



Final version

prepared by Rabbi Guy Austrian (rabbi@ftjc.org) for the Fort Tryon Jewish Center, Ritual Committee

March 2017 / Nisan 5777

A Torah Service liturgy for honorees of all genders¹

The Fort Tryon Jewish Center, founded in 1938, is an independent, traditional-egalitarian congregation based in the Washington Heights and Inwood neighborhoods of northern Manhattan. We have several transgender members, and we frequently welcome transgender guests.

The term “transgender” refers to people whose experience and understanding of their gender identity does not correspond to the gender which they were assigned at birth. Some transgender people transition from female to male, or from male to female, and are referred to with the pronouns corresponding to their gender identity (*he/him/his* or *she/her/hers*). However, other transgender people do not identify as either male or female (sometimes also called “gender non-conforming” (GNC)). Many in this latter category affirm that they are most accurately referred to in English by gender-neutral pronouns. To date, the neuter pronoun usage gaining widest acceptance is *they/them/their*—in which what has typically been considered a plural pronoun now refers to a single person.

We at FTJC strive to be a welcoming community, and we offer honors in the Torah Service (such as an *aliyah* to the Torah or *habgahah* and *gelilah*) to a wide range of our members as well as first-time guests, including of course transgender members and guests. We affirm that all people deserve the respect of being referred to by the names and pronouns by which they identify—how much the more so when they are being honored in public in sacred space!

However, our standard egalitarian Torah Service liturgy in Hebrew can only accommodate male or female honorees. Hebrew is a gendered language. While it is true that some grammatical forms which appear to be masculine-plural forms may sometimes be neuter-plural (e.g., *b’nei yisrael*, *yisraelim*), there is no comparable neuter pronoun to the English *they/them/their* when referring to an individual.

Further, *gabbayim* are not able to visually assess honorees’ gender identities in order to decide which grammatical forms to use. We do also strive to be a kind and patient community, in which people still learning about the range of gender identities are able to make mistakes and be gently corrected. Even so, it seems wise to avoid such situations precisely when efficiency and inclusivity should converge smoothly, as in the Torah Service.

¹ We are deeply indebted to many whose work precedes ours. Variations on this liturgy have already been developed at congregations such as Congregation Beit Simchat Torah (CBST) in New York, and Congregation Sha’ar Zahav in San Francisco and in their important *siddurim*; by organizations such as Keshet and TransTorah; and by many individual transgender Jews who have insisted upon different ways of naming themselves and being named. We have drawn on many of these models to meet the needs of our particular community. We hope that our contribution is to fill out the range of liturgical usages required for a very traditional Torah service including *kohanim* and individual *mishebeirach* prayers.

We are also indebted and grateful to those who have given invaluable insight, feedback, and encouragement on matters liturgical, grammatical, and ritual. We thank in particular Rabbi Miles Cohen, and encouragement on matters liturgical, grammatical, and ritual. We thank in particular Rabbi Miles Cohen, as well as Rabbi Ari Lev Fornari, Dr. Ruth Langer, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, Rabbi Dalia Marx, and Rabbi Joel Roth.

Members of FTJC who have worked on this project include Ritual Committee co-chairs Seth Guthartz and Jack Murad, as well as Rabbi Joel Alter, Rabbi Noah Bickart, Rabbi Matthew Goldstone, Karen Greene, Lois Griff, Rabbi Elie Kaunfer, Mary Brett Koplen, Jenny Koshner, and Laynie Soloman.

This treatment does not yet address special variations for lifecycle occasions: *b’nei mitzvah*, *aufrufs*, etc. We hope with God’s help to work on lifecycle variations in the future, and we welcome input and suggestions.



Therefore, the Ritual Committee of FTJC has set out to revise our Torah Service liturgy to create three variations—masculine, feminine, and neutral. The challenge is not only to work around the gendered nature of the Hebrew language. Reflecting our community’s traditional-egalitarian ethos, a revised Torah Service liturgy should also be continuous where possible with old forms and the values embedded in those forms. It should flow seamlessly and, in the words of Rachel Adler, “feel like it has always been done this way.” Finally, our aim was not to eliminate and flatten gender differences, but to create a manageable set of options that lifts up the diversity of human gender identities.²

Below we present the gendered sections of the traditional-egalitarian Torah Service liturgy as conducted at FTJC in recent years, and present ways to revise it. In some aspects, we create a third option; in other aspects, we standardize the liturgy for honorees of all genders.

