

The Symbolic Representation of the Torah Scrolls

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Introduction

Anthropologists argue that symbolism or symbols “typify or represent or recall something by possession of analogous qualities or by association in fact or thought.”¹ The symbol is directly related, constructed and bound to the culture and people that it represents. Furthermore, “religious symbols are above all sacred symbols, and as such, they embody to the faithful the unquestionable truth of unverifiable statements about the cosmos and man’s place in it. It is this characteristic of self-confirming assertions about reality that gives religious symbols both intellectual and emotional significance to the people who hold them.”² Thus for Judaism, and especially rabbinic Judaism, an examination of the attitude towards Torah scrolls or the Sefer Torah within Jewish culture will show it to be considered as the prime symbol of Judaism.

This essay will examine the symbolic representation of the Sefer Torah in Jewish society and culture, including the theoretical framework chosen to understand this symbol and the rabbinic literature regarding with the “honor” and “sanctity” attributed to the scrolls. Lastly, there will be discussion of the usage of the artifact, the Sefer Torah, in contemporary Jewish life. Differentiation between the actual artifact and the content of the Torah is unclear both in the perception of the uneducated Jew and in the way this is projected in rabbinical texts; of primary interest here is not the content of the scrolls but rather the Sefer Torah as a religious artifact.

If taken in the proper perspective, the Sefer Torah is the Jewish totem. I am not referring to the classic understanding of totem,³ but rather to a pseudo-totem.⁴ In the cultures of primitive tribes the totem⁵

¹ Lessa and Vogt 1979, p.90.

² *ibid.* pp. 1-2.

³ For a detailed description and discussion of totem and totemism, see, for example, Freud 1965, Radcliffe-Brown 1952, Levi-Straus 1963.

⁴ I am basing and adapting my description of totem from Goldenwewiser 1965, pp. 270-278.

⁵ Totems and totemism can be found in almost all primitive tribes, but they function differently and maintain different sets of beliefs and different roles depending upon the culture and geographical location.

is related to an animal or vegetable species, and occasionally (as in the case of the Torah) to an object that is made, produced, or manufactured. In some societies a totem is a deity (though not in Judaism or as manifested through the Sefer Torah) or is incorporated into the religion of a member of that society.⁶ Though it extends into the patriarchal stage, it is essentially associated with the mother-right. Totems are considered the protectors of those who believe in them. In the case of animals and specific plants, one refrains from eating them. There is acknowledgment and respect as well as obligations and mutual rights between the members of the culture and the totem, which usually becomes the crest or symbol of the group.

What is important here is that the totem is the expression the social solidarity of the group's members. Rituals arise as a direct expression regarding the totem and the sacredness attributed to it. Feelings related to the totem are projected onto the daily life of the culture, and give rise to the belief in the efficacy of the sacred rituals related to the totem. The belief in the totemic principle thus contributes both to group solidarity as well as to control by the totem guardians. By inculcating historical traditions, authority and sanctions the group is made stronger. Thus the group's members are able to express their unity and shared life, a life which stems from the past and becomes available for the future. As Goldenweiser (1965, p. 277) argues, "Evidence is not lacking that mystical and social features, once components of totemism, persist in modern society, if in less integrated form." As we will see, the Sefer Torah or the Torah scrolls play a similar role in Jewish culture and society.

The Bible

The focus of this essay is on the symbolic representation of the Sefer Torah, and therefore the collective memory of the Jewish people and their understanding of the Torah scrolls, an understanding not related to historical reality. Therefore, the Bible critic's discussion on the writing of *Deuteronomy* is not relevant to my discussion. At Sinai the Lord gave Moses the Pentateuch in its entirety. This is the tradition

⁶ In the Durkheim approach, totemism qualifies as a tribal religion.

accepted by the majority of believing Jews. *Deuteronomy* refers to the Sefer Torah several times, in *Deuteronomy* 17:18, 28:61, 29:20, and 30:10.⁷ While the different Biblical Rabbinic commentaries disagree as to whether the Sefer Torah described here is the five books of Moses or smaller sections, I would suggest that within the collective memory of the Jew, it is seen no different than the Sefer Torah we have today. The sanctity of the Torah is primarily displayed and established by two passages. *Deuteronomy* 31:9 states “Moses wrote the Torah, and delivered it to the priests the sons of Levi, who bore the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, and to all the elders of Israel.” Moses is instructed by the Lord to write the Torah.⁸ The tradition is that every word that Moses wrote was the word of the Lord. Consequently, the Torah is the word of G-d and the “Book” is a manifestation of His holiness and therefore holy in itself; it was the intimate link with G-d. According to the Rabbinical tradition, the Torah existed prior to the revelation at Sinai. The *Midrash Raba* (Genesis 1:1) informs us that when G-d created the world, He consulted the Torah, which served as His blueprint. Furthermore, G-d spends the first hours of every day studying Torah. Only after that does He administer justice, and feed the world. (TB *Avoda Zara* 3b).

The Torah

This concept is taken one step further in *Deuteronomy* 31:24-26, which states “When Moses had finished writing the words of this Torah in a book (*Sefer*) to the very end, Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the Lord. ‘Take this Sefer Torah and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the Lord your G-d that it may be there for a witness against you.’ ” The Biblical Rabbinic commentaries discuss the actual place the Sefer Torah was placed on the side of or in the ark, but what is

⁷ Examples of additional sources that refer to the Sefer Torah throughout the Bible are: *Joshua* 1:8, 8:31, 8:34, 23:61, *Kings* 2 22:8,3, 10,11, 14:6, 23:2, 21, *Nehemiah* 8:1,2,3, 8:18, 9:3, 13:1. Of special interest to this essay is *Nehemiah* 9:3, which reads “And they stood up in their place, and read in the Sefer Torah of the Lord their G-d...” Standing for the Torah will be discussed below.

⁸ See TB *Sanhedrin* 99a, which writes that Moses was an intermediary and that G-d dictated every word and every dot of the Torah to him.

important is that it was placed with the tablets (or broken tablets) containing the Ten Commandments that was the word of G-d. Placing the Sefer Torah alongside the Ten Commandments meant that its level of sacredness was parallel to that of the Ark of the Covenant and its contents. Thus the Sefer Torah written by Moses, according to the word of G-d and possessing the sacredness of the Decalogue, would retain this holy status in the collective memory of the Jew even after the destruction of the Temple and the loss of the Ark of the Covenant.

The Sacredness of the Sefer Torah

Van der Toorn argues in his essay (1997, pp 229-248) that, since the Israelites did not worship idols and could not use physical entities to represent their deity, they required a substitute image or icon to identify with and symbolically represent sacredness.⁹ The pagans carried idols on their persons, just as the Israelites carried portions of the Torah as represented in phylacteries that contain parchments with Torah passages written upon them. Pagan households (as found among the Babylonians) had figurines to dissuade demons and dangers from entering their homes, while the Israelites placed *mezzuzoth* containing words from the Scripture on their doorposts. As an alternative to the shrine housing the images of the pagan deity, the Cohen or the Israelite priest carried an ark containing a Torah attributed to the pen of Moses.

On page 234, Van Der Toorn reminds his readers that, although silent, those replicas of cult images had their own way of speaking to convey their message. These smaller images not only retained the memory of the real living object but also stimulated the devotion of the believer. Even for those who did not conceive of the Deity as a physical entity, and for whom any visual representation of the Lord was condemned and forbidden, the image of the Sefer Torah (though not of the Deity) was the expression of the divine and the manifestation of the sacred. The Israelites were the people of the Torah and, from a psychological perspective, the Torah replaced the void with the image needed. The Torah thus served a

⁹ See also Hendel 1997, pp. 205-228.

dual purpose as a book of law, history and guidance (considered the blueprint of the Jews) and as an object that was sacred unto itself.

