

# THE CORRECT READING OF THE TORAH AND THE ROLE OF THE GABBAI

Joshua Jacobson

## Qualifications for the *Ba'al Keri'ah*<sup>1</sup>

Who is qualified to read Torah in public? Here is a list of qualifications taken from *Sha'arey Efrayim*, a commentary on the *Shulhan Arukh*, published in Moravia in 1688.

ויש להם לבחור אדם הגון ובעל תורה ומעשים טובים, ויש לו קול נעימה ובקי לקרות המלות בנקודתם והנגינות והטעמים כראוי. וגם יהיה לו קצת ידיעה בחכמת הדקדוק, למען דעת שלא ירפה החזק ויחזק הרפה, ויניח הנד וינוד הנח. ולא ישתנה שום אות מתנועתו ונקודתו הנתונה מסני. ולא ישתנה משמעות שום תיבה על ידי שיבוש קריאתו.

They should choose a decent person who knows the Torah, who is a moral person, who has a pleasant voice, who is an expert in the proper rendition of the words, the melodies and the accents, who also has some knowledge of grammar, who won't put a *dagesh* where it doesn't belong and vice versa, who won't slur over a vocalized *sheva* nor vocalize a silent *sheva*, lest even one letter from the punctuation and vocalization that were given at Sinai be altered, lest an erroneous reading cause a change in the meaning of even one word.<sup>2</sup>

The author continues to describe the ideal style of reading:

הקורא יש לו לתת לב להבין הסדר שיקרא. . . . ויקרא בקול רם, ולא בחטיפה, ולא במתינות הרבה משום טורח צבור. . . . ולא ישמיע קולות גדולות שמבלבל בזה דעת השומעים. רק יקרא בשפה ברורה בנעימה קדושה להמשיך לב הציבור, שיהיו מטים אוזן לשמוע. ויקרא הכל מתוך הכתב.

The reader should make an effort to understand the pericope that he is reading. . . . He should read in a loud voice, not too fast nor too slow. . . . nor should he show off with elaborate vocalization that would confuse the listeners. Rather let him read with clear pronunciation and with the sacred melody to attract the attention of the congregation and induce them to listen. He must read everything from the writing [in the scroll].<sup>3</sup>

הקורא יש לו ליזהר לקרות הכל כפי הנקודות והטעמים המסורים בידנו מקדמונינו ז"ל. . . . ויש לקורא להרגיל אותו בהם, וגם להיות שגור בפיו משפט המתגין לעיל ומלרע, ובמשפט הנקודות שלא יטה ימין ושמאל.

The reader must be careful to read everything according to the vocalization and punctuation accents that were handed down to us by our ancient [scholars] of blessed memory. . . . He must also be completely fluent with the rules of

syllabification (whether the accent is penultimate or final), and vocalization. He may not deviate to the right or to the left.<sup>4</sup>

### Correcting an Error in the Reading

Clearly, from the halakhic point of view, the *ba'al kerī'ah* carries a heavy responsibility. The *ba'al kerī'ah* must read in such a way that every congregant can hear the text and understand it just as if he/she had read it for him/herself. For this reason, a major error cannot be tolerated and must be corrected immediately. The *gabbai* should quietly indicate what the correct reading is, and then the *ba'al kerī'ah* must repeat the phrase in which the error was made.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, a minor error should not be corrected; the reader should be allowed to continue. When the *ba'al kerī'ah* has completed the reading, however, the *gabbai* should point out the error so that the *ba'al kerī'ah* will not continue to make the same mistake.

### Misreading the Consonantal Text

What is considered a major error and what is a minor error? According to the *Shulḥan Arukh*, קרא וטעה, אפילו בדקדוק אות אחת – מחזירין אותו, “An error in the pronunciation of any consonant (even just one letter) [is not tolerated and] must be corrected.”<sup>6</sup> This ruling is based on the concept that the letters (the consonants) in the Torah (תורה שבכתב) are God-given, whereas all the נקודות and the cantillation marks (תורה שבעל פה) are a human product, the work of the Masoretes.

Commenting on that passage in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, Rabbi Yeḥiel Epstein adds,

דוודאי אם הטעות בעצם התיבה, כמו "כבש"- "כשב" "אם"- "ואם" וכיוצא בהם, אף שאין הענין משתנה – מכל מקום מחזירין אותו.

This is certainly the case if the error is in the consonantal text. For example, [if the *ba'al kerī'ah* read] כָּבֵשׁ instead of כָּשֵׁב or אֵם instead of וָאֵם etcetera, you must make him [stop and] repeat the passage with the correct pronunciation, even though the error does not result in a change of the meaning of the word.<sup>7</sup>

### Misreading the Vowels

An error in the pronunciation of the vowels is another matter.

