא טובים"

Whoever recites [Torah] without the trope, of him the verse says, "And I gave you laws that were not good" (Ezekiel 20:25).<sup>3</sup>

The word *ne'imah* is usually translated as "melody."<sup>4</sup> I translate it here as trope because of the similarity between *nei'imah* and *ta'am*, literally taste, the word the tradition uses for the cantillation, or trope. In Marcus Jastrow's definition of *ne'imah*, he translates this Talmudic phrase as "He who recites Bible verses without chanting."<sup>5</sup> The translation agrees with Rashi, who explains that *ne'imah* means *ta'amei hamikra'ot*, the cantillation marks for the Bible.<sup>6</sup> The Talmudic proof-text from Ezekiel uses *hukim*, laws, to refer to Torah, meaning that if one does not read Torah with the trope, the Torah is no longer good, *lo tovim*.

The importance of the public reading of the Torah with the trope, therefore, is an ancient tradition that makes the Torah "good" or complete. A Rabbi Pamela Barmash explains, "The *ta'amei ha-miqra* serve as an interpretation of the biblical text."<sup>7</sup> Joshua Jacobson, in his comprehensive presentation of the cantillation tradition, offers eight reasons for its importance: halakhah (quoting the Talmudic statement from Megillah), *hiddur mitzvah* ("the Beautification of the Sacred Act"), "Music as a Means of Communicating with God," "Dramatization of the Text," "To Aid the Memory," "To Make Liturgical Reading Different from Secular Reading," "Amplification" and "Signifying" (referring to special holiday melodies).<sup>8</sup> For all these reasons, we should do everything we can to preserve this unique aspect of our heritage.

The physical requirements of the Torah scroll, the handwritten parchments that serve as the central elements of a synagogue, are well established in the halakhah.<sup>9</sup> The requirement to read from the scroll where there is no punctuation nor notation, remembering the pronunciation and cantillation, is a challenge in many communities, especially in the Diaspora where most worshippers lack sufficient knowledge of Hebrew. In Conservative synagogues, a short reading marks the traditional rite of passage for bnei mitzvah, a feat requiring good teaching, diligent learning, and capacity that not all are able to achieve. Finding a good *ba'al(at) keriah*, one who can chant the weekly reading, is a challenge faced by many a congregation. The difficulty in finding capable Torah readers was one of the reasons why the CJLS approved the Triennial Cycle for weekly readings in 1988.<sup>10</sup> But in fact, the challenge was not unknown in earlier times.

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<sup>3</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 32a. The statement is attributed to Rabbi Shefatiah in the name of Rabbi Yochanan.

<sup>4</sup> As Maurice Simon does in the Soncino translation, although he notes: "as indicated by the singing accents." *Megillah: Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices* (London, Soncino Press, 1938), p. 194, n. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary*, s.v. נעימה.

<sup>6</sup> Rashi to Meg. 32a, s.v. נעימה.

<sup>7</sup> Rabbi Pamela Barmash, "Reading Torah in Sign Language: An Appendix to 'The Status of the Heresh and of Sign Language'" CJLS HM 35:11.2011b, p. 3, n. 12 and see the academic studies cited there.

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<sup>8</sup> Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible: The Art of Cantillation*, second expanded edition (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2017), pp. 4-10.

<sup>9</sup> Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 270-284.

<sup>10</sup> Rabbi Richard Eisenberg, "A Complete Triennial System for Reading Torah" CJLS OH 137.1988.

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## Classical Solutions

All of the medieval codifiers recognized that a Torah reader could struggle. As Maimonides writes in the Mishneh Torah:

קרא וטעה אפילו בדקדוק אות אחת מהזירין אותו עד שיקראנה בדקדוק.  
If one is reading [from the Torah scroll] and makes an error, even regarding pronunciation, he is corrected until he reads it properly.<sup>11</sup>

The halakhic literature gives careful instruction on what kinds of errors need to be corrected, as Maimonides' term of *בדקדוק* (*bedikduk*), literally precision of language, is somewhat (ironically) ambiguous. The general sense of the halakhah is that when incorrect vocalization changes the meaning of the word then the Torah reader must be corrected. Good guidance to a gabbai is to always correct consonantal errors. Vowel errors need only be corrected when it changes the meaning of the word (granted this is difficult for a gabbai to know when Hebrew comprehension is limited). Errors in trope (cantillation) need not be corrected except for the *etnahta* and *silluk* (often called a *sof pasuk*) because they serve as the comma and period, respectively, that are essential for the Masoretic understanding of the biblical text. The effort that the Torah reader makes to recite the Torah reading in trope needs to be respected and corrections limited. Even the *etnahta* and *silluk* may not always be recognizable, but ideally a gabbai will recognize the Torah reader's cadences and assist.

