

Torah service

The torah service is at once the oldest and the newest part of the Shabbat service. It's the oldest, because reading and expounding torah was the original purpose of the communal gathering in the synagogue. But that reading at the time of the second temple as described by the rabbis was only a reading with the brachot. Between the time of the Talmud and about the 12th century, the time of our earliest preserved prayerbooks, a torah service grew up. I will deal with the torah service that precedes the reading.

This service evolved, so it's not surprising that at first look it seems a random collection of many ideas and moods. But I see a logic in all this variety. All the parts enable us to fully participate in Public reading of torah. I think they can help us understand what we want to accomplish in our torah reading.

At the time of the temple, the high priest and the king read torah to the people on important occasions. Now the temple, the site in which Gd dwelt in the midst of Israel, and also the entire society based on Torah have ceased to exist. Now we must read ourselves. Torah has taken the place of the temple as the focus of our service to Gd. Since about 400 CE synagogues have placed permanent arks on the wall toward Jerusalem, so we face torah and the temple at the same time. This reality makes it all the more vital that we together as a community, and also each of us individually prepare to read, understand and observe torah and its mitzvot.

We begin our preparation with statements about Gd rather than about torah. I think this is because we must first be convinced that Gd rules us, orders our lives. So we have statements drawn from tanakh: Malchutecha malchut col olamim, ememshaltecha bcol dor vador. One is a newer invention: Adonai melech, adonai malach, adonai yimlock l'olam vaed. Gd reigns; but not as a ruler who requires impossible things. Adonai oz l'amo yeten; adonai yvarech et amo b'shalom." We've been reminded—Gd is to be obeyed.

Now just for a moment we look back. Remembering our earlier relation to Gd, some baal t'fillah somewhere inserted a petition that some part of it be restored, that Gd favor Zion with goodness, and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. It is a humble prayer; we're not even asking to return to Zion. Instead we're aiming for a firm conviction that "in you alone we put our trust." That rather than a yearning for the temple, must take us through the torah reading.

Now we open the ark, the torah confronts us. Now we speak about torah as a representative of Gd. With Moses we proclaim that when the ark went forward, those that hated Gd were vanquished as we advanced toward the promised land. We then declare with Isaiah that Torah shall make another powerful, triumphant progress—from Zion and into the whole world. It's a little history of torah's survival from the desert to Zion to us. And in fact, Torah traveled with us through the centuries, and it has also traveled though only partially to other peoples throughout the world.

We end this phase thanks: Baruch shenatan torah le'amo Israel bi'kdushato.

Gd is our ruler; torah represents Gd. Now we had better adjust our consciousness to deal with this. On ordinary days, aware of our sins and mistakes, we invoke Gd's attribute of mercy. On Shabbat we need the beautiful medication B'rikh Sh'meih.

It comes from the Zohar, and it was adopted as a part of this service perhaps for the first time in the 14th century, perhaps the newest piece in our beautiful mosaic. It is both private and

communal, Privately we pray for Gd's continued love of Israel (the love that gives us Torah) and for our own aspiration to be counted among the righteous "Ve Lhevei ana pkeedah bego tsadikayah." Then aloud we pledge allegiance to Gd and Torah as inseparable: Y'hay raava kadamach dteeftach libi b'oraita. Open our hearts to your light— torah. This is the source of goodness, life and peace. To me, the most daring theme of the prayer is "be ana racheitz" We rely on Gd alone? Not on mortals, not on angels like "luck"? Which of us can say truly that we do that? But we remind ourselves to aspire to it.

Now we're ready to have the torah come out of the ark. Rabbis have taught that reading the Torah is akin to standing at Mt Sinai and receiving the Torah. So the hazzan, posing as Moses perhaps, leads us in the Shma, and Echod eloheinu. This seems to me a kind of boil-down of the first commandment. It wouldn't do for the hazan to state, "I am the lord your Gd". As the torah comes out among us we also imitate the people who heard King David promise to build the temple, a sanctuary for Gd to dwell among the people Israel. When the torah is among us, we are at Sinai, we are in the temple.

The torah is carried through the congregation. Is it a king to whom we pay homage? A possession that comes to each of us? A friend we greet with a kiss?

It's also an authority we recognize and authenticate.

Anthropologists tell us about authentication ceremonies, in which members of a group are reassured that important ritual items, including documents, are the real ones. In Catholic services, an acolyte gives the priest the Bible, which he then reads. The priest and acolyte affirm to the congregation that this is really the word of Gd.

Lay people star In our authentication ceremony. Lay people take the torah from the ark and carry it out among all the laity; then later they return it to the ark. They serve as a guard of honor and as guarantors: No substitutions will be made! Remember that religious wars raged in Europe for more than 30 years over in part alternate translations of the Bible.

I was surprised to learn that this is an ancient pattern. At the time of the Second Temple the "president of the congregation" presented the scroll to the priest to read. Who knew there were presidents of congregations then?

Similarly, as the torah is read, two "officials" of the congregation supervise. From second Temple times there were two: one to make sure the reading was correct, and one to give a simultaneous translation. Now our authoritative print texts do that, and the second person also corrects the reading.

As a final authentication, before or after the reading, a lay person holds high the open scroll so everyone can see—this is the very same Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel, from the mouth of Gd by the hand of Moses.

Arnold Rosenberg believes that the whole torah service is overemphasized, almost superstitious—grounded in part on awe of the unique physical nature of the scroll.

But I think that the service includes so many different ideas and moods because we need them as we read torah. We need to know that Gd reigns, Gd has demands to make on us; torah is an authentic statement of those demands. And we want to meet those demands. I struggle with the facts: Can a work written by man really be from the mouth of Gd? So I am grateful for the way the

torah service pulls me out of a purely factual belief and into aspiration. There is a moral something greater than we, greater than we can understand. Imperfectly and with great effort we can order our lives in harmony with this greatness. When we are fully prepared to do so, we find it is a joy.