ודע דשינוי בנקודות אינו אלא במקום שלא נשתנה הענין, כמו "שְׁמַיִם" בקמץ "שְׁמַיִם" בפתח, או "אֶרֶץ" בקמץ או "אֶרֶץ" בשני סגולין וכיוצא בהם. אבל במקום שהענין נשתנה, כמו "חֶלֶב" בקמץ ו"חֶלֶב" בצירי וכיוצא בזה – וודאי מחזירין אותו.

The rule is that if the change in vowels does not result in a change of meaning, then

the error can stand without correction. For example if the *ba'al kerī'ah* confused the pausal form with the regular form, reading "שָׁמִים" instead of "שְׁמַיִם" or "אֲרָץ" instead of "אֶרֶץ". But if the change in vowels does result in a change of meaning (for example, reading "חֶלֶב" [HÉ-lev, fat] instead of "חָלָב" [ḥa-LAV, milk]), then this is considered an error that certainly must be corrected.<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes the mispronunciation of a single vowel can radically alter the meaning of the scriptural text. How do we pronounce the penultimate word in this verse (Exod. 25:40)?

וְרָאָה וַעֲשֵׂה בְּתַבְנִיֹתָם אֲשֶׁר־אַתָּה מְרַאֶה בְּהָרִ:

*Observe and make them according to the models that you are being shown on the mountain.*

If you are using standard Israeli Sephardic pronunciation, you must have enough knowledge to determine whether the kamats in מְרַאֶה is a *kamats gadol*, pronounced “a,” or a *kamats katan*, pronounced “o.” ’at-TA mar-’E (with *kamats gadol*) means “you are showing,” whereas ’at-TA mor-’E (with *kamats katan*) means “you are being shown.” In the first case, Moses is doing the showing; in the second case (the correct reading) God is doing the showing. Clearly this constitutes a difference in meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Here is another example of how a seemingly minor error can radically alter the sense of the reading. Compare the following two phrases:

וַיָּשְׁבוּ אֲתָנּוּ דְבָרִי *Let them bring us back a report* (Deut. 1:22)

וַיָּשְׁבוּ אֲתָנּוּ דְבָרִי *And they brought us back a report* (Deut. 1:25)

The word וַיָּשְׁבוּ when pronounced וַיָּשְׁבוּ [ve-yaSHI-vu] means “they will bring back”; when pronounced וַיָּשְׁבוּ [vay-ya-SHI-vu] means “they brought back.” Since this error changes the meaning of the text, it is considered a “major error.”

### Misreading the *Mappik*

Another form of annotation to the consonantal text is the *mappik* dot in the letter ה at the end of a word, indicating an aspirated pronunciation. For example, the word אִשָּׁה (’ish-SHA) means “woman.” But אִשָּׁהּ (’i-SHAH—with the final ה aspirated) means “her husband.” The sense of the phrase וְאִשָּׁהּ גְּרוּשָׁה מֵאִשָּׁה (Lev. 21:7—“a woman divorced from her husband”) becomes radically altered (“a woman divorced from a woman”) if one does not make the necessary distinction between the first and last words. Here again, this would be considered a “major error.”

### An Error in the *Te’amim*

What if the *ba'al kerī'ah* makes a mistake not in a consonant, nor a vowel, but in the

melody of the *keri'ah*? The *Shulhan Arukh* at first states that a mistake in the melody is considered a minor error.<sup>10</sup> But the *Mishnah Berurah*, quoting a secondary source, qualifies this rule. “דה"ה בנגינת הטעמים כשהענין משתנה ע"ז.” “It’s the same rule [as for an error in the vowels]: an error in the melody [is considered to be major] if it causes a change in the meaning.”<sup>11</sup>

### An Error in the Syllabic Stress

How could a musical mistake cause a change in the meaning of the text? Incorrect inflection of syllabic stress can cause a major change in the word’s meaning. In Deut. 8:10 we read:

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ:

*You shall eat until you are satisfied, and you shall bless the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.*

Now, what if you read “ve-’a-KHAL-ta” instead of “ve-a-khal-TA?” Would it change the meaning of the word? “ve-’a-KHAL-ta” means “and you ate.” “ve-’a-khal-TA” means “you shall eat.” The *vav* at the beginning of the word is conversive (וּוּ הַהִפּוּךְ—*vav ha-hippukh*); it changes the stress of the word from *millera’* to *mille’el* and changes the tense from perfect to imperfect, in this case from past to future. The correct pronunciation is indicated by the *ta’am* placed underneath the last letter of the word “ve-’a-khal-TA.”

