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The Layning (Torah Reading) Project*

Bernard Horowitz

Dedicated to

The memory of my teacher and mentor, Rabbi Solomon I. Berl, ז"ל

and

Rav Avi, ייבדל לחיים ארוכים, who saw in me what I didn't see.

The gift of layning was given to me by my teacher and mentor Rabbi Solomon I. Berl, ז"ל, then of the Young Israel of Bronx Gardens. When the Young Israel of Bronx Gardens was no longer viable, he became the spiritual leader of the Young Israel of Coop City. He was the founding rabbi in both of these congregations. Rabbi Berl was a master בעל קריאה (Torah Reader) and בעל תפלה (Prayer Leader) and taught generations of students as an instructor in Yeshiva University's Belz Cantorial School. Rabbi Berl died in 2017. He was in his nineties, and until shortly before his death was still regularly layning and davening at the Young Israel of Coop City. This project, to record and make available my layning of all 54 parshiot of the Torah, is dedicated to him. I pray that it is worthy of him.

I believe that layning publicly can be a powerful tool for infusing the text with emotional and dramatic impact, much more so than the same text studied in written form. Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levy long ago wrote of this impact.

"Through oral communication, a person can use a pause to separate his words when he finishes a thought, or he can connect words that that are phrased together. He can speak softly or with emphasis.... He can use other means to indicate astonishment, question, narrative, desire, fear or supplication. In our holy texts are implanted subtle elements that serve to promote the complete understanding of the intent of narrator. This can be accomplished by [chanting, using] the cantillation marks by which the Torah is marked." (Rabbi Yehuda Ha-Levy, *The Kuzari*, quoted in Joshua R. Jacobson, *Chanting the Hebrew Bible*)

I have had the privilege and honor of serving as the בעל קריאה at the Bayit since September 1988, and before that at the Young Israel of Parkchester. On a Shabbat morning at the Bayit in 2001, I spoke about my experience as a בעל קריאה. The talk included my approach to layning and was entitled "Layning is a Passion." The talk spoke of my constant quest for precision, my dedication to clarity and my sense of responsibility to the congregation's obligation to hear - and, I would say, to experience - each and every word of the Torah reading. The talk spoke of my goal of making the words of the Torah come alive, a sentiment beautifully expressed in the quotation from *The Kuzari*.

These remain my goals as a בעל קריאה. After more than sixty years, laying is still a passion.

Listening carefully to my recordings, one may hear certain features that I have brought to my Torah reading. These features have been developed over the years in my quest for accuracy and precision.

☆ The Letter Ayin (ע): I pronounce the ayin gutturally, with the sound made in the back of the throat (pharynx), as is the custom of Arabic-speaking Jews, in order to distinguish between words which would otherwise sound the same. (e.g. ירעו, "they will pasture", with an ayin, and יראו, "they will see", with an aleph)

☆ The שוא (:): vowel: The שוא (sh'va) has two pronunciations. There is the שוא נח (the 'resting' שוא) that is not vocalized and only the sound of its consonant is heard. In the word מנהג (minhag), for example, the שוא under the letter nun is not vocalized. In the word בראשית (b'rayshit), however, the שוא under the letter bet is vocalized. (The letters בר' are not blended as is the case for the letters 'br" in the English word "brain"). This is the שוא נע (the 'moving' שוא). I distinguish between שוא נח and שוא נע. Vocalizing or not vocalizing a שוא allows me to distinguish between words that would otherwise sound the same. (יראו - yir-u, "they will see", with a שוא נח, and יראו - yir'u, "they will fear", with a שוא נע) Some knowledge of Hebrew grammar or a text that prints one שוא darker or larger than the other is required to distinguish between the two types.

☆ דגש (dagesh, a dot within the letter): There are two types: דגש חזק (a 'hard' dagesh) and דגש קל (a 'soft' dagesh). A דגש חזק in a letter lengthens the sound of the letter. A דגש קל in a letter is used to distinguish between the dual sounds of certain letters. There are six such letters: בגדכפת. Some communities still distinguish between the sounds of all six. Ashkenazi tradition distinguishes between the sounds of only some of them (e.g. כּ and ךּ). Again, some knowledge of Hebrew grammar or a text that prints one דגש darker or larger than the other is required to distinguish between the two types.

☆ Consecutive words that end and begin with the same sound: For example, the word בְּכַל ends with the letter ל. The word לְבַבְךָ begins with a ל. In the first paragraph of the שמע, I read the two words בְּכַל לְבַבְךָ with a hairbreadth pause between them so they do not sound like one word.

A similar situation presents itself when two words end and begin with the lips closed, as with וַיִּקְרָא בְּלֵעָם. Here too I pause slightly between the words.

☆ The קמץ (ט) vowel: There are two types of קמץ (kamats): קמץ קטן (a 'short' kamats) and קמץ גדול (a 'long' kamats).

I use Ashkenazic pronunciation, which does not distinguish between the two types, following the pronunciation of the inventors of the vowel signs. I pronounce every קמץ like the vowel in the word "for."

In the Sephardic pronunciation, a distinction is made between קמץ קטן and קמץ גדול. Many Hebrew readers who have adopted Sephardic pronunciation are unaware of this distinction and pronounce every or nearly every קמץ with the sound of the vowel in the word "pot." This is an error. Distinguishing between the two types of קמץ requires some knowledge of Hebrew grammar or a text that prints each type slightly differently.

In the summer of 1988, Rav Avi called me to the Bayit office and asked me to become the regular בעל קריאה. Bobby Hoch, who had been serving in that capacity, was moving out of the neighborhood. I hesitated, unsure whether I wanted to take on the responsibility of the weekly reading again. He said to me, "Bernie, do it. You will thank me for it." How right he was! I am forever grateful to Rav Avi for seeing what I did not understand about myself at the time. This project is also dedicated to Rav Avi. I thank him for the opportunity and the privilege of serving as בעל קריאה these 30 years. After all, Layning is (still) My Passion.

- * I want to express my gratitude to Dr. Barry Kanner who conceived of this project and kept encouraging me to undertake the project,
- * And to Avi Bloom who gave me the vital technical advice and education that allowed me to record the parshiot.
- * And to Richard Langer, our Executive Director, and Avi, who have worked with their usual dedication to get the project up and running on the HIR website.
- * And to Rav Steven who is a daily source of inspiration and whose advice I treasure.
- * And, finally, to my parents Irene and Julius Horowitz, my biggest fans and supporters, for their constant encouragement and the role-model lives they lived.

Bernie