Van Der Toorn (pp. 243-234) also suggests interesting analogies between religions believing in images and the Sefer Torah. First of all, in the religion of images, as founded by the Babylonians, the followers took an oath by touching their idols. In Judaism, people make their oath by touching the Holy Book. “The physical contact with the sacred object exposes the juror to divine punishment may He not speak the truth.” (p. 243) Second, idol worshipping societies would go into battle accompanied by their divine statues. The idol was carried at the head of the military convoy as a symbol that the deity was leading armies into battle and thus protecting them. It was the Ark of the Covenant and the Torah that accompanied the Israelites to battle. The Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 2:4) stated that the king, who also served as the military chief, carried with him a copy of the Torah, serving not only as a source of information but also as a symbol of G-d’s presence. Finally, when the Sefer Torah was damaged or could no longer be used, it was buried, reminiscent of the behavior of the idol worshippers who buried their irreparably broken cult statues.

Cross-cultural use of common objects found in nature and similar behavior is a frequently occurring phenomenon. As long as the behavior did not negate Jewish law, there was no reason why it could not be reconfigured and adapted to Judaism. Where the human psyche required certain types of reinforcement, such as a physical object with which to identify, the use of an artifact such as the Sefer Torah was not surprising.

*The Kings of Israel*¹⁰

The Kings’ relationship with the Torah scrolls contributed to the Jewish reverence for these scrolls. The Bible, in *Deuteronomy* 31:19, states “Now therefore write this Song... .” BT *Sanhedrin* 21b interprets this passage to mean that the King, in addition to the general obligation for a Jew to write a Sefer Torah, is required to write an additional Torah scroll to carry with him at all times. The Talmud cites as a proof the

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of Sefer Torah relating to kings and leaders, see Zolden Yehudah 2002.

passage in *Deuteronomy* 17:18-19: “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah in a book which is before the priests and the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life....” Although the King had a Sefer Torah in the Temple, he carried this additional scroll wherever he went, even when he did not need to read from it.

Additional elaborate ceremonies were bound up with the kings of Israel. At the end of the seventh year, when the king was obligated to publicly read from the Torah, he used the scroll housed in the Temple. A similar ceremony was performed in the Jerusalem Temple on Yom Kippur. These ceremonies served as an additional means of enhancing the sacredness and reverence of the Sefer Torah in the eyes of unlearned Israelites.¹¹ The Mishnah (*Sotah* 7:8) describes the elaborate ritual: “The pericope of the king, how so? At the end of the first festival day of the Festival [of Succoth], on the eighth year, [that is at the end of the seventh year], they make him a platform of wood, set in a courtyard. And he sits on it. As it is said: ‘At the end of every seven years at the set time’ (*Dt.* 31:10), the minister of the assembly takes the Sefer Torah and hands it to the head of the assembly, and the head of the assembly hands it to the prefect, and the prefect hands it to the high priest and the high priest hands it to the king, and the king stands and receives it.” The high status of those receiving the Torah and the physical surroundings prepared for this special occasion contributed to and initiated the reaction and response of the observers towards the Torah.

A similar ceremony is found on Yom Kippur in the Jerusalem Temple (in the women’s court). The Mishnah *Yomah* 7:1 writes: “The beadle of the community takes the scroll of the Torah and gives it to the head of the community, and the head of the community gives it to the prefect [of the priests], and the prefect gives it to the high priest. The high priest rises....” Although the Torah scrolls were brought to the dignity rather than having the person come to the Torah as required by law, the Talmud (*Yerushalmi Yoma* 7:1 and *Sotah* 7:6) informs its readers that, because these luminaries referred to in the Mishnah referred to were of great stature, the Torah is therefore presented to them. Although the Ark of the Covenant and the tablets had not yet been lost, the Sefer Torah continued to grow in terms of its importance and sacredness in the eyes of the Jew.

¹¹ Knowledge of the Torah and the oral law was primarily in the hands of the priests and the selected few.

Before examining the rabbinic texts, it is important to clarify one of the agendas of the early rabbis and the redactors of the Mishnah (the first known rabbinic document redacted in approximately 2 CE). As I have shown in earlier publications (Fishbane 2007), the redactors of the Mishnah based their work on a utopian Temple society. Whether it stemmed from their longing to return to this world or whether they felt that they required such reliance on the Temple to receive their authority is not the issue here. With the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the Ark of the Covenant was lost and all that remained was the Sefer Torah. Although the scrolls' own status as the representative of G-d's word had been established, they now fulfilled a second role as the replacement of the Ark and its contents containing the Decalogue. This enhanced the sacred status of the Sefer Torah, seen as the alternative to for the tablets.

The Mishnah in *Avot* 4:6 sets the stage for the sacredness of the Sefer Torah with a short statement, "Whoever honors the Torah himself is honored by people. And whoever disgraces the Torah himself is disgraced by people."

An additional Mishnah *Megillah* 3:1 places the Sefer Torah at the uppermost level of sacredness. All other holy objects are secondary to the Torah. The Mishnah states: "Townfolk who sell a street of a town, buy with its proceeds a synagogue. [If they sell] a synagogue they buy an ark. [If they sell] an ark they buy wrappings. [If they sell] wrappings, they buy scrolls [of the prophets or writings]. But if they sell a Torah scroll, they should not buy scrolls." BT *Megillah* 27a appends the Mishnah by permitting the Torah to be sold if it is for the purpose of Torah study and of marriage. The Talmud states that selling the Torah scrolls to study Torah is justified, [because] it will bring one to the performance of *mitzvot* (fulfillment of Jewish law and conduct). Taking a wife is legitimized by offering support from the passage in *Isaiah* 45:18: "He did not create the world to be a void; He formed it to be inhabited." The Talmud is thus suggesting that this mitzvah supersedes the sanctity of the Torah, for it will also assist one in studying Torah without distraction. The Babylonian Talmud follows its agenda which emphasizes the study of Torah and the oral

¹² For a brief description of the rabbinic sources mentioned throughout this essay see appendix 1.

law above all. The Talmud, realizing that it must retain the sacredness of the Sefer Torah and therefore the severity of the prohibition against selling the a Torah, interjects a *Baraita*¹³ stating that a man is forbidden to sell the Torah scroll even if he lacks food to eat. If he does sell the scrolls he will never see a blessing from the monies acquired from the sale. The sacredness of the Sefer Torah vs. that of the Torah scholar is explicitly stated in BT *Kiddushin* 33b “They asked what is the law with regard to standing before a Torah scroll? R. Chilkiyah, R. Simon and R. Elazar said that the answer to the question may be deduced from the following *kal vachomer* argument. Since one rises before those who study the Torah, how much more so should one rise before the Torah itself.”¹⁴ Thus, whether it be the study of Torah or the Torah scholar, the holiness and honor attributed to the Torah scrolls supersedes all.

The status of the Sefer Torah and its sacredness resulted in different rituals, customs and laws to support and enhance this reverence. These rituals and laws maintained this reverence towards the Sefer Torah throughout Jewish history. As Bell (1997, p. 21) correctly points out, ritual imposes an order, accounts for the origin and nature of that order as the ritual is enacted, and shapes the people’s desire to experience that order in the world around them. Furthermore, Bell writes (p. 29) that ritual activities regulate the community and enhance the well-being of the individual actor. The ritual surrounding the Torah scrolls served to accomplish these results. Throughout the many volumes, both the Babylonian and Palestinian (Jerusalem) Talmud discuss how a person is obligated to honor the Torah, and what ritual, customs and laws are related to its exaltation.

The majority of these rituals and laws are accumulated in two minor tractates— Tractates *Sefer Torah* and *Sofrim* (Scribes)—that were redacted at the end of the Talmudic period.¹⁵ The preponderance of Tractate *Sefer Torah* is devoted to the preparation and writing of the Torah. This includes the type of kosher animal to be chosen, how to prepare the parchment used to write the scrolls, the writing materials, color of the ink and what names are holy and therefore may not be erased. Also included is how to write

¹³ These are Taanic statements not included in the Mishnah but often quoted in the Talmud.

