



B'NAI DAVID-JUDEA

Shabbat Shorts

We've all been there. We're sitting in shul on a Shabbat morning listening to the Torah reading, when suddenly everything goes silent. We look toward the *shulchan*, and see the Torah reader and the gabbai with their faces almost flush with the scroll itself, until they look up with grim expressions. A flaw has been found in the Torah's writing! Perhaps a letter has gotten rubbed out, or two letters appear attached to each other, or perhaps even a misspelling has been discovered! Two basic questions need to be answered to determine what we do next. What kinds of flaws disqualify a Torah scroll, and what kind do not? If the flaw is "fatal", what exactly should be done now? And (a third question :) what if there is no other Torah scroll available? (Think in camp, or at a Shabbaton, or a satellite Mincha minyan...)

While a discussion of the variables and possibilities would exceed the acreage allotted to Shabbat Shorts, we can certainly lay out the basic guiding principles. We'll begin by exploring three of the most common "flaws":

(1) Missing or misplaced letters - The most interesting point here is with regard to the many words that are sometimes written in the Torah with a letter "yud/י" or "vav/ו", and sometimes not. Even though we have a specific tradition as to when these words should include these letters and when not, a mistake in this regard *does not* disqualify the Torah (at least in the sense that a second Torah need not be summoned from the Ark if we are already in the midst of reading). The reason, in the words of Rama, is that "our Torahs are not written with enough precision that we could be sure that the

replacement Torah will be more accurate than the original". Missing or extra letters other than these "yuds" and "vavs" generally *do* disqualify the scroll, as do other misspelling of words.

(2) Faded letters - this happens a lot especially in older Torah scrolls. When a letter is faded to the point at which part of it appears to be missing, the prescribed procedure is to summon a child "who is neither too simple nor too wise" to see how the child would read it. If the child can identify the letter, then another scroll need not be taken out. There's a difference of opinion about the similar case in which the black ink has completely faded away, but the reddish shadow of the ink remains.

(3) Spacing - another occasion when the aforementioned child would be summoned is either when two words seem to be running together, or one word has an unusually large space between two of its letters. If the child reads the two words as separate words, or the one word as one word, then the Torah remains valid for reading. Otherwise it should be replaced by another. (in a similar category, when two letters are attached, the general rule is that being attached length-wise is a more serious problem than being attached across the top or along the bottom)

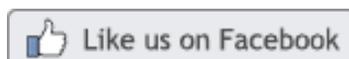
As you're probably thinking, there must be a back-up plan if no child matching this description is immediately available. It seems logical that an adult who is a relative newcomer to Hebrew-reading would similarly qualify. And if this too is not practical, the people staring closely at the scroll have to make their best judgement call which, when they have other Torah scrolls only feet away, is often decided on the side of caution.

More to come!

I love feedback!
ravyosef@bnaidavid.com

B'nai David-Judea 8906 West Pico Blvd. Los Angeles, CA 90035
director@bnaidavid.com

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B'nai David-Judea, 8906 W. Pico Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90035

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