1. Calling honorees for an aliyah to the Torah:

יְעֹמֵד בֶּן _____ , שְׁלִישִׁי	Let _____ son of _____ stand (<i>ya’amod</i>), the third [person to be called] (<i>shelishi</i>).
תְּעֹמֵד בַּת _____ , שְׁלִישִׁית	Let _____ daughter of _____ stand (<i>ta’amod</i>), the third [person to be called] (<i>shelishit</i>).

The standard call to an aliyah has three gendered elements: (a) the verb inviting the honoree to stand, (b) the description of the honoree’s relationship to parents, and (c) the honoree’s place in the sequence.

For (a), the verb, we will add a third, neutral option: “**na la’amod**” / “**נָא לְעֹמֵד**” a formal usage in modern Hebrew that means “please stand.” While perhaps a bit awkward idiomatically, “na la’amod” is grammatically correct, appropriately brief, adds just one syllable, and sounds almost indistinguishable from the familiar gendered “ya’amod” and “ta’amod.”³

For (b), the bridge from the honoree’s name to the parents’ names, many transgender Jews use “**mibeit**” / “**מִבֵּית**” (from the house of) or “**lebeit**” / “**לְבֵית**” (of the house of) in lieu of “ben” or “bat.” These gender-neutral usages have precedent as names in ketubot (marriage contracts) where they can introduce the vernacular last name of the bride’s or groom’s family.⁴

The gabbai must refrain from automatically filling in “ben” or “bat” when listening to and repeating the honoree’s Hebrew/Jewish name. Rather, the gabbai simply waits until the honoree gives the appropriate phrase. (In practice: the honoree gives their personal name, which the gabbai repeats, then says “ben/bat/mibeit [parents’ names],” which the gabbai repeats.)

² Our expectation is that gabbayim can learn the gender identities of regulars, as they have learned who is the child of a *kohen* or *levi*, and that GNC and other regulars can alert their guests to these options. If necessary, a gabbai would discreetly ask an honoree how they would like to be called up, but the aim is to minimize how often that happens.

³ An alternative proposal used in some other communities is “ekrah la’amod” (“I call to stand”), but we feel that it shifts the attention from the honoree to the gabbai who is speaking.

⁴ Rabbi Dalia Marx has suggested that לְבֵית may be more common and idiomatic in rabbinic Hebrew. In our community, מִבֵּית seems to be the prevailing choice among transgender/GNC Jews. We expect that this custom will take its own organic path. In any case, the choice is up to the individual honoree.



For (c), the place in the sequence, we will shift *for all honorees* to a custom already used by some congregations, which is to refer not to the honoree (in Hebrew, the “oleh” or “olah”) but *to the aliyah itself*. Since “aliyah” is always a feminine noun, the formulation is always feminine; for example, “**la’aliyah hashelishit**” (“for the third aliyah”), and so on.⁵

Levi: When calling someone descended from the tribe of **Levi**, we have previously recognized honorees as “levi” or “bat levi.” In practice, this means that they give the name of their father last, so that the call concludes with the ringing out of “Levi!” regardless of the honoree’s gender. This practice can continue even if the honoree is GNC and calls themselves “mibeit so-and-so ha-Levi.”⁶

Acharon: When adding an extra (eighth) aliyah, the traditional liturgy calls the honoree as “acharon” or “acharonah.” The revised liturgy will be “**la’aliyah ha’acharonah**” (“for the last aliyah”).

Maftir: When calling someone for a maftir aliyah, the traditional liturgy again refers to the honoree, following their Hebrew name, as “maftir” or “maftirah” (the one who will read the Haftarah).⁷ The revised liturgy would call all such honorees “**likriyat hahaftarah**” (“for the reading of the Haftarah”).

Kohen: The traditional liturgy for calling a kohen or bat kohen is a special case. After the gabbai’s introductory liturgy (“*veya’azor veyagen...*”) the gabbai calls up an honoree:

פְּהֵן קָרַב, יַעֲמֹד _____ בֶּן _____ הַפְּהֵן	Kohen, approach (<i>kerav</i>), let _____ son of _____ the kohen stand (<i>ya’amod</i>)
בַּת פְּהֵן קָרַבִּי, תַּעֲמֹד _____ בַּת _____ הַפְּהֵן	Daughter of a kohen, approach (<i>kirvi</i>), let _____ daughter of _____ the kohen stand (<i>ta’amod</i>)

⁵ The Mishnah in Megillah 4:2 lists the number of people who read from (i.e., are called up to) the Torah on a given day or holiday, and not the number of aliyot (though it is effectively the same thing). Changing the reference from the oleh/olah (“shelishi/shelishit”) to the aliyah (“la’aliyah hashelishit”) is a shift in rhetorical emphasis, and may mark an increased deference toward the role itself. Such a shift may already be underway in common English usages such as “the third aliyah begins on chapter 3, verse 3,” or “would you like to do hagbahah?” Perhaps it is, then, appropriate to name both the individual and the role, balancing the two. To us, this shift seems permissible in order to resolve the problem.