¹⁴ Although the TB *Makot* argues the opposite, giving the Torah scholar precedence, the Talmud commentaries explained that Talmud is saying that, were it not for the Torah scholars, the Sefer Torah would remain in the corner, thus not impinging on the Torah’s higher status. See Rabbi Nisin’s commentary on TB *Kiddushin* 33b.

¹⁵ See Higger 1930 pp. 10-16.

the Torah, for example, the spaces that must be left between letters, words, columns and books in the scroll. It also deals with the number of columns in a sheet, the width and length of columns and scrolls, the size of the upper and lower margins, blank spaces at the beginning and end of scrolls and the disposal of worn-out sheets. This and much additional specific detailed information concerning the preparation of the Sefer Torah is encompassed in this Tractate.

Tractate *Sofrim* dedicates the first 14 of its 21 chapters to Sefer Torah related issues. The first nine chapters deal with the correct performance of the scribes, their professional and religious duties and guidance for choosing the proper materials for the performance of their duties. Chapters nine through fourteen are concerned with the public reading of the Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa. Chapter fourteen also discusses the degrees of sanctity of the Torah, the issue with which this essay is concerned. The redactors of Tractate *Sofrim* were familiar with Tractate *Sefer Torah* and thus included much of its material. These detailed instructions had little to do with the layman, his participation or even contact with the Torah scroll. It did succeed in instilling a sense of veneration and reverence for the Torah scrolls. In the layman's mind, the Torah (as stated above) was the exact Torah, prepared in the same way as given at Sinai and thus the direct representation of the word of G-d. Additional rituals dealing with the Scrolls of the Law are found in Chapter 14:14, where the redactors teach us how one should display the Torah to the congregants. After the Torah is removed from the Ark, "The scroll of the Torah is immediately unrolled a space of three columns and elevated to show the face of the script to the people standing on the right and on the left. Then it is turned round towards the front and towards the rear; for it is the precept for all men and women to see the script, to bend their knees and exclaim, 'And this is the Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel' (*Deut.* 4:44) 'The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul' (*Ps.* 19:8). The *maftir* then hands it over to the superintendent of the synagogue services who returns it to the first (the head) of those who are to be called to the reading because it is not an honor for the Torah to be left alone. Similarly it is not proper for the cantor to stand alone before the reading desk; so [two persons] should stand with him, one on his right and the other on his left, [the number] corresponding to that of the

patriarchs. The pure-minded men of Jerusalem acted in this manner: When the Torah scroll was taken out of the ark and when it returned they followed it as a mark of respect.”¹⁶

The Reading of the Torah

The mystical and symbolic influence of the Torah on the Jew occurred when he actually came in contact with the scrolls. The most frequent instance was on Mondays, Thursdays and the Sabbath when the Sefer Torah was removed from its Holy Ark (*Aron Hakodesh*) to be publicly read.¹⁷ The awe and the reverence that accompanies the ceremony of the removal of the Sefer Torah from the Holy Ark has no parallel in either the liturgy or Judaism. In the minds of the Jews, the only section of the liturgy that attracted them was the power of the open Holy Ark and the Torah scrolls. This opportunity presented them with direct contact with the glory of G-d. The *Magen Avraham (Orakh Hayim (O.H.) 124 sub paragraph 2)* quotes the *Maharil*, who writes in his laws of reading the Sefer Torah (page 449), that it is a mitzvah for those that are standing and or praying in the courtyard or at the entrance of the synagogue to come in to witness the removal of the Torah from the Holy Ark. He attributes the reason to the rabbinical concept “the King is honored with masses.” In other words the greater the number participating in the ritual, the greater the respect offered. Rabbi Hayim Palgi (1961, pg. 19 paragraph 1) reports that the some of the Jews in his community in Izmir, Turkey would attend the synagogue service only at the time of the ceremony to remove the Torah scroll from the ark. He reprimanded the onlookers for not participating in the prayer service and instructed the synagogue officials to seat them. As we described above, Tractate *Sofrim* relates individual segments of this ritual.

a. *Opening of the Holy Ark*

¹⁶ Translations of the Minor Tractates are from the Soncino Press edition.

¹⁷ The congregation also came in contact with the Torah during the holiday of Simchat Torah (see Yaari 1998 who describes the holiday in detail) and during the dedication of a new Sefer Torah (see Zinner 1998 who presents the laws and rituals attributed to this ceremony).

In certain congregations the honor of opening the Holy Ark and carrying the scrolls is considered so extraordinary and the demand is so great that the privilege is auctioned off.¹⁸ Rabbi Hayim Palgi (1961, pp. 13-14) discusses whether a minor (a boy of less than thirteen years of age) may participate in this ritual. Although the custom is frowned upon by various rabbinical authorities, he attempts to justify permitting a minor to carry the scrolls. Rabbi Palgi cautions his readers that there must be an adult with the child at all times to guarantee that the Torah scrolls do not fall, a situation that would generate many halakhic problems for the congregation.

The *Aron Hakodesh* where the Torah scrolls are housed is draped with a curtain, in most instances an embroidered curtain decorated with Jewish symbols. The most common shows two tablets representing the Decalogue. This symbolism manifests the direct relationship between the scrolls and the hand of G-d represented in the Ten Commandments, thus creating the status for the Torah as the substitute for the Decalogue.

b. *Brich Shmei*

The *Zohar*¹⁹ (*Exodus*, Portion Vayakhel) writes that when the Holy ark is opened and the Torah scrolls are removed from the Holy ark, the Gates of Mercy are opened in Heaven. At this time, G-d's love is awakened. The *Zohar* then writes that one should recite the Aramaic prayer *Brich Shmei*, a prayer of request to G-d. This prayer was first introduced in Italy in 1540 as an individual's prayer rather than one to be recited by the entire congregation. Fifty-nine years later, it was adapted and inserted into the prayer service.²⁰ Hamburger (1995, pp. 158–186) presents a comprehensive survey of the rabbinic approach to reciting this prayer, especially in the Ashkenazi communities. He reports that in most of these communities *Brich Shmei* was not recited. The main reason for not including it in the liturgy was that it was not part of the tradition of the early rabbis, and consequently does not appear in their prayer books. Even when *Bbrich Shmei* came to be included in the liturgy, specific issues still arose that caused rabbinical skepticism. For

¹⁸ Meller 2009 p. 19, ff 2 and 3 discusses the different sources that are concerned with auctioning the opening of the Holy Ark.

¹⁹ A mystical (kabbalah) work attributed to the Tanna Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

²⁰ See Jacobson 1968, p.213, Landau 1958, pp. 362-363.

example, the rabbis preferred to distance the lay Jew from mystical teachings. Furthermore, there were many questions as to both the trustworthiness and credibility of the *Zohar*. Many rabbis felt that halakhic rulings could not be derived from the *Zohar*. Typical of this view was Rabbi Yichezkel Landau (1713-1793) in his work of responsas *Noda B'Yehudah*, who explicitly states that “we do not adjudicate from the *Zohar*.”²¹ Different issues arose as result of this prayer being recited in Aramaic language. The Babylonian Talmud, p. 12b, teaches that one should not make requests to G-d in Aramaic because the angels who intervene between the supplicant and G-d do not understand Aramaic. Although the Talmud finds a reason to allow Aramaic at times, making requests to G-d in Hebrew is preferable.²² A further objection was raised by Hidah (*Responsa Yosef Ometz* section 44), who argued that on the Sabbath one should not make personal requests in prayers.²³ The Hidah provides an unclear response.