Even the best of Torah readers will make mistakes that require correction from time to time. But already in the sixteenth century the Shulhan Arukh imagined the situation of a congregation with no one capable of even trying to read from the Torah with accuracy. In an astoundingly vague instruction, Karo writes that when there is no capable Torah reader, the Torah should still be read

וישוב שיש שם מנין ואין מי שיודע לקרות בתורה כהלכתה בדקדוק ובטעמים אפ"ה יקראו בתורה בברכה כהלכתה

In a place where there is a minyan but no one who knows how to read Torah properly with the right vowels and trope, even so the Torah should be read with the blessings according to halakhah.<sup>12</sup>

The instruction is essentially that if the Torah cannot be read properly it should still be read (as) properly (as possible) and with the brakhah. The mention of the inclusion of the brakhah is critical because Karo is saying that even though the general principle of *safek brakhah lehakel*, that in case of doubt as to whether to recite a brakhah we would be lenient and omit the brakhah lest it be recited in vain,<sup>13</sup> here in this case we still say the brakhah over the Torah reading. The ambiguous word is כהלכתה, according to its halakhah. Karo does not specify what he means there, but the

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<sup>11</sup> Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer 12:6.

<sup>12</sup> Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 142:2.

<sup>13</sup> Babylonian Talmud, Sukkah 47a; Mishneh Torah, Laws of Blessings 11:16.

commentaries understand it as a qualification to the general rule that one proceeds to read from the Torah scroll even if it is not done בדקדוק (*bedikduk*), with precision.

How does one read from the Torah if one cannot properly read from the Torah? The commentary of the Mishnah Brurah offers the following:

כהלכתה - ואם יש שם מי שיודע עכ"פ לקרות הטעמים מתוך החומש יקרא  
זה מתוך החומש לפני האיש הקורא בס"ת להורות הדרך בנקודות וטעמים כראוי  
והקורא מתוך החומש לא יקרא בקול רם רק כדי שיהא נשמע להקורא מתוך הס"ת

If there is someone who at least knows how to read the text with the trope from a printed humash, then he should read from the humash beside the person reading from the sefer Torah, to guide him with the vowels and tropes in the proper way, while the person reading from the humash should not read in a full voice lest people not be able to hear the Torah reader reading from the sefer Torah.<sup>14</sup>

The recommendation is that someone reads quietly from a book and the “Torah reader” then repeat each phrase while reading from the Torah.

The Arukh Hashulhan offers a similar perspective:

וכיצד יעשו? אחד מביט בחומש, ולוחש באזני הקורא בספר תורה,  
והקורא קורא בקול אחריו בספר התורה, דבאין ברירה שאני

How should one read [in a way that is acceptable to say the brakhot if one cannot read from the Torah with proper pronunciation and vowels]? Another person reads from a humash quietly into the ear of the person reading from the Torah, and the Torah reader recites [as prompted] with a full voice from the Torah scroll, because there is no other option.<sup>15</sup>

The Arukh Hashulhan and the Mishnah Berurah assume that there is always someone who can read from the humash with proper pronunciation and trope, although we know that even that is not often the case in congregations without rabbis, cantors or learned lay leaders. Clearly, the halakhah wants the Torah reading to be read properly from the scroll but understands that that depends on human resources that not every congregation has. What guidance can we offer to our congregations?

### **Conservative Movement Solutions**

The archives of the CJLS preserve a short responsum by Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser from 1981 on what to do when a Torah reader needs more than the regular promptings of the gabbai. Rabbi Bokser, who was then the Chair of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, was asked about a congregation where the Torah reader had made penciled markings in the Torah scroll of the vowels and tropes, and members of the congregation were upset that the markings made the Torah scroll not kosher for use. Rabbi Bokser wrote:

<sup>14</sup> Mishnah Brurah to OH 142:2, se'if katan 8.

<sup>15</sup> Arukh Hashulhan to OH 142:2, paragraph 5.