⁶ Ironically, many have felt that the classification of *kohen/levi/yisrael* is itself a non-egalitarian custom, with its group distinctions and the patrilineal inheritance of *kohen/levi* status! Nevertheless, in a traditional prayer context like ours, we value these customs. Jews of all genders who are children of a (male) *kohen* may also participate in *duchening* (conveying the priestly blessing) in our congregation.

⁷ In rabbinic literature (e.g., Mishnah Megillah 4:2) this function is referred to as להפטיר בנביא (literally, “to release [from the Torah reading] with a reading from a Prophetic book,” or more directly, “to read the haftarah”). As Rabbi Miles Cohen explains: “The maftir’s job is to read from Nevi’im (Prophets). But the one who is called is not allowed to do so without first paying respects to the Torah. To put Nevi’im and Torah on the same footing would not give due honor to the Torah. So most Shabbatot, we even invent a token aliyah, reading material that has already been read, just so the one who is called can first read from the Torah. The blessing before the haftarah is very strangely structured (two in one) to make just this point. Although the one who is called should be reciting a blessing about the haftarah, the blessing raises an irrelevant subject, namely Torah, and by tying the Torah to Moshe (the first prophet, of course), the blessing can claim to stay on topic. All this is for the honor of the Torah” (adapted from e-mail communication).



The call to the honoree is followed by a standard call-and-response (“*baruch shenatan Torah...*” and “*ve’atem hadeveikim...*”)

The custom of opening with “kohen, kerav” or “bat kohen, kirvi” is no mere flourish but alludes to a verse (Lev. 9:7):

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, קִרְבֵּ אֶל-הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וַעֲשֵׂה אֶת-חַטָּאתְךָ וְאֶת-עֹלֹתְךָ, וְכִפֵּר בְּעֵדָךְ, וּבְעֵד הָעָם; וַעֲשֵׂה אֶת-קִרְבַּן הָעָם, וְכִפֵּר בְּעֵדָם, כַּאֲשֶׁר, צִוָּה ה' .	Then Moses said to Aaron: "Approach the altar and sacrifice your sin offering and your burnt offering, making expiation for yourself and for the people; and sacrifice the people's offering and make expiation for them, as the Lord has commanded."
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The allusion to the verse evokes the tradition that the Torah reading table is a stand-in for the altar, and that the kohen coming for an aliyah is a stand-in for Aharon, the original kohen.⁸ Eliminating this introductory call to approach would be the simplest option, but it would entail the loss of this deeper, mythopoetic resonance, of the sort that infuses so much of Jewish liturgy and synagogue customs.

The best option to preserve both the textual allusion and the sound of the traditional form may be to actually cite *the first few words of the verse*, Lev. 9:7, “**vayomer Moshe el Aharon, kerav...**”—ending thus with the familiar call, “kerav!” Since we are quoting directly, there is no need to modify the gendered verb. Citing a verse fits this section well, because another verse citation quickly follows: “*ve’atem hadeveikim...*” (Deut. 4:4).⁹

Gabbayim have typically asked aloud, when necessary, “Is there a kohen or bat kohen present?” The gabbai should instead ask, “**Is there anyone present who is the child of a kohen?**”

2. Mishebeirach for an individual after an aliyah

The FTJC version of the individual mishebeirach is a mix of various traditional texts that has evolved in our congregation.

מִי שִׁבְרָךְ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אַבְרָהָם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב, שָׂרָה רִבְקָה רָחֵל וְלֵאָה, הוּא יְבָרְךָ אֶת _____ בֶּן / בַּת בְּעֵבוּר שְׂעֵלָה/שְׂעֵלָתָה לְכָבוֹד הַמָּקוֹם, לְכָבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה, וְלְכָבוֹד הַשַּׁבָּת, וְאֵת ... _____ וְאֵת כָּל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ/ מִשְׁפַּחְתָּהּ וְאֵת כָּל הַקְּהָל הַקְּדוֹשׁ הַזֶּה. בְּשִׂכְרָךְ זֶה, הַקְּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יִשְׁמְרֵם וְיַצִּילֵם...	May the One who blessed our ancestors, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah, bless _____ son/daughter of _____ because he/she has come up (<i>alah/aletah</i>) for the honor of God, Torah, and Shabbat, as well as _____ and his/her entire family (<i>mishpachto/mishpachtah</i>) and this entire holy congregation. On this merit, may the HBO guard and save them (all)...
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⁸ We are grateful to Rabbi Miles Cohen for alerting us to this allusion.