Different opinions were offered as to the day on which to recite the prayer. The *Kaf Hachaim* argues that since the prayer appears in the *Zohar* within the discussion of Shabbat, this is the time it should be said. In fact, the *Magen Avraham* rules that *Brich Shmei* should only be recited on the Sabbath. Rabbi Chaim Yosef Abdula, known as the Ben Ish Chai, argues that since it is recited (now) on a regular basis, it is permitted to recite it on the Sabbath.²⁴ Hamburger (1995, p. 178) cites mystics who—with that understanding—argue that the prayer should only be recited during the *mincha* prayer on the Sabbath. As summarized by Rabbi Israel Mayer Hacoen in the *Mishnah Berurah* (134:13), the majority of Ashkenazi adjudicators rule that *Brich Shmei* should be recited whenever the Sefer Torah is removed from the Holy Ark and read.

Others rejected the prayer because of the sentence “nor in the son of G-d do I trust” implying that there is a son of G-d as in the Catholic dogma.²⁵ In his *Baruch Sheamar* (pp. 177-178), Rabbi Baruch

²¹ *Reponsa Noda B'Yehudah Kama Yorea Dea* section 74.

²² See *Shulkhan Arukh* 101:4 and the standard *Sulkhan Arukh* commentaries.

²³ This issue, including the views of additional rabbinical authorities, is discussed in Meller p. 22 ff. 10, Hamburger 1995, pp. 176-177.

²⁴ See *Responsa Torah Shelema* section 103.

²⁵ The accepted explanation is that this refers to angels. The Art Scroll prayer book translates these words “nor on any angel do I rely.” The *Siddur Tzalota D'Avraham* volume 1 p. 362 argues that these words mean great strength but objected to the term angels. Rabbi Epstein in his *Kitzur Hashela* (p. 137) where he offers the complete text of the prayer and changes these words to read “not on the angles of high do we rely.”

Epstein responds to this dilemma by suggesting the prayer *Brich Shimei* was not authored by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, to whom the *Zohar* is attributed, but rather by some unknown later individual.²⁶ Thus it would not be required to include it in the prayers. Objections were also raised to the words “and prostrate myself before him and before the glory of the Torah at all times.” In other words, the congregant is declaring that he is bowing in honor to the Sefer Torah. Hamburger (1995, p. 174) traces the reluctance to permit bowing to the Sefer Torah from the period of the Geonim to the works of Rabbi Haim Benbenishti in his *Kenesset Hagedolah*, and finally to Rabbi Geogin in his *Keter Shem Tov* (part 1 p.2) who were concerned about the intention of the lay Jew towards whomever or whatever he was bowing discouraged this ritualistic behavior. The Sephardim do not accept this objection, and bow while uttering these words. Rabbi Yaakov Hayim Sofer in his *Kaf Hachaim* (*Orakh Hayim* section 113 paragraph 12), based on BT *Berakhot* 24a, argues that one is only permitted to bow in the liturgy in places designated by the early rabbis. *Brich Shimei* is not included in this list. Rabbi Epstein, in his *Arukh Hashulkhan* (*O.H.* 113:6), justifies bowing in places not designated by the Talmud. He argues “that if one bows in prayers dealing with praises or pleading before God, or for any reason one feels the need to bow before the Lord, or if it is the custom to bow in this specific prayer, or if he if his heart is impassioned with the prayer, he is blessed and is not adding to the decree of the rabbis.” Rabbi Israel Mayer Hacohen in his *Mishnah Berurah* section 113:9 summarizes the views of different later rabbinical authorities: “It should be noted that all this normally only applies as regards the eighteen blessings, but apart from during the eighteen blessings one may bow and stoop as he chooses.” He continues to make a distinction between the prayer referring to everyone bowing and to the individual bowing. The latter case is permitted since this is not the reference made in the Talmud. Bowing during *Brich Shimei* could be justified by either rationalization.

Different customs were adopted regarding when to recite this prayer. The *Magen Avraham* (section 282 paragraph 1) as well as the *Hidah* (in the name of the Ari²⁷ Z”l)²⁸ interprets the *Zohar* to mean that

²⁶ Hamburger 1995, p. 167 cites other rabbinical authorities who are in agreement with Rabbi Epstein. For example, see Rabbi Yaakov Emden in his *Mitpachat Sefarim* in *Mor Vkiyia* section 25.

²⁷ Rabbi Yitchak Luria b. Jerusalem, Israel 1534 and died Tzfat, Israel 1572.

²⁸ Quoted in the book of *Responsa Rav Pealim* section three. See Meller 2009, ff. 10.

the prayer is only to be recited on the Sabbath, because the *Brich Shimei* is discussed in the *Zohar* in the context of Shabbat. Most Sephardic communities follow this ruling. Others interpret the words of the *Zohar* differently. It is also quoted in the name of the Ari Z"l that since it does not explicitly state that it is to be read on Shabbat one should include *Brich Shimei* even during the week when the Torah is removed from the Holy Ark.²⁹ Aside from the German communities who completely rejected the prayer, most Ashkenazi congregations followed this ruling. There is an additional opinion of the *Birchei Yosef* (section 488) that the prayer should be included in the liturgy only during the Sabbath afternoon prayers.³⁰ Those rabbinical authorities who argue that the *Brich Shimei* should be recited on Shabbat discuss whether this would include the Jewish holidays and *Rosh Hodesh*. As stated above, Ashkenazi communities have adapted the custom of reciting *Brich Shmei* any time the Sefer Torah is removed from the Holy Ark, be it Shabbat or weekday. Because of the difficulty for those who do not understand the Aramaic text of the *Zohar*, in some Ashkenazi communities the prayer is recited in Yiddish, as presented by Rabbi Yecheil Mechel Segel Epstein in his *Kitzur Hashelah*. The Sephardic communities incorporate the prayer in the liturgy only on Shabbat. Some Sephardic communities recite the prayer in Ladino rather than Aramaic so that the prayer will be understood.³¹

The rabbinical adjudicators also discuss the exact time to recite the *Brich Shmei*, i.e., when the Holy Ark is opened or when the scrolls are removed. Rabbi Shemtov Gaguine, the author of *Keter Shem Tov*, reports that in the Land of Israel, Syria, Turkey and Egypt the custom is to open the Torah scrolls while in the Holy Ark, and while they are open recite the *Brich Shmei*. Rabbi Efraim Margolith in his *Shaarei Efraim* (section 10:1) recommends reciting *Brich Shmei* while removing the Sefer Torah from the Holy Ark. Later, in his book *Mate Efraim* (paragraph 48), he states that the *Brich Shmei* should be recited after the scrolls have been removed. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, a representative of 20th century Ashkenazi Jewry (*Igrot Moshe Orakh Chaim* book 4, response 70:9), discusses whether the prayer is said when the Holy

²⁹ Meller 2009, ff. 10 discusses this issue and cites numerous rabbinical authorities who rule that *Brich Shimei* is not only said on the Shabbat but also on weekdays. See also Hamburger 1995, pp. 179-180.

³⁰ For a detailed discussion see Meller 2009, pp. 21-22 ff. 10.

³¹ *Talmudic Encyclopedia* 1957, p. 479.

Ark is opened before the removal of the Sefer Torah or during its removal. In both instances the Holy Ark is open, but the scrolls are closed. Rabbi Feinstein supports the latter suggestion. The custom varied between the different communities. Some recite the prayer while the Holy Ark is opened, and others after it is closed.³² For the purpose of this discussion, the focus is on the fact that it is recited when the ark is open and on the mystical power attributed to this phenomenon.