It is not proper to make pencil marks in the margin of a Sefer Torah to help the reader in reading from it. However, this would not make the Torah Scroll invalid for use. But I would advise the removal of those pencil markings. Your Torah reader might use a Humash near the Torah Scroll and glance at it occasionally to help him with the proper chanting.”<sup>16</sup>

There are many points in Rabbi Bokser’s carefully worded letter. *Lehathila* (before the fact), one may certainly not make markings in a Sefer Torah to aid with reading, and ideally they should be erased. However, *bedi’eved* (after the fact), the Torah scroll is still kosher to read from.<sup>17</sup> Does the lack of a fully competent Torah reader count as a continued *bedi’eved*? I do not think so. Since Rabbi Bokser knows they do not have a capable Torah reader but still suggests they erase the markings, I believe he was just being careful to not say it was absolutely forbidden so as to avoid allowing his reading of the halakhah to play too heavy of a hand in internal synagogue politics. I have heard today of some Torah readers preparing translucent sheets that match the columns in the scroll to provide the vowel and trope markings, but without marking the scroll. I do not think that Rabbi Bokser’s silence on that implies that it is permissible. One could apply the same approach of his responsum, that the Torah scroll should be read without additional markings on the scroll (whether adhering to the parchment or not). Similarly, in the Hadar podcast series, *Responsa Radio*, Rabbi Ethan Tucker argues, after recognizing that one could make a case for permitting, that one should not use a transparency over a Torah scroll but find a way to read the Torah from the scroll in the way it is written.<sup>18</sup> At some point we may need to consider how a new technology of transparency such as Google Glass, where an image is projected before one’s eyes in front of the scroll, might be applied to Torah reading.<sup>19</sup> The suggestion Rabbi Bokser makes, of the Torah reader glancing occasionally at a printed humash, is a variant on the classical interpretation of the Shulhan Arukh. Rabbi Bokser suggests that the Torah reader himself (or herself) look at the printed humash occasionally while reading from the scroll, rather than depend on a gabbai to chant quietly into the ear.

Rabbi Bokser’s suggestion, as well as Rabbi Tucker’s reticence to permit transparencies, represent a tendency among Conservative rabbinic authorities to give strength and support to the traditional method of reading directly from the scroll with preparation. A somewhat similar approach would be to look at the humash alongside the scroll for more than an occasional glance. This is sometimes called “the windshield wiper method” where the Torah reader is literally switching back and forth between the book and the scroll. While there is a danger here that the Torah reader may fail to read every letter from the scroll, if it is done properly this method would

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<sup>16</sup> Rabbi Ben Zion Bokser, Correspondence of the Chair, February 6, 1981. CJLS Archives.

<sup>17</sup> In his brief letter Rabbi Bokser does not explain his reading of the relevant sources, including Shulhan Arukh, Yoreh Deah 274:7: “a sefer Torah marked with vowels is invalid,” which seems to imply that a marked Torah scroll would be invalid *lehathilah*. Perhaps Rabbi Bokser was willing to be lenient because the markings were only in pencil.

<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Avi Killip and Rabbi Ethan Tucker, “Can I Print an Overlay to Make Torah Reading More Accessible?” *Responsa Radio* 118, [Can I Print an Overlay to Make Torah Reading More Accessible? | Hadar Institute](#) (accessed June 19, 2025). My thanks to rabbinical student Noam Blauer for this reference.

<sup>19</sup> On sources that permit eyeglasses to aid in mitzvot that require seeing, see Rabbi Joshua Heller, “Counting a Minyan via Video Conference,” p. 25. CJLS OH 55:14.2021a [heller - zoom minyan \(2\).pdf](#)

be an halakhically acceptable approach as long as every word is properly (*bedikduk*) read from the scroll. It may in fact be preferable to the approach proposed by the Mishnah Brurah and Arukh Hashulhan for two reasons: having the gabbai whisper each word to the Torah readers raises the concern of hearing two voices (*trei kalei*), that of the Torah reader and gabbai, invalidating the ritual Torah reading as one cannot hear a distinct voice,<sup>20</sup> and the process may slow down the Torah reading, raising the concern of *tirhah detzibbura*, of not causing hardship (usually undue delay) for the congregation.

There is a long history of communities lacking capable Torah readers, and a long history of accommodations so that the Torah can still be read liturgically in synagogue. However, there does not seem to be any *heter* (permission) to read only from a humash when there is no one who can read the Torah. I have seen a humash placed within the open scroll so that it appears to the congregation (except those up close) that the Torah is being read. This seems to vary from the course of the halakhic tradition, that each word must be read from the scroll. Even if one is checking the book while then reading in the sefer Torah, the book should not be placed on the Torah scroll because anyone who sees the book there will assume that the Torah reader is only reading from the book and not from the scroll. The careful laws about the writing of Torah scrolls and their need to be *kasher* (ritually fit), the role of the Torah scroll in the liturgy, the way it is stored with honor in the ark, all point to the critical importance of using and reading from the scrolls. Reading technologies have advanced from scrolls to the bound codex, and from that to the digital screen. The halakhic requirement of public Torah reading from a handwritten parchment scroll communicates to the congregation that this is no ordinary book. It is special, governed by special rules and kept in a designated ark. That is, it is sacred, *kadosh*. The tradition's insistence on reading liturgically from the Sefer Torah should be preserved, maintaining the sacred nature of how we read and hear Scripture.