### An Error in the Melody

Not only can the wrong syllabic stress change the meaning of a word. A mistake in the choice of melody can also change the meaning of a sentence or phrase.

Every word in Scripture is marked with a *ta’am*, and every *ta’am* is either conjunctive or disjunctive. A conjunctive *ta’am* indicates that the word is joined in meaning to the word that immediately follows; the two words must be connected with no pause between them. A disjunctive *ta’am* indicates a syntactic separation, a pause analogous to that which would be indicated by a period or a comma or a semicolon in many modern writing systems.

The *Mishnah Berurah* that we cited above adds “דה"ה בנגינת הטעמים כשהענין משתנה ע"י זה. כגון שקרא משרת במקום מפסיק מחזירין אותו. “If the reader substituted a conjunctive for a disjunctive, it is a serious error that must be corrected.”<sup>12</sup> For example, the phrase אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֲלֶף could mean 24,000, or it could mean 20,004, depending on how the words are cantillated. If the word אַרְבָּעָה is chanted with a disjunctive melody אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֲלֶף, then the meaning is 20,004. But if the word אַרְבָּעָה is chanted with a

conjunctive melody (as it is in Num. 25:9), then the meaning is 24,000.

וַיְהִי הַמָּתִים בַּמִּגַּפָּה אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אֲלָף:

*Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.*

## **A Defect in the Scroll**

If, in the course of public cantillation, you discover a defect in the Torah scroll, you should finish the verse you are reading and then stop to allow a competent halakhic authority to inspect the scroll.

Defects include: (1) a letter whose form has been changed as a result of damage to the ink, (2) two letters that are written too closely together, (3) a word that was misspelled by the scribe.<sup>13</sup> It may be necessary to remove the defective Torah and bring out a second scroll. Generally, the *ba'al keriah* will begin reading the new scroll at the beginning of the verse in which the error was found.<sup>14</sup> Because of the complexity of the halakhic issues, it is best to consult an expert authority.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Responsibility of the *Gabbai***

The *gabbai* needs to know when to apply these laws, when to correct the *ba'al keriah* and when not to correct. There are rabbinic authorities who argue that any public correction causes shame and embarrassment to the *ba'al keriah* and therefore is forbidden. On the other hand, some authorities argue that any error, no matter how trivial, must be corrected on the spot.<sup>16</sup> The authorities that we cited above provide more of a normative position, that certain errors are severe and must be corrected on the spot, whereas others are trivial and need not be corrected. Each congregation, under the guidance of its rabbi and/or ritual committee, should determine which policy they feel comfortable with.

Any person who serves as a *gabbai* must be aware of the halakhic considerations as well as the congregation's policy. The *gabbai* must be well versed in the meaning of the biblical text, and its proper pronunciation and cantillation. The *gabbai* must have excellent reflexes to be able to determine if the reader has made a serious error, and then correct the reader on the spot. The *gabbai* should correct the reader in a soft voice, to minimize embarrassment. The *gabbai* also functions in a supportive role, assisting the *ba'al keriah* in cases of a lapse of memory. In any event, all authorities agree that congregants should not shout out corrections.

## Notes

1. The terms *ba'al kerī'ah* and *gabbai* are being used here to refer to all genders.
2. *Sha'arey Efrayim, sha'ar 3*, section 1.
3. *Sha'arey Efrayim, sha'ar 3*, section 3.
4. *Sha'arey Efrayim, sha'ar 3*, section 14.
5. If you are corrected immediately, you need not repeat the entire verse, even if the verse contains the Tetragrammaton; you need only repeat the phrase in which the error was made.
6. *Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim*, §142.
7. *Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Oraḥ Hayyim*, §142:1.
8. *Arukh Ha-Shulhan, Oraḥ Hayyim*, §142
9. See Rashi's commentary to this verse.
10. *Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim*, §142.
11. *Mishnah Berurah, Oraḥ Hayyim*, §142.
12. *Mishnah Berurah Oraḥ Hayyim*, §142:1.
13. An exchange of *male* and *haser* spellings is considered a defect.
14. See *Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Hayyim* §143.
15. Many of the issues are covered in Steiner, *Diney Sefer Torah she-nimtsa bo ta'ut*.
16. For a thorough investigation of the halakhic sources, see Moshe Rosenberg, "Correcting the Ba'al Koreh: Punctilious Performance vs. Public Embarrassment." *Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society*, Fall, 2009, 5-44.

Much of this text is taken from Joshua Jacobson's *Chanting the Hebrew Bible* (second, expanded edition). Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2017.