The ceremony of the removal of the Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark is capitalized upon in other instances. The husband of a woman in the ninth month of pregnancy “should be careful to receive the honor of opening the Holy Ark.”³³ The *Hidah* saw this to be a “nice custom” that stemmed from a mystic belief that this was capable of reducing the pangs of childbirth. Rabbi Palagi (1961, section 1 paragraph 5) was concerned with the behavior of people who opened the Holy Ark but refrained from closing it. Since symbolically the opening of the Holy Ark paralleled the woman’s giving birth and the opening of the cervix, closing the Holy Ark would suggest the opposite effect. The Rabbi argued that if one begins a mitzvah he should complete it, and therefore should close the Holy Ark after removing the Sefer Torah, for this ritual is in honor of the Torah scrolls. Furthermore, argues Rabbi Palagi, closing the Holy Ark is symbolic of a good closing of the womb.³⁴

In some communities (primarily Chasidic), before his wedding a groom will also receive the honor of opening the Holy Ark. This also suggests symbolically the opening or beginning of a new life.³⁵

Discussion

I have used the terms ceremony and ritual interchangeably. This does not do justice to either of them. Liebman (1999 p. 307-308) argues that religious ritual is stylized and is religious as well as efficacious. He

³² See Hamburger 1995, p. 181.

³³ The *Hidah* quoted in Levy 1997, p. 242 and Meller, 2009 p. 19.

³⁴ Some hold to a custom of bringing the Sefer Torah and even placing it upon a woman having difficulty giving birth and who is therefore in a life-threatening situation. Passages from the Torah are then recited. The Rabbis forbid such behavior since it was disrespectful to the Torah; they permitted the Torah scrolls to be brought to the door of her room but not to open the Torah, place it in the hands of the woman giving birth or for that matter in the hands of any woman. (see Chazan 2009, p. 392).

³⁵ See Meller, 2009 p. 2 ff. 3.

writes: "It is directed toward a particular goal and becomes, among other things, a mechanism for achieving those goals. Religious ritual connects the participant to some transcendent presence. It provides a bridge to G-d by engaging the participant in an act that G-d has commanded. At the very least, it is efficacious in the sense that it is pleasing to G-d or avoids G-d's displeasure. But it only produces the desired results when performed correctly." Ritual is generally resistant to change and detailed in its content. Examples of ritual are some of the *mitzvot* (sing. *mitzvah*: commandment) described in detail in Jewish law or halakha.

In contrast to ritual, Liebman explains that ceremony is connected directly to the social order it represents. For example, in reform synagogues the traditions observed such as the removing of the Torah are not based upon law or *mitzvot* but are chosen because of their importance in the eyes of the congregants. Liebman describes the ceremony (1999, p. 309). "The Sabbath service in a Reform synagogue may not include reading from the Torah or may include reading only a few lines rather than the entire weekly portion, but it will include a rather elaborate ceremony in which the Torah scrolls are taken out of and returned to the highly ornamented ark in which they are kept. A bar mitzvah ceremony in a Reform synagogue might have the rabbi removing the Torah scroll from the ark and handing it to the parents or the youngster whose bar mitzvah is being celebrated. The parents, in turn, hand the Torah, in this case a symbol of Jewish tradition, to the bar mitzvah celebrant." In this case, the actors do not believe their actions to be a *mitzvah* requiring precise and detailed rules determined by generations of rabbinical authorities. Their performance is a symbolic act whose social nature in this case is quite explicit. As Liebman continues to explain, "The ceremony symbolizes the ties between parent and child in a Jewish context; the centrality of generational continuity and the special role of the parent-child relationship in transmitting the Torah (i.e. tradition). The ceremony clearly manifests and affirms the participation and identification of these actors in the Jewish social order. In the words of Malina (1986, p. 7), a culture projects "collective communication."

While I agree with Liebman's definition of ritual and ceremony, there is also a grey area that he discusses: customs that vary in different communities and Jewish ethnic groups. In our discussion about

removing the Torah from the Holy Ark (and as we shall see below), the majority of the rules concerning Sefer Torah differ from community to community, and the rabbinical opinions differ significantly. The question therefore arises as to whether a custom practiced in a specific community can in fact be called a ritual.

For both halakhically observant or traditional Jews, identifying with a physical artifact is necessary for the fulfillment of their religious belief and commitment. Since Judaism cannot tolerate the representation of G-d in any form, a lower level substitute is required. In this case the Torah is “the written word of G-d.” Accompanying accessories such as the Holy Ark play an important role in satisfying this human need, and the world of mysticism contributes by giving these artifacts a status that allows the Jew to feel he has the representation of G-d before him. The Torah evokes a mental representation in the mind of the reader.³⁶ The Torah ritual discussed above seeks to achieve collective effectiveness or the attainment of social goals, namely the identification of members with its social structure and culture, resulting in conformity. Symbols such as the Torah scrolls, its ornaments and rituals establish a “powerful, pervasive and enduring feeling and motivation in people (the players) by formulating conceptions of value objects and outfitting these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the feeling and motivations which the symbols generate are perceived as reality.”³⁷ A further example involving the Torah scrolls and attempting to achieve such goals is the Torah lifting ceremony (*hagbahah or hagbahat haTorah*).

c. *Lifting of the Sefer Torah*

As cited above,³⁸ Tractate *Sofrim* (14:8-14) portrays an elaborate ritual for the removal of the Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark. “The scroll of the Torah is immediately unrolled a space of three columns and elevated to show the face of the script to the people standing on the right and on the left. Then it is turned round towards the front and towards the rear; for it is a precept for all men and women to see the script, bend their knees and exclaim, ‘And this is the Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel’ (*Deut.*

³⁶ See Malina 1986, p. 2.

³⁷ Malina 1986, p. 74.

³⁸ Although quoted above, I present it here again for the convenience of the reader.

4:44) ‘The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul’ (*Ps.* 19:8).”³⁹ The person who receives the *maftir*, a lower level honor in comparison to the *chazan*, is compensated with a “great honor” of reciting the *shema* during the Torah removal ceremony. After reciting parts of the *shema* as well leading the congregation in other prayers, “The *maftir* steps enters [the Holy Ark], takes the scroll of the Torah and says, *Hear O Israel*, chanting the first verse, and the people say it after him in response. [The *maftir*] then elevates the Torah scroll and says: ‘One is our G-d, great is our Lord, holy and revered is His name forever and ever.’ Then he repeats: ‘One is our G-d. great is our Lord, holy is He. One is our G-d, great is our Lord, holy and revered is His name.’ [This is said three times] corresponding—according to some—to the number of the three patriarchs; others hold that it corresponds to the three *kedushoth*.” Additional prayers are recited. Tractate *Sofrim* continues to inform its reader that “The Torah scroll must be elevated at *Hear O Israel*, at the threefold declaration of the unity of G-d, and at *O magnify the Lord with me*.”

In the Sephardic liturgy and in some Hasidic congregations, the Torah is opened and exhibited to the congregation immediately after the removal of the scrolls from the Holy Ark. There are different suggestions as to the source for this ritual.⁴⁰ Nachmanides, in his Torah commentary (*Deuteronomy* 27:26) on the passage “Cursed be he that conformeth (*lo yakim*) not the words of this law” writes:⁴¹ “Now I have seen the following text in Yerushalmi *Sotah*, ‘that does not stand up – the words of this law. But is there a law about falling? Rabbi Shimon ben Yakim says, This refers to the officer [of the Synagogue, as explained further on]’ ... And by the way of a homily the Rabbis said [in the above Yerushalmi (Palestinian Talmud)]: ‘This refers to the sexton of the synagogue who does not stand up the Scroll of the Law properly so that it would not fall.’ It appears to me that it [the Yerushalmi] refers to the sexton who does not stand the Scroll of the Law up before the public to show the face of its writing to all the people, as it is explained in Tractate *Sofrim* that “they lift the Torah high and show the face of its writing to the people who stand there to the right and left thereof and turns it frontwards and backwards, for it is

³⁹ These laws are also later adjudicated in the works of early rabbinical authorities as the Mordechai at the conclusion of *Hilchot Ketanot*, *Rokeach* section 52 and the *Kolbo* section 20. They are later ruled by Rabbi Karo in his *Shulkhan Arukh* section 134:2.