And at the same time, what should a congregation do when there is no one who can read from the scroll, when we have no choice, דבאין ברירה as the Arukh Hashulhan said? Are there other options that our communities might avail themselves of? The following basic preference of options should be observed:

1. A capable Torah reader should read from the scroll in the traditional way. Each congregation must encourage its Torah readers and encourage more people to learn how to read Torah, or invest in hiring a capable Torah reader.
2. A capable minor should read (while someone else says the blessings).
3. The Torah reader glances at a humash occasionally in between phrases but still reads each word from the Sefer Torah.
4. The gabbaim assist the Torah reader, with one whispering the phrases into the ears of the Torah reader, who repeats each phrase out loud, or gently correcting as necessary or giving hand signals.
5. Some would, in a *she'at dehak*, have someone read the Torah reading from a humash while the "Torah reader" follows each word in the scroll mouthing each word along with the one reciting aloud.

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<sup>20</sup> For an analysis of the halakhic concern of *trei kalei*, see Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner, "Joint Aliyot" CJLS OH 136.1992 [reisner\\_aliyot.pdf](#)

The first option is for a capable Torah reader to read the Torah properly. As mentioned earlier, the triennial cycle is one way to make it easier to accomplish this by shortening the amount of Torah reading that must be prepared. While aliyot can sometimes be further shortened, though never less than three verses, there is a danger that one may inauspiciously conclude an aliyah on an unpleasant note. There is also the concern that if a parashah is shortened to less than the full third of the official triennial cycle, then the community will not have heard the entirety of the Torah read over the course of three years. Therefore, while the aliyot can at times be cut shorter, the rules for divisions and the need to complete the cycle in three years argues against shortening the aliyot beyond the already abbreviated triennial cycle divisions.<sup>21</sup> However, if an aliyah is too long for one reader to manage, it could be split between different Torah readers, still constituting a single aliyah.<sup>22</sup>

In addition to appropriate corrections from the gabbai, the Torah reading could also be aided by hand signals. What is important is that the gabbai not embarrass the Torah reader by the extent and manner of correcting. Rabbi Yonatan Raziell in a recent paper argued that the Toraitic imperative to not embarrass someone needs to inform the gabbai's restraint over the rabbinic concern that the Torah be read properly.<sup>23</sup>

Some have suggested that the Torah reader recite the Torah reading without the trope, with the gabbai only correcting for pronunciation. This approach is not uncommon in Reform communities. However, as argued above, the cantillation melodies are a halakhic requirement that also preserve a distinct aspect of ancient Jewish tradition. As such, they behoove us to go to lengths to preserve them. For this reason more than others, the gabbai and congregation, rather than jumping to correct the Torah reader, must encourage its members to read, and more experienced Torah readers should mentor novices so that this valuable tradition can be passed down.

If there is no one who can read with proper preparation, the next best option is to permit a capable minor to read, an option that is not without dissent but has ample halakhic support, as argued by Rabbi Joel Roth and permitted by the CJLS in 1982.<sup>24</sup> The third best option is for the reader to look over at a humash (as suggested by Rabbi Bokser) rather than the fourth option here where the reader is prompted by the gabbai (as suggested by the Mishneh Berurah and Arukh Hashulhan), where there is a concern of *trei kalei* (two voices) and *tirha detziburra* (taking the time of the congregation).

The fifth option is proposed as the last, and least optimal. When there is no one, adult or minor, who can read from the Torah, even by glancing at a book or being prompted by the gabbai,

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<sup>21</sup> The concerns that the triennial cycle is guided by are: "1. Each aliyah must contain a minimum of three verses and each sidrah must contain at least 21 verses. 1. Paragraphs with 4 or 5 verses are read in their entirety. 3. There is no skipping from one section to another on the same day. 4. Excessive overlapping is avoided whenever possible so as not to lend preference to one section over others. 5. Effort has been made to avoid beginning and ending the sedarim and aliyot on a negative note. 6. Upon completion of the three-year cycle, no sections will have been omitted" Rabbi Richard Eisenberg, "A Complete Triennial Cycle," p. 2 of the manuscript or p. 130 of the typeset edition.

<sup>22</sup> I thank Rabbi Elliot Dorff for this suggestion.

<sup>23</sup> Rabbi Yonatan Raziell, "The Correction of a Torah Reader who Errs" *Tehumim* 35 (5775): 463-470 (in Hebrew). I thank Rabbi Robert Scheinberg for this reference.

<sup>24</sup> Rabbi Joel Roth, "May a Minor Read from the Torah?" CJLS OH 282:3.1982a. [010.pdf](#). For the opposing view, see: Rabbi David H. Lincoln, "May a Pre-Bar Mitzvah Boy Read from the Torah?" CJLS OH 282:3.1982b [11.pdf](#)

then the Torah can be read by someone else from the humash while the Torah reader still follows and mouths each word from the scroll. In a sense we already do that in the traditional manner of Torah reading, as the “real” Torah reader is the *oleh/olah*, the one who says the blessing, while the Torah reader is the one who reads as a substitute, replacing the older practice of each person saying the blessing and then reading themselves, because the former custom embarrassed those who did not know how to read Torah. Today, we give an aliyah to anyone (they can read the blessings in transliteration) while the Torah reader reads the Torah for them as their agent.<sup>25</sup> The *oleh/olah* is supposed to follow along in the scroll (not a book!) and should be mouthing each word along with the Torah reader. As Rabbi Karen G. Reiss Medwed writes in *The Observant Life*: “The individual called to the Torah, if able, should read along quietly with the person reading aloud. If unable, then the individual called to the Torah should at least follow the reading as closely as possible.”<sup>26</sup> Too often our *olim* will look over at the humash with the gabbai when they ought to be instructed to follow directly from the sefer Torah. Since the development of traditional ritual already permitted the removal of the Torah reading from the official ceremonial reader, why can we not remove it by another degree? Now, the person reading from the humash is the agent of the one following along each word in the scroll, who is in turn the agent of the *oleh/olah* who does not necessarily have the ability of following each word in the sefer Torah, and in each case שלוחו של *shluho shel adam kamoto*, the agent is the same as the individual.<sup>27</sup> We employ tertiary agency regularly in gittin, when the husband appoints the mesadder gittin to write a get, who in turn appoints a secondary agent (*shaliah sheni*) to deliver the get to the wife. The person reading the Torah from the humash can serve as *shaliah sheni* to the original *oleh/olah* with the first agent following along in the scroll. This approach should only be applied in a *she’at dehak*, a temporary pressing circumstance (ranging from a Torah reader not appearing in synagogue as expected to a singular Shabbat on the calendar where every capable Torah reader was away) where there is simply no other good option.<sup>28</sup>

Where the lack of any good option is generally the case, then rather than have someone follow along in the sefer Torah while someone else reads from the humash it would be better to simply read the humash without opening the sefer Torah, lest people think that it is acceptable to read from the humash and not from the sefer Torah in the traditional way. When only reading from a humash one should not say the blessings. This same approach would be appropriate when there is no minyan or no kosher Torah scroll.

**PSAK DIN:** Chanting or reading the Torah from a printed humash does not fulfill the community’s obligation for the public reading of the Torah, which must be fulfilled from a

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<sup>25</sup> Shulhan Arukh, Orah Hayim 139:2; 141:2; 140:1 gloss. On the evolution of practice of Torah reading from the reader reciting the blessing and then reading to a division of those roles, see Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy*, p. 140.

<sup>26</sup> Rabbi Karen G. Reiss Medwed, “Prayer” in Martin S. Cohen, ed., *The Observant Life: The Wisdom of Conservative Judaism for Contemporary Jews* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 2012), p. 45.

<sup>27</sup> Mishnah Brakhot 5:5.

<sup>28</sup> See my papers, “A Minyan is Constituted in Person” CJLS OH 55:14.2021b [fine-minyan-in-person-updated.pdf](#) and “A Minyan is Constituted by Ten” OH 55:4.2025a [a-minyan-is-constituted-by-ten-1\\_0.pdf](#) where I have opposed applying the concept of she’at dehak too liberally. In this case, however, where there is no one to read Torah as a *temporary* condition, then it would be a she’at dehak meriting a more lenient approach.

handwritten parchment scroll. Assuming the congregation has a kosher Torah scroll, the following options are recommended in descending order of preference:

1. A capable Torah reader should read from the scroll in the traditional way. Each congregation must encourage its Torah readers and encourage more people to learn how to read Torah, or invest in hiring a capable Torah reader.
2. A capable minor should read (while someone else says the blessings).
3. The Torah reader glances at a humash occasionally in between phrases but still reads each word from the Sefer Torah.
4. The gabbaim assist the Torah reader, with one whispering the phrases into the ears of the Torah reader, who repeats each phrase out loud, or gently correcting as necessary or giving hand signals.
5. Some would, in a *she'at dehak*, have someone read the Torah reading from a humash while the "Torah reader" follows each word in the scroll mouthing each word along with the one reciting aloud.