

THE ALIYAH AND THE TORAH SERVICE

The Aliyah

Before the Reading

בְּרַכּוּ אֶת־יְיָ הַמְּבָרָךְ!
בְּרוּךְ יְיָ הַמְּבָרָךְ לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד!
בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר בָּחַר־בָּנוּ מִכָּל־
הָעַמִּים, וְנָתַן־לָנוּ אֶת־תּוֹרָתוֹ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה.

Praise the One to whom our praise is due!

Praised be the One to whom our praise is due, now and for ever!

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You have called us to Your service by giving us the Torah. We praise You, O God, Giver of the Torah.

After the Reading

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לָנוּ תּוֹרַת
אֱמֶת, וְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם נִמְטַע בְּתוֹכֵנוּ. בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, נוֹתֵן הַתּוֹרָה.

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You have given us a Torah of truth, implanting within us eternal life. We praise You, O God, Giver of the Torah.

COMMENTARY

Among many ancient peoples, the priests were the privileged, educated class. They were charged with the responsibility of knowing and preserving the tribal traditions. Often, their knowledge was kept a secret from others and passed on only to members of their families.

Among Jews, however, even though there were priests, the Torah was considered the possession of all the people. When Ezra read and taught the Torah, he did so "before the congregation, both men and women, all that

could hear...." Jewish tradition revolutionized and democratized religion. In Judaism the Torah was open to everyone, and each Jew became responsible for both knowing Torah and living according to its מצוות.

The reading of the Torah in the ancient synagogue demonstrated the democratic spirit of Jewish tradition. From biblical times the Jewish people had been divided among כֹּהֲנִים (*kohanim*), "priests," לְוִיִּים (*L'viyim*), "Levites," and יִשְׂרָאֵלִים (*Yisr'eilim*), "Israelites." The synagogue gave ceremonial honor to these divisions during the Torah service. When it came time to read from the Torah, first the כֹּהֵן (*kohein*) was called, then a לֵוִי (*Levi*), and then a יִשְׂרָאֵל (*Yisrael*). Once called to the Torah, however, each person did the same thing. Each would read a designated portion.

In Orthodox and many Conservative synagogues today, you will find that these ceremonial honors are still given. During the Torah service, the first person called to the Torah is a *kohein* (someone thought to be descended from the ancient priests, often with a last name like Cohen, Kahn, or Kagan). Next to be called is a Levite (a person thought to be a descendant of the tribe of Levi, often with the last name Levy, Levine, or Levitt). The third person called to the Torah is a *Yisrael* (a person not descended from the ancient priests or Levites). In maintaining this tradition, Orthodox and Conservative Jews link their Torah service to the Torah service of the ancient synagogue and show honor to the descendants of the earliest priests and Levites. In preserving this ancient ritual, they feel that they are reliving the experience of our historic people.

Among most Reform Jews, however, you will find that these ceremonial honors are not given. Because thousands of years have passed since the Jewish people lived as separate tribes, it is impossible to know for certain who the true descendants of the ancient priests and Levites are. Also, Reform Jews see all Jews as equal and do not distinguish among *kohanim*, *L'viyim*, or *Yisr'eilim*. Therefore, during the Torah service in a Reform synagogue, there are no designated portions for the descendants of priests, Levites, and Israelites. People are called to the Torah not to represent their ancestors' tribes, but on their own individual merit. Each Jew is considered equal to another.

If you were leading a Torah service, would you follow the traditional or the Reform practice of calling people to the Torah? Why did you choose the way you did?

What Is an *Aliyah*?

The privilege of being “called up” to read from the Torah is known as *עֲלִיָּה* (*aliyah*). Why?

Do you remember the passage sung while the Torah is being placed on the reading desk? Its words are “Praise be the Eternal. Worship at God’s holy mountain...” In Psalm 24:3 the poet asks:

Who shall ascend to the mountain of *Adonai*?

And who shall stand in God’s holy place?