⁴⁰ A detailed list of sources and discussion can be found in *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, volume 8 pp. ff 5, Meller 2009, Sperber 1989, pp. 78-88, Talbi 1997, pp.129-132, and Yosef 2000.

⁴¹ Translation adapted from the Charles B. Chavel translation 1976. P. 320.

incumbent upon all men and women to see the written words and bend the knee and say ‘And this is the Law which Moses set before the children of Israel,’ and such is the custom.”

Nachmanides understands the passage in *Deuteronomy* 27:26 “Cursed be he who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them” to include the sexton who does not lift and display the Torah scrolls. This is the intention of the Yerushalmi which talks of “the sexton.” The Gra in *Shulkhan Arukh* (134:3) states that the correct textual reading is “the sexton that he stands” and Nachmanides omitted the words “that he stands,” thus ignoring the correct meaning of the Yerushalmi.

Sperber (1989 pp. 78-88) argues that the source for *hagbahah* is from *Nehemiah* 8:4-5 which states: “And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden pulpit (*migdal*) which they had made for the purpose... And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people. The opening of the scrolls would imply revealing the text to the congregants. For he was above all the people, and when he opened it all the people stood.” Sperber supports his view by quoting an early Rabbinic authority, Rabbi Nathan ben Rabbi Yehudah who, in his book *Sefer Hamachkim*, uses the word *migdal* as in found in *Nechemia*, translated as “to lift” and, therefore, seems to learn the source of *hagbahah* from *Nehemiah*.

Talbi does not accept this interpretation and explains that the word *migdal* is used differently in different rabbinical sources. Talbi suggests that the primary source for *hagbahah* is the text we quoted above from Tractate *Sofrim*.

Although the proof texts are only an elucidation (*asmachta*) they are sufficient to substantiate its acceptance by the rabbinical authorities and the decision to incorporate it into law.⁴² The discussion and dispute in rabbinic literature is on when and how to lift the Torah scrolls and exhibit their texts to the congregation. To correctly understand the customs that developed concerning *hagbahah*, it must be

⁴² There is a small minority of rabbinical authorities who do not support the custom of *hagbahah*, so as not to inconvenience the congregation by making worshippers stand or possibly out of fear of dropping the Torah. See *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, volume 8 p 167 ff. 5. Talbi 1997, pp. 133-135 offers the opinions of various 15th and 16th century rabbinical authorities who supported the concept of not lifting the Torah. These include the *Orchot Hayim* Laws of Monday and Friday section 8, *David Emet* section 4. These rabbis offered different reasons for their objections. 1. The prooftext from Tractate *Sofrim* is only an *asmachta* and not sufficient to be required as a law. 2. It is relatively a new custom only few practiced. This is not sufficient to require it as law. 3. They feared that it Torah parchment might be held without a cloth which transgresses the Talmud’s statement in Tractate *Megillah* 22a not to hold the Torah “naked.” The punishment for this action is to be buried naked. 4. There was the constant fear of dropping the Sefer Torah. 5. There are other laws in Tractate *Sofrim* that are not practiced, thus also providing the possibility of including *hagbahah*.

understood that the primary purpose of *hagbahah* is to exhibit the writing on the scroll to the congregation. As stated in Tractate *Sofrim*, at least three folios of the scrolls must be exhibited. The *Magen Avraham* (134:2) suggests that the intention in Tractate *Sofrim* is that not more than three folios be viewed. Citing mystical sources, the Rabbi also informs his reader that if one is actually close enough to read the letters a great (spiritual) light will shine upon him. In some communities during this ritual the Rabbi, using a special pointer, has the honor of showing the congregants where the weekly reading begins and in a loud voice recites the passage “This is the Torah that Moses placed before the children of Israel.”⁴³ In many present-day synagogues the reader points to the writing of the Torah with the index or little finger.⁴⁴ Women have often expressed a special interest in viewing the Torah while it is being exhibited. Even in the twelfth century, Rabbi Nathan ben Rabbi Yehudah in his monograph *Sefer Hamachkim* writes that during *hagbahah* the women push and shove to view the script, but do not understand why they are behaving this way. The *Kol Bo* (Section 20) also reports such behavior, and attributes the reason to the statement in Tractate *Sofrim* (even though the women do not know the reason).⁴⁵ The *Turi Zahav* suggests (*Orakh Hayim* 88:2; amongst others, see footnote 39) that although women are not forbidden to do so, out of respect for the Torah, during her menstrual period a woman is discouraged from looking at the writing while the scrolls are lifted.

After the Torah is removed from the Holy Ark, it is carried to the stage (platform) (*bima*) customarily situated in the center of the synagogue. The procession that includes the various honorees who have removed the Torah,⁴⁶ the Rabbi, and possibly other dignitaries, who will all turn to the right. In some communities the procession circles the entire synagogue, including the outer rows of the women section. The *Rama* (*Orakh Hayim* 149:1) writes “that in localities where the Torah scroll is put away in the

⁴³ *Keter Shem Tov* section 32. In footnote 316 he explains that Rabbi is considered the “Father of the Torah” and thus should receive this honor.

⁴⁴ Meller 2009, 336 ff 28 offers sources for this custom.

⁴⁵ See also Yosef 2000, p. 9 ff 18 who discusses this ruling. Also Yosef 1980, pp. 27-32 who discusses in general whether a woman during her period can pray and go to the synagogue, look at the Sefer Torah etc. After citing various opinions he concludes that while they are obligated to pray and recite blessings, they can be strict in observation of the rules and not enter the synagogue, not touch the Torah and not look at it when it is exhibited to the congregation.

⁴⁶ This honor was previously sold to the highest bidder. Although it was the prayer leader (*shaliach tzibur* who usually performed the ritual, it could be done by someone else. The *Or Zarua* volume 2 section 42 writes that it is considered as honoring the Torah to buy the ritual of removing the Torah from the Holy Ark and offering it to the *chazzan*.

sanctuary which is the Holy Ark of the synagogue, it is a mitzvah for all those in front of whom the Torah scroll passes to accompany it until it is in front of the Holy Ark into which it is put.” The same law would seem to apply to the process when taking out the Sefer Torah.⁴⁷ According to the *Arukh Hashulkhan* in *Orakh Hayim* 149:3, some argue that someone joining the procession - if he is not directly involved in the rituals - would seem to be committing a gesture of arrogance. Therefore, he concludes that “each person may do as he chooses as long as his intentions are holy (*lashamayim*).” In contemporary synagogues, only the individuals involved in the Torah rituals accompany the Torah to its place.

Depending on the community, the ritual of *hagbahah* is acted out on two specific occasions. These times are indicated in Rabbi Joseph Karo’s *Shulkhan Arukh* (*O.H.* section 134:2). In the opening statement to the laws pertaining to Sefer Torah he writes: “One should show the face/side/ of the Torah Scroll with the writing to the people...” suggesting that the lifting and exhibiting of the Torah is at the start of the ritual. Exhibiting the writing of the Torah at this stage of the ritual is based upon the statements we have seen in Tractate *Sofrim* (14:14). An alternate view is found in the *Rama*’s amendum to this law where he writes “It is the practice to do this after reading the Torah.”

The Sephardic community adheres to the first ritual suggested by Rabbi Yosef Karo, while the Ashkenazi practice the latter presented by the Rama.

Each time frame has developed different rituals depending upon the community. The first ritual practiced prior to the reading of the Torah had different scripts depending upon the community where it was staged. For example, in one community the writing of the scrolls was displayed after they were carried from the Holy Ark to the center stage. *Sefer Hamanhig* statements suggest this action when he writes: “*Hazan hakneset*, who is the sexton of the synagogue, removes the Torah [from the Holy Ark] and says in a loud voice *Shema Yisroel* etc. With prayers, he goes up to the stage (*duchan*) opens [the Torah] and shows it to the congregants, then places it on its head and all the congregants read the first passage [of the weekly portion]” This custom is also mentioned by Rabbi Chaim Vital (in his book *Pri Eitz Chaim*) describing the Ari Za”l’s custom: “It was his custom, during the removal of the Sefer Torah [from the Holy

⁴⁷ See on this section of the *Shulkhan Arukh* the commentary *Magen Avraham* paragraph 3 and *Arukh Hasulkhan* paragraph 3.