⁹ We considered the option of calling “*na likrov*” (“please approach”) rather than “*na la’amod*,” but that choice would eliminate the dual call of including both “*kerav*” and “*ya’amod*,” and would also take us farther from the biblical text.



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It presents two gendered forms: the verb for “has come up” (*alah/aletah*), and the possessive “his/her family” (*mishpachto/mishpachtah*). The rest of the text is uniform for all honorees, as it applies the blessing to many people—the honoree, the family, the congregation—and uses neuter-plural forms (*yishmereim, yatzileim, etc.*).

In addition to the gendered “*ba’avur she’alah/she’aletah*,” the neutral version will be: “*ba’avur ha’aliyah*” (“because of this aliyah”).

In addition to the gendered possessive “*mishpachto/mishpachtah*,” the neutral version will be: “*ve’et kol hamishpachah*” (and the whole family). The lack of possessive form here is admittedly awkward but does have some precedent in more colloquial Hebrew, and is preferable to dropping the reference entirely and requiring honorees to list multiple family members by name.

3. Calling someone for *hagbahah* (הַגְּבִיחָה) or *gelilah* (גְּלִילָה)

יַעֲמֵד הַמַּגְבִּיחַ	<i>Ya’amod hamagbiah</i> Let the [male] lifter stand.
תַּעֲמֵד הַמַּגְבִּיחָה	<i>Ta’amod hamagbihah</i> Let the [female] lifter stand.
יַעֲמֵד הַגּוֹלֵל	<i>Ya’amod hagoleil</i> Let the [male] wrapper stand.
תַּעֲמֵד הַגּוֹלֵלָת	<i>Ta’amod hagolelet</i> Let the [female] wrapper stand.

As with the aliyot, to avoid calling a person by their *role* (as lifter or wrapper), we must shift to describing the *action*. Still we would need a reference to the person, and so would call these honorees by their (Hebrew/Jewish) name. Adding the names here would be a shift from FTJC practice, but is common enough in other synagogues.

We will call all honorees for hagbahah/gelilah as follows:

1. a variation by gender: “ya’amod,” “ta’amod,” or “na la’amod,”
2. the honoree’s name, and
3. uniformly, “*lehagbahat hatorah / liglilat hatorah*” (“for the lifting of the Torah / for the wrapping of the Torah”), which are the formal names of these actions.



REVISED VERSIONS

1. Calling a gender non-conforming honoree for an aliyah

three variations by gender for the call to stand; one uniform reference to the aliyah itself

Table with Hebrew and English text for calling a gender non-conforming honoree for an aliyah. Includes phrases like 'Let ___ stand' and '... for the third aliyah'.

Calling a gender non-conforming honoree who is the child of a kohen for the first aliyah

Table with Hebrew and English text for calling a gender non-conforming honoree who is the child of a kohen for the first aliyah. Includes phrases like '... Let us render greatness to God...' and 'Let ___ the kohen stand'.

2. Mishebeirach for a gender non-conforming individual after an aliyah

three variations by gender

Table with Hebrew and English text for Mishebeirach for a gender non-conforming individual after an aliyah. Includes phrases like 'May the One who blessed our ancestors...' and 'On this merit, may the HBO guard and save them (all)...'.

3. Calling someone for hagbahah (הגבהה) or gelilah (גלילה)

three variations by gender for the call to stand; one uniform reference to the action itself

Table with Hebrew and English text for calling someone for hagbahah or gelilah. Includes phrases like 'Let ___ stand' and '... for the lifting of the Torah'.



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Appendix: Full text of mishebeirach for those called up to the Torah at FTJC:

מי שברך אבותינו אברהם יצחק ויעקב, שרה רבקה רחל וְלֵאָה,
הוא יברך את _____

בעבור שְׁעָלָה /

בעבור שְׁעֵלְתָה /

בעבור הַעֲלִיָּה

לכבוד המקום, לכבוד התורה, וְלִכְבוֹד הַשַּׁבָּת / וְלִכְבוֹד הַרְגָּל,

וְאֵת _____

וְאֵת כָּל מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ /

וְאֵת כָּל מִשְׁפַּחְתָּה /

וְאֵת כָּל הַמִּשְׁפָּחָה

וְאֵת כָּל הַקְּהָל הַקְּדוֹשׁ הַזֶּה.

בשכר זה, הקדוש ברוך הוא ישמרם ויציילם

מכל צרה וצווקה ומכל נגע ומחלה,

וישלח ברכה והצלחה בכל מעשה ידיהם / ויזכו לעלות לרגל /

עם כל ישראל אחיהם, ונאמר: אמן.