For the Jew in biblical times, the “mountain of *Adonai*” was Mount Zion in Jerusalem, where the Temple stood. From there was the Torah to go forth to all nations. In order to visit Jerusalem, one must “go up,” or “ascend,” for it is located on one of the highest places in the Land of Israel. In biblical times, “going up” to Jerusalem for a Festival was called *עֲלִיָּה לְרֵגֶל* (*aliyah l’regel*). In our own times, the word used for immigration to Israel is *עֲלִיָּה*.

Now, how did the word *עֲלִיָּה* come to be associated with being called up to read from the Torah? Perhaps because the Torah was associated with Jerusalem, the reading of it became a substitute for “going up” to the holy city. It follows that the reader became known as an *עוֹלֵה* (*oleh*) because the reader “goes up” to the pulpit to read the Torah. Whatever the explanation, over the course of years the word *עֲלִיָּה* came to designate the privilege of reading from the Torah.

The *בַּעַל קוֹרֵא*—*Baal Korei*

From about 300 B.C.E., the language of Aramaic began to replace Hebrew as the spoken language of the Jewish people. Gradually, over the years, many Jews lost the art of reading from the Torah or even being able to understand all of the Hebrew of the Torah. As one might imagine, this posed a serious problem for the future of Judaism.

In order to solve the problem, the Rabbis created the position of *בַּעַל קוֹרֵא*, the trained reader of the Torah. In this way they could be sure that the text would be read correctly. Their solution, however, brought with it another problem. It removed the privilege of reading the Torah from most Jews. In order to solve that problem, the Rabbis assigned the blessings before and after the reading of Torah to the *עוֹלֵה*. This meant that all Jews, whether they could read from the Torah or not, could be called upon for an *עֲלִיָּה*. In this way, the Rabbis preserved the democracy of the synagogue.

Translating the Torah

As we have already discovered, the introduction of Aramaic as the spoken language of the people meant that many were unable to understand the Hebrew of the Torah. Again, in order to preserve the democratic nature of Jewish knowledge, the Rabbis introduced the position of מְתוּרְגָּמָן (*m'turg'man*), "translator," into the synagogue. They also developed and accepted an Aramaic translation of the Torah, which was read by the translator. That translation is known as *Targum Onkelos*. It is interesting to note that the Jews of Egypt, who spoke Greek, developed a translation of the Torah in Greek.

And Caused Them to Understand the Reading

When Ezra and his fellow priests read the Torah to the people of Israel, we are told that "they gave the sense and caused them to understand the reading." What, exactly, does it mean to "give the sense" or "cause" someone to understand the Torah?

The Sages of Jewish tradition believed that Ezra sought to "interpret" the Torah and provide the people with its application in their lives. The task of "interpreting Torah" required knowledge and skill. In the ancient synagogue, the interpretation of Torah was called a דְּרָשָׁה (*d'rashah*). The word דְּרָשָׁה is derived from the root דָּרַשׁ, which means to search, to investigate, or to explain. Today, we call the דְּרָשָׁה a sermon.

Creating the Sermon

In the ancient synagogue, as in most modern ones, the דְּרָשָׁה was delivered just after the reading of the haftarah. (For a discussion of the haftarah, see pp. 193–201.)

The Rabbis developed the sermon in order to explain the Torah and inspire Jews toward its fulfillment. To make their points clear, the Sages used stories, analogies, legends, and incidents from their own experiences. Most of their sermons were organized in the following way:

- a. The first section called attention to the story, theme, or subject of the Torah or haftarah they wished to interpret.

- b. The Rabbis then asked questions about the most challenging parts of the section.
- c. Having asked the questions, they tried to answer them and apply their answers to the lives of their listeners.
- d. The conclusion of the sermon included a summary as well as a statement meant to inspire the listeners to "take to heart" the message of the Torah or haftarah interpretation.

This outline of the *דבר* ought to be helpful to you when you are called upon to write a sermon for your congregation. Remember that your task is to help others appreciate and understand the Torah or haftarah text.