Ark] (*hozaha*) to kiss the Sefer Torah and accompany it until [he arrived] adjacent to the stage [*tevah*]. He remained there until they opened it [the Torah scrolls]...⁴⁸

Rabbi Ovadia Yosef (2000, p. 7) summarizes the opinion that the Torah writing is exhibited while standing in front of the Holy Ark. He writes: “When the Sefer Torah is removed from the Holy Ark [and brought] to the stage (*tevah*) in order to be read from, the Sefer Torah should be opened to show the congregation....”

Rabbi Shemtob Gauine in his *Keter Sem Tob* (pp. 273-274) writes that the Sephardic custom in London, Amsterdam, Israel, Syria, Turkey and Egypt is that the Sefer Torah was exhibited while standing at the Holy Ark and that then all the congregants bowed⁴⁹ to it.⁵⁰ The Torah scrolls are then closed and given to the “carrier” who opens them for a second time so that the congregants can view the weekly portion and he (the man who is being honored) identifies where it begins. He then takes his fringes and places them on the first word of the weekly portion and kisses them. Then he lifts the Sefer Torah so the women can view it. Rabbi Gauine offers different reasons for this practice. He cites Tractate *Sofrim* as well as Nachmanides discussed above. He also explains the reason for the mitzvah of *hagbahah*, allowing the congregants to vocally give testimony to the Torah being the word of G-d transmitted by Moses by declaiming the passages “This is the Torah that Moses placed before the children of Israel (*Deuteronomy* 4:44), upon the command of G-d through Moses’ hand (*Numbers* 9:23).” If the Torah were closed this would be impossible. The Rabbi also offers Kabbalistic reasons for the practice.

The *Kaf Hachaim* (134:13) cites a different practice. In Jerusalem he writes, “They circle the entire synagogue with the Sefer Torah to show [the writing] to all [the congregants].” This custom of covering the entire synagogue resulted from the desire to show the Torah to the women. An additional reason suggested was to allow everyone to see the Torah script, something that would not be possible if it were only exhibited on the *bimah*.

⁴⁸ See also *Kaf Hachaim* 134:10.

⁴⁹ Meller 2009, p. 335 ff 24 discusses the modern day reality that people do not bow. He cites sources that discuss this issue.

⁵⁰ Bowing in this instance does not refer to one prostrating oneself but rather to slightly bending over as is done in other rituals such as bowing for the *modim* prayer. See *Talmudic Encyclopedia* p. 170, ff 44 that cites various sources that discuss this issue.

The *Rama* writes that the Ashkenazim perform the *hagbahah* ritual at the conclusion of the Torah reading. Rabbi Chaim Benveniste, in his *Sheyarei Kneset HaGedolah (Orakh Hayim 134:2)*, writes that the *Rama* has presented the correct custom. He explains that since there are many individuals who come only to gaze at the Torah and do not remain in the synagogue for the reading of the weekly Torah portion, it is better to perform *hagbaha* after the reading so these congregants will remain and listen to the Torah reading.⁵¹ Talbi (1997, p. 142) does not see this reason as an explanation why the *hagbahah* should be at the end of the Torah reading. He attributes the custom as presented by the *Rama* as dependent on the relationship between lifting and rolling the Torah. The *glilah*, rolling the Torah scroll, at the end of the reading was considered, as is written in Tractate *Megillah 32a* the greatest honor for the person chosen “receives the rewards of all of them.” It was auctioned off for large sums of money and offered to persons of stature. The *Tur (Orakh Hayim 147)* summarizes this law when he writes: “It is customary in Ashkenaz to purchase the *gellilah* for large sums of money to express one’s love for the mitzvah.” If there is no one to purchase the honor of rolling the Sefer Torah, the sexton may award the honor to anyone of proper stature.

There would seem to be a dispute amongst the rabbinical authorities as to whether one who purchases *gellilah* (or *hagbahah*) also has the right to move or transfer the Torah mantles. Rabbi Joseph Karo, both in his *Bet Yosef* commentary on the *Tur* and in his *Shulkhan Arukh (147:2)*, rules that the purchase of rolling does not include taking off the mantles. The *Rama* adds “Likewise in localities where it is the practice to buy the mitzvah of taking out the Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark and putting them back, the community cannot object as this right does not belong to the *Chazanim*.” In present times, the custom has developed to honor anyone of the sexton’s choice, even children. The *Mishnah Berurah (147:7)* summarizes this view: “However it has become the practice now not to be meticulous about this, but even average people are honored with this mitzvah because of the need to pursue peaceful relations. Now the present day mitzvah of *gelilah* is also a mitzvah of considerable value. Despite this, it has become the

⁵¹ For additional Rabbinical authorities who discuss the Ashkenazi practice see Talbi 1997, pp 139-142 and *Talmudic Encyclopedia* 1957, p. 117 ff. 14.

practice to honor even children with the performance of this mitzvah, once they have enough intelligence to appreciate the concept of a form of sanctification. This serves to educate the children towards the observance of mitzvot.”⁵² The contemporary practice of *gililah* on the Sabbath was not done following the last portion of the reading (*shivie*) but rather after the *maftir*, therefore requiring an additional *hagbahah* to honor the buyer.⁵³

To accommodate all opinions, some communities lift the Torah and exhibit the Torah writing before and after the weekly readings. The *Keter Shem Tob* (p. 276 ff. 306) explains the reason for twice performing *hagbahah* is to allow the men and the women who missed the lifting during the removal of the Torah from the Holy Ark to fulfill the mitzvah of seeing the Torah’s words. Rabbi Yosef (2000, p. 7, ff 13) reports this custom in the name of the Maharitz Doshinsky.

When lifting the Torah scrolls to exhibit them to the congregants, the lifter would rotate them in all directions. The Rabbinical authorities disagreed both on how to move one’s body and where the writing should be exhibited, towards the roller or towards the lifter. The *Shulkhan Arukh (Orakh Hayim 134:2)* summarizes the debate and rules that “the face [writing] of Torah is exhibited to the congregants by showing it to the people standing to his [the chazzan’s] right and his left, then turns around for it is a mitzvah upon all men and women to see the script and bow and recite ‘This is the Torah that Moses placed before the children of Israel, upon the command of G-d through Moses’ hand.’” Rabbi Karo is basing his ruling on Tractate *Sofrim* and many early Rabbinic authorities such as the *Kol Bo*, *Machzor Vitri* section 527, the *Or Zarua* in laws of the Sabbath section 42 and the *Tur Shulkhan Arukh* section 147. There are those rabbinical authorities, such as Rabbi Chaim Benveniste (in his *Sheyarei Kneset HaGedolah, Orakh Hayim 134*), who write that the lifter should remain in the same place but turn the Torah in various directions so that it can be viewed.

The *hagbahah* ritual developed differently throughout the Jewish world as a result of each community’s social reality. Practices were motivated by the fear of dropping the Sefer Torah, the most

⁵² The *Hafetz Hayim* is basing his ruling upon the *Shaarei Efraim* section 10 paragraph 22.

⁵³ I will not discuss the topic of *gililah* in this essay. My focus is on the rituals and customs that have direct influence upon the social behavior of the community. The same applies to the many other rituals involved with Sefer Torah.

holy artifact in Judaism. Talbi 1997, p. 135 writes that in Italy two persons with the help of a rod connected to the poles on each side of the Torah lift the scrolls.⁵⁴ In Yemen, it is reported that the Torah lies in a case and with a special pole (*sharvit*) and the parchment is lifted out of the case.⁵⁵ Talbi (1977, p. 137) also reports that in the Spanish Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam *hagbahah* can only be performed by 4 or 5 especially selected strong men called “leantadores.” The rabbis throughout the early and later rabbinic literature argue whether it is permitted to roll the Sefer Torah while it is its case out of concern for ripping the parchment.

BT Tractate *Megillah* 32a writes that the mitzvah of rolling was awarded to the most prestigious individual in the community. The *Manhig (Laws of Sabbath)* explains that the reason for this practice is to honor the Torah, for who else should receive such an important task? The rabbis suggested different views on who is considered prestigious. The *Ran* and *Rashbah* commentaries on the Talmudic statement above explain prestigious to mean—as it implies—the most important individual in the community. Even if this individual was not called to read the Torah, he should be honored with *gellilah*. Maimonides in his (Laws of prayer 12:18) argues that “prestigious” in the Talmud means that even the most important person should roll the Torah. It is not a disgrace to roll the Torah, for you receive two mitzvot, reading the Torah and rolling it.⁵⁶

When performing the *hagbahah* (and *gellilah*) the rabbis discuss what direction the Torah script should face, the lifter or the roller? Rabbi Yitzchak ben Abba Mar, author of the *Ittur*, describes the ritual by stating that when the Torah is rolled (*golel*) the writing faces the person who rolls it and not the person who lifts the Torah.⁵⁷ Approximately 300 years later, Rabbi Yosef Colon (*Maharik*) challenged the author of the *Ittur*, Rabbi Yitzchak ben Abba Marri, saying that this is an individual opinion. He argued the custom of having the Torah writing face the man who lifts the Torah, not the roller. This, he writes, is the accepted custom in the Jewish communities. Rabbi Yechiel Mechel Halevi Epstein in his *Arukh*

⁵⁴ Talbi 1977, p. 153 presents a photograph of this practice.

⁵⁵ See Talbi 1977, p. 154 for a photograph of this practice

⁵⁶ *Talmudic Encyclopedia* p. 145 and ff. 72-78 cites additional opinions.

⁵⁷ Others who support this opinion are the *Mordechai*, the *Rosh* and the *Tur*. See *Talmudic Encyclopedia* 1957, p. 117 ff. 23 for a list of rabbinical authorities who hold to this view. See also Rabbi Nissan (*Ran*'s) commentary on Tractate *Migelah* 32a.

Hashulkhan as well as Rabbi Israel Mayer HaCohen in his *Mishnah Berurah (Orakh Hayim 147:9)* attribute the difference to a technical reason. If the person who is honored with rolling the Torah does both *hagbahah* and *gillela*, the writing will face him (as is the practice in most Sephardic congregations). If there are two people involved, the script will face the lifter. The *Rama* (O.H. 147:4) and the *Bach* (147) follow the ruling of the *Maharik*. The *Rama* also adds (149) that the roller is also honored to participate in the procession returning the Sefer Torah to the Holy Ark.

d. Additional manifestations of the Torah's mystical power

Throughout the year, the Torah scrolls are used to enhance the power of the prayers. Such an example is the *Kol Nidre* service on the eve of Yom Kippur. The holiest day of the year is ushered in with the opening prayer *Kol Nidre*, and Sifre Torah are carried to accompany it. Various other carefully chosen prayers such as Prayer for Dew and Rain require the Holy Ark be opened and the scrolls revealed. Prayers such as *hagomel* (cited after a life threatening incident involving travel, prison, or recovery from serious illness) are recited in front of the Sefer Torah.⁵⁸ The prayer for the soul of the dead known as *hashkava* or *Kel malei rachamin* is also said in the presence of the Torah. Various customs have developed as to when, where and what text is used to recite this prayer. Rabbi Gaguine (p. 261-263), who discusses these different customs, explains that the presence of the Torah and the *aliya* of the person requesting the prayer determine the appropriate time to recite it. They cannot all be listed here, but these are prayers where the power of the Torah is sought to enhance the request contained in the prayer.⁵⁹ Most prominent is the prayer for an individual or group that opens with the words *mi shebarach* (He Who blessed) said in the presence of the Sefer Torah.

Yaari (1958a and b) in his presentation of the history of the *mi sheberach*, argues that a similar prayer (*yakum purkan*) was composed and recited in the period of the Geonim. This prayer, recited before

⁵⁸ See BT *Berakhot* 54b. There is a dispute on the level of illness that would require this prayer. See *Shulkhan Arukh O.H.* section 220 paragraph 8.

⁵⁹ Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine (pp. 239 – 240) lists both for the Sephardic and Ashkenazi communities the times and prayers the Holy Ark and Sefer Torah is required .

returning the Torah scrolls to the Holy Ark, was for the welfare of the heads of the Jewish communities in Israel and Babylonia. Rabbi Amram Gaon in his prayer book (*siddur*) presents a *mi shiberach* that reads “He Who blessed our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, He should bless all our brothers and sisters, the children of Israel, who come to pray and give charity in the synagogues. The Lord may Hear the sound of their prayers and heed their needs and fulfill positively their requests and say amen.”⁶⁰ In addition, during the Geonic period, a *mi sheberach* was composed and recited on Monday and Thursdays during the rolling of the Torah. The prayer was included in the *yehi ratzon*. The purpose of this prayer, through the mystical power of the Torah scrolls, was to encourage the Jewish men to come to the synagogue and donate to charity.⁶¹ In Europe, the *mi sheberach* prayer was added to the Sabbath liturgy. Shortly afterwards the *mi sheberach* prayer is presented in both the *Shibolei Leket* and the *Kol Bo*.

Thus the time of the Torah reading, (as part of the *mi sheberach*), was used to solicit charity such as donations for the synagogue or even for the sexton. Specific holidays such as Simchat Torah were designated to request donations for specific purposes, such as for the well being of the Pope.⁶² For example, on the last days of the *Shalosh Regalim*⁶³ an appeal was made for the poor of Israel and a *mi sheberach* read for those who donated. This custom continued throughout Jewish history in all ethnic groups and geographical locations. The area of solicitation grew to include any form of charity. In the 13th century, Rabbi Yitzchak of Vienna in his halakhic compendium *Or Zarua* (section Shabbat sub section 50) writes that it was the custom of the reader (*shaliach tzibur*) who read the Torah Sabbath portion to bless the person invited to the Torah with “*mi sheberach*”⁶⁴ *Abraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov*, should bless so and so that he will pledge a donation in honor of the Torah.”

The *Or Zarua* cites his father, who objected to this custom since it suggests business dealings which are forbidden on the Sabbath. Rabbi Yitzchak of Vienna offered a rationalization as to why this ritual is not

⁶⁰ Yaari 1958 a pp. 118-119 discusses the historical development of the *yakum purkan* and its acceptance into the liturgy. He shows the differences in different geographical locations that Jews resided.

⁶¹ See *Siddur Rabbi Amram Gaon*.

⁶² See Yaari 1958a, p. 125.

⁶³ Passover, Succoth, Shavuot.

⁶⁴ The prayer *mi sheberach* is often cited throughout rabbinic literature but is not usually recited at the Sefer Torah. This is especially prevalent in the early rabbinic sources.

considered as doing business (especially if the *shaliach tzibur* is a poor person in need of charity) and permits it. Yaari 1958a and b cites 63 versions of the *mi sheberach*, representing the different communities and ethnic groups beginning with the Geonic period to the twentieth century. They included prayers for communities, the nation of Israel, individuals, leaders, special occasions and people with problems. In 1942, one was composed in Hungary for those Jews taken to the Nazi labor camps. The *mi shiberach* was also cited for specific professions such as the tax collector.⁶⁵ The *Darche Tishuva* (section 151:29) permits reciting a *mishebyrach* for a non-Jew who requests the prