



IF YOU'RE BOUND ABOVE, YOU WON'T FALL BELOW

What's the most important aliyah? It's not what you think it is.

Hagbah

What is the most distinguished aliyah at the Torah reading?

I have news for you: the most important aliyah is Hagbah.

Every shul-going Jew is familiar with the custom of exposing three columns in the Torah scroll after the reading and then lifting it for the entire congregation to view while they stand respectfully. The lifter first turns right, then left, then returns to the center as the entire congregation chants "V'zos hatorah": "this is the Torah that Moses placed before the Children of Israel", after which the scroll is returned to the table and rolled closed.

The story is told of a Jew once granted the honor of performing Hagbah. He struggled to lift the Torah scroll and felt embarrassed in front of the crowd. But after Shabbos, he started working out extensively—so that the next time he would be called upon for Hagbah he'd be much stronger and capable of lifting the Torah easily.

Several months later, the gabbai called him to the Torah. Feeling self-confident, he stepped up right away and lifted the scroll properly. Afterward, he turned to the gabbai and asked: "Nu? How was it this time?" And the gabbai answered him: "You did a great job! The only thing is, I didn't call you up for Hagbah—I had given you an aliyah..."

The Best Part

Why is Hagbah considered valuable? The commentators explain that in addition to hearing the Torah reading, there is another mitzvah for all shul-goers, men and women alike, to physically see the Torah scroll's writing. Thus, at each reading's end, the scroll is held up before everyone's eyes.

The Jerusalem Talmud cites a basis for this in the Torah portion of Ki Savo (Deuteronomy 27:26), where the verse states: “Cursed is the one who fulfills not the words of this Torah.” And the Jerusalem Talmud comments: “Rabbi Shimon ben Yakim says, ‘This [verse’s reference] is the chazan who doesn’t hold up the Torah scroll for the congregation to display its writing.’”

There are those who explain the reason for this, saying that when we recite “And this is the Torah that Moshe placed before the Children of Israel,” we are in effect testifying that this is the very Torah that Moshe gave the Jews—and with every testimony, there needs to be visual witnessing. Hearing is not enough. Therefore, when we testify about the Torah, it’s not enough to merely hear the reading of the Torah, but one also must physically see it with his or her eyes to sufficiently testify.

The Talmud tells us that this mitzvah is quite important, being that the Torah lifter is the one who effectively ends the Torah reading. Thus the Talmud says, in Tractate Beitzah 32a, that “the Torah roller,” meaning the person who rolls the Torah open so as to lift it, “collects the merits of all of them,” meaning the merits of all those called up to the Torah earlier. This is also the case with all mitzvos—whoever completes it collects its merit.

There are those who think that getting an aliyah is an important mitzvah, and they are prepared to spend a lot of money on it. There are even those who want to become Kohanim so as to be able to get a lot of aliyos! But along the Talmud comes, saying that lifting the Torah scroll at the reading’s conclusion is a greater mitzvah than all the aliyos combined, which, by the way, is why the Polish Chasidic custom is to give their Rebbe the honor of Hagbah.

But what is so great about completing a mitzvah? The following example will make it understood.

If one patronizes a restaurant and is served undercooked chicken, he immediately protests, the owner comes running to apologize profusely, and the patron ultimately gets a free meal. But if you think about it, the question arises: what’s the big deal? The chicken was slaughtered, salted and cleaned by halachic standards, and it was cooked with all the necessary flavors and spices. So much work was put into it—all that was missing was that last five minutes of cooking.

Now that’s why Hagbah “collects the merit of them all.”

What To Look At

The Arizal writes that when the Torah is lifted, one must carefully scrutinize the actual letters, since “a great light” is drawn down through them. While we are talking about the Torah, it is only right to mention that one ought not only study the Torah’s contents, or its sacred language of Hebrew, but its very letters too. The image and form of the letters give us a path, and lessons, in the service of G-d. Each letter has a specific message to the Jewish nation, and when we contemplate the letters, we ought to contemplate the message G-d wants to communicate to us through each.

For example, let’s take the first letter: Aleph. Looking at this letter reveals that it actually consists of three letters. The upper right consists of the letter Yud. The lower left consists of a second Yud, although upside down. And the middle section consists of the letter Vav, at an angle.

The first Yud represents G-d, because the letter Yud is the first letter of the Name of G-d. This is seen in the fact that when a Yud is written alone, it is automatically understood to be referring to G-d. But Yud has more significance: the words “Yisrael” and “Yehudi”, meaning “Israel” and “Jew”, also begin with Yud.

In the middle of the Aleph is the line that connects both Yuds. The upper Yud is G-d. The lower Yud is the Jew. And what is the line? What does it consist of?

In our Parshah, we read, “For His nation is G-d’s portion; Jacob, the rope of His inheritance”—the song of Haazinu describes the bond between G-d and the Jews as a “line,” or “rope.” But why is this bond compared to a rope?

In the Tanya, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi states that the soul is a rope. One end originates in G-d Himself and the other end is found in the Jew’s body. And just as a rope’s purpose is to bind together two different things, in like manner is the Jew in this physical world bound to G-d.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman continues to explain that just as when one pulls one end of a rope, he drags along the other end of a rope, so too when a Jew does a physical mitzvah he spiritually tugs the other end of his or her rope, “pulling” along G-d Himself, so to speak. And the converse is true too—should a Jew do undesirable things, he drags the entire rope down and, so to speak, drags G-d into undesirable places.

But he or she cannot claim, “This is my personal issue. I want to live my life the way I want, and no one can mix in to my private life.” One must know that one’s actions affect G-d Himself.

It’s like a newlywed couple. The husband cannot tell his wife: “What I do is my business! Don’t mix into my life.” If he says that, her reaction is quite predictable: “What do you mean, ‘Your business?’ We’re connected to each other! If you go down, I go down with you. What you do directly affects me!” In like manner is the connection between Jew and G-d.

There is a reassuring and reinvigorating lesson here: It doesn’t matter what a Jew does—his connection with G-d is so strong and deep that he can never disconnect from G-d. Practically speaking, this is the entire idea of teshuvah, repentance: No Jew is ever lost, but rather, is always bound from above no matter how far he runs. He will always remain bound to G-d by his spiritual “umbilical cord.”

Let us conclude with the story of Rabbi Meir of Premishlan, an early Chasidic leader. His custom was to immerse in a river each morning—and to get to the river, he had to walk up one side of a slippery hill and down the other side. When he was asked how he never slipped and fell on the hill, he replied: “If you’re bound above, you won’t fall below.