Contributions

The practice of reading from Torah and haftarah, as well as delivering the sermon, were borrowed by Christianity and Islam. In both the church and the mosque, Scripture is read and interpreted. In the church, Scripture includes the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. In the mosque, Scripture is the Koran, which Moslems believe was dictated to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel. The Hebrew word for biblical verse, *קרא* (*k'ra*), and the Arabic word "Koran" both come from the same root that means "to read aloud."

The Blessings before and after the Reading of Torah

Who wrote the blessings that come before and after the reading of Torah? We do not know! We really do not even know when they were composed. In the Book of Nehemiah, we are told that when Ezra read from the Torah he "blessed *Adonai*, the great God. And all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' with the lifting up of their hands..." (Nehemiah 8:6).

It seems that by the end of the first century C.E., the custom of saying blessings before and after the reading of Torah was accepted. The blessings we recite today are those most likely used by Jews since that time.

You Have Given Us the Torah Giver of the Torah

Notice that in both the blessings before and after the reading of Torah, the author used the words נָתַן (*natan*), "gave," and נוֹתֵן (*notein*), "gives." Why do you supposed Jews utilize both past and present tenses when thanking God for the Torah?

A Sage known by the strange name of Ben Bag Bag once taught: "Turn the Torah, and turn it over again, for everything is in it!" (*Pirkei Avot* 5:25). What might Ben Bag Bag's statement have to do with the use of past (נָתַן) and present (נוֹתֵן) in the blessings for the reading of Torah?

Is Torah still in the process of being given today? In what ways? Look again at the quote from the Baal Shem Tov. He said: "The Torah is eternal, but its explanation is to be made by the spiritual leaders of Judaism...in accordance with the age." How are new "explanations" a modern giving of the Torah?

THE HAFTARAH BLESSINGS

Blessings before Haftarah Reading

פְּרוּך אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר פָּחַר בְּנְבִיאִים
טוֹבִים, וְרָצָה בְּדְבָרֵיהֶם הַנְּאֻמִּים בְּאַמֶּת. פְּרוּך אַתָּה יי,
הַבוֹחֵר בַּתּוֹרָה, וּבְמֹשֶׁה עַבְדּוֹ, וּבְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ וּבְנְבִיאֵי
הָאַמֶּת וְצַדִּיק.

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe: You have called faithful prophets to speak words of truth. We praise You, O God, for the revelation of Torah, for Moses Your servant and Israel Your people, and for the prophets of truth and righteousness.

SINAI IS EVER PRESENT

Sinai is ever present—not only a past event. Wherever people gather to seek God's presence, To renew the covenant, to discover God's will; Whenever they listen and hear, receive and transmit—

They stand at Sinai.

Rabbi Eugene Mihaly

Remember that the Jewish people received the Torah at Mount Sinai. Rabbi Mihaly says that we stand at Sinai whenever we search for God, study Torah, and try to understand what God requires of us. What do you think it means to "stand at Sinai"? How does Rabbi Mihaly's teaching relate to the idea that Torah is still being given to us today?

COMMENTARY



Among Moslems, Jews have historically been known as “the people of the Book.” We were given that name because of our devotion to our Bible. While the Torah occupies a special place not only in the ark but in the history of the Jewish people, the rest of the Hebrew Bible is also considered holy. The “Prophets” of Israel were believed to have spoken “in the name of God,” and the “Writings” (such as Psalms, Proverbs, and the Book of Job) were all considered sacred.

When Jews refer to the Hebrew Bible, we call it תַּנְ"ךְ (*Tanach*). That name is made up of the three first letters taken from the titles of the three sections of the Hebrew Bible:

Torah	תּוֹרָה = ת	<i>tav</i>
Prophets (<i>N'vi-im</i>)	נְבִיאִים = נ	<i>nun</i>
Writings (<i>K'tuvim</i>)	כְּתוּבִים = ך	<i>chaf</i> (the final <i>chaf</i>)

The תּוֹרָה section, as we have indicated, includes the Five Books of Moses. נְבִיאִים begins with the Book of Joshua and concludes with the Book of Malachi. כְּתוּבִים begins with Psalms and ends with the final book of the Hebrew Bible, Second Chronicles.

What Is the הַפְּטָרָה—Haftarah?

The word הַפְּטָרָה means “conclusion” or “dismissal.” Why would a reading from the Bible be given such a name? We are not sure.

It could be that it was the custom in the ancient synagogue to follow the reading of the Torah with a reading from the Prophets and then dismiss or conclude the worship services. We do know that such a custom did exist in some synagogues, and this may explain how the reading selected from the Prophets came to be known as הַפְּטָרָה.

Selecting the Haftarah

By the second century C.E., the practice of reading a selection from the Prophets was well established. The blessings before and after the reading had been written and were used throughout the Jewish world. The selection of the specific *הַפְּטָרָה* reading, however, was left to those in charge of each local synagogue.

How did they make their selection of an appropriate *הַפְּטָרָה* for each Shabbat? Interestingly enough, the New Testament gives us a good description:

[Jesus] came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Shabbat day. While there, he was called upon to read, and the Book of Isaiah was given to him...

Luke 4:16-17

It seems clear from this description of Jesus at the synagogue in Nazareth that it was the custom to call upon a member of the congregation to come forward to read from the *הַפְּטָרָה*. We are not sure whether the selection of a passage from Isaiah was made by the leaders of the synagogue or by Jesus. The description in Luke, however, does indicate that after he had completed the reading, Jesus went on to deliver a sermon based upon it.

There are those who believe that by the time of Jesus it had become the custom to select a *הַפְּטָרָה* reading that would have some connection with the Torah portion. This, too, is entirely possible. By the seventh century C.E., a full cycle of *הַפְּטָרָה* readings had been developed. All of these were selected by the Rabbis because they complemented or developed the subject found in the Torah portion. For example, when the first chapters of Genesis are read, the *הַפְּטָרָה* is taken from Isaiah, chapter 42. The theme of the first chapters of Genesis is the creation of the world by God. The chapter of Isaiah that is read as the *הַפְּטָרָה* includes the following words:

Thus says *Adonai*,
Who created the heavens and stretched them forth,
Who spread forth the earth and that which comes out of it,
Who gives breath to the people upon it,
And spirit to them that walk therein.

Isaiah 42:5

THE HEBREW BIBLE

Torah תּוֹרָה

Genesis
Exodus
Leviticus
Numbers
Deuteronomy

Prophets נְבִיאִים

Joshua
Judges
First Samuel
Second Samuel
First Kings
Second Kings
Isaiah
Jeremiah
Ezekiel
Hosea
Joel
Amos
Obadiah
Jonah
Micah
Nahum
Habakkuk
Zephaniah
Haggai
Zechariah
Malachi

Writings כְּתוּבִים

Psalms
Proverbs
Job
Song of Songs
Ruth
Lamentations
Ecclesiastes
Esther
Daniel
Ezra
Nehemiah
First Chronicles
Second Chronicles

You may wish to compare the order of the Hebrew Bible with the order of the Christian Bible. What is the difference, and why do you think Christians have arranged the books of the Hebrew Bible in a different order?

As indicated on page 195, the *הַפְּטָרָה* was selected on the basis of its having something in common with the Torah portion. Below are some Torah portions and their *הַפְּטָרָה* selections. Divide them up, and have two or three groups examine them. Try to figure out the relationship of the *הַפְּטָרָה* to the Torah selection. Then share your results.

1. Genesis 6:9–11:22 and Isaiah 54.
2. Exodus 6:2–9:35 and Ezekiel 28.
3. Exodus 13:17–17:16 and Judges 5.
4. Exodus 21:1–24:18 and Jeremiah 34.
5. Numbers 22:1–25:9 and Micah 6.
6. Deuteronomy 3:23–7:11 and Isaiah 40.
7. Deuteronomy 33:1–34:12 and Joshua 1.

The Maccabees and the *הַפְּטָרָה*

Some Jewish scholars trace the beginning of the custom of reading a *הַפְּטָרָה* to the time of the Maccabees. Just before the revolt led by Mattathias and his sons, Antiochus Epiphanes decreed that there should be no public reading of the Torah. Some Jews responded to this form of persecution by substituting a reading from the Prophets for the Torah portion. After the Jewish uprising and the defeat of the Greek-Syrians, the custom of the *הַפְּטָרָה* reading was continued.

Do you think that substituting the *הַפְּטָרָה* reading for the Torah portion was a good way to handle Antiochus Epiphanes' decree? What would be your reaction if a modern government prohibited the reading of Torah in the synagogue? What might you do if your government began to force Jews to close their synagogues? What do you believe would be the most effective response to such anti-Semitism? How have Jews in the past reacted to such persecution? How should Jews today react to attacks on synagogues or Jewish centers, or to anti-Semitic websites?

What do you think of the following four statements and responses to anti-Semitism? How do they differ? With which, if any, would you agree?

Anti-Semitism is a mad passion, akin to the lowest perversities of diseased human nature. It is the will to hate.

Leo Tolstoy

Anti-Semitism is not to be overcome by getting people to forget us but to know us.

Meyer Levin

A Jewish group with firmly established rights can—when the fine balance of the people amid whom it lives is disturbed—suddenly find itself faced with hostility. The system has not yet been found which will insure the Jew living in the Diaspora the complete normalization of [life] as a part of society and as an individual.

Leni Yahil

For the Jews, the moral is to answer anti-Semitism with more Semitism... greater devotion to the great ideals which Judaism proclaimed to the world.

Israel Abrahams

Blessings before Haftarah Reading

The blessings before the reading of the *הַפְּטָרָה* praise God for “the prophets of truth and righteousness.” They also thank God for the Torah and for those who have passed the Torah from generation to generation. We are not sure when the blessings before the reading of the *הַפְּטָרָה* were written. It is likely that they were composed sometime during the second to the seventh century C.E.

*Study the blessings before the reading of the *הַפְּטָרָה*. Notice that their themes are God’s choosing “good prophets,” the “truthfulness” of their messages, and the faithful passing on of the tradition from generation to generation.*

*On the basis of these themes, what would you include today if you were challenged to write a new *הַפְּטָרָה* prayer? Take up the challenge and write one!*

Blessings after Haftarah Reading

The blessings after the reading of the *הַפְּטָרָה* are divided into four sections. We might expect that their theme would have to do with the importance of the prophets or their message. However, that is not what we find. Rather, the first section praises the truthfulness and fulfillment of God’s words. The second section asks for mercy upon Zion and the people of Israel. The third section voices the hope for the coming of Elijah and the messianic era. And the fourth thanks God for the Torah, the prophets, worship, and the Shabbat day.

Later, as we have already seen (see page 157), the שְׁלוֹם רַב was added to the prayer book.

Jewish scholars believe that the four sections of the final הַפְּטָרָה blessings were once a version of an עֲמִידָה. After the עֲמִידָה was formulated at Yavneh, the blessings were preserved. When the tradition of concluding the worship service with the הַפְּטָרָה developed, it is likely that the abbreviated version of the עֲמִידָה was reintroduced as a final set of prayers for the worship service. In other words, the four sections were not thought of as a blessing for the reading of the הַפְּטָרָה but rather as concluding prayers for the whole worship service. This would explain why there is practically no mention of the prophets or of the הַפְּטָרָה in the four sections.

What do you think would be an appropriate prayer after the reading of the הַפְּטָרָה? What themes would you include in such a prayer? Would you retain any of the older sections?

Here you will find an abbreviated version of the blessings after the reading of the הַפְּטָרָה from the Reform prayer book, *Gates of Prayer*. How does this version differ from the traditional one? The version of *Gates of Prayer* published in 1975 includes both the traditional version and this abbreviated one.

Abbreviated Final Haftarah Blessings

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, צוּר כָּל־הָעוֹלָמִים, צַדִּיק
בְּכָל־הַדּוֹרוֹת, הָאֵל הַנָּאֵמָן, הָאוֹמֵר וְעוֹשֶׂה, הַמְדַבֵּר וּמְקַיֵּם,
שֶׁפֶל־דְּבָרָיו אֵמֶת וְצֶדֶק.
עַל־הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל־הָעֲבוּדָה וְעַל־הַנְּבִיאִים וְעַל־יּוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת
הַזֶּה, שְׁנַת־תְּלָנּוּ, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, לְקַדְּשָׁה וּלְמַנוּחָהּ, לְכַבּוֹד
וּלְתַפְאֳרָתָהּ, עַל־הַפֶּל, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, אֲנַחְנוּ מוֹדִים לָךְ, וּמְבָרְכִים
אוֹתְךָ. יִתְבָּרַךְ שְׁמֹךְ בְּפִי כָּל־חַי תָּמִיד לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד. בְּרוּךְ
אַתָּה יי, מְקַדֵּשׁ הַשַּׁבָּת.

We praise You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the universe, the Rock of all creation, the Righteous One of all generations, the faithful God whose word is deed, whose every command is just and true.

For the Torah, for the privilege of worship, for the prophets, and for this Sabbath day that You, our Eternal God, have given us for holiness and rest, for honor and glory, we thank and praise You. May Your name be praised for ever by every living being. We praise You, O God, for the Sabbath and its holiness.

THE NEW MONTH

The New Month (Traditional Version)

יְהִי רָצוֹן מִלְּפָנֶיךָ יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְאֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ, שֶׁתְּחַדֵּשׁ עֲלֵינוּ
אֶת־הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה, לְטוֹבָה וְלִבְרָכָה. וְתַתֵּן־לָנוּ חַיִּים אַרְכִּים,
חַיִּים שְׁלֵשָׁלוּם, חַיִּים שְׁלֵטוֹבָה, חַיִּים שְׁלִפְרֻסָה, חַיִּים
שְׁלִפְרֻסָה, חַיִּים שְׁלִחֲלוּץ עֲצָמוֹת, חַיִּים שְׁשֵׁשׁ בָּהֶם יֵרָאֵת
שָׁמַיִם וְיֵרָאֵת חֲטָא, חַיִּים שְׁאִין בָּהֶם בּוֹשָׁה וּכְלָמָה, חַיִּים
שְׁל עֶשֶׂר וְכָבוֹד, חַיִּים שְׁתִּהְיֶי בְּנוֹ אֲהַבַת תּוֹרָה וְיֵרָאֵת
שָׁמַיִם, חַיִּים שְׁיִמְלְאוּ מִשְׁאֲלוֹת לְבָבוֹ לְטוֹבָה, אָמֵן סְלָה.

May it be Your will, Eternal, our God and God of our ancestors, to renew us with goodness and blessing in the new month ahead. Grant us life—a life of length of days, a life of peace, a life of goodness, a life of blessings, a life of sustenance, a life of strength, a life of reverence for God, fear of sin, without shame or disgrace, a life of riches and honor, a life marked by our love of Torah, a life in which the wishes of our hearts may be fulfilled for good. Amen. Selah.

מִי שֶׁעָשָׂה נִסִּים לְאֲבוֹתֵינוּ וְגַאֵל אֹתָם מִעַבְדוֹת לְחֵרוֹת,
הוּא יִגְאֵל אֹתָנוּ בְּקִרְוֹב, וְיִקְבֹּץ נִדְחֵינוּ מֵאַרְבַּע כְּנָפוֹת
הָאָרֶץ, חֲבֵרִים כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְנֹאמֵר: אָמֵן.

May the Eternal, who has done wonderful things for our ancestors, who redeemed them from slavery to freedom, soon redeem us and gather our scattered people from the four corners of the earth. Israel is one united people! And let us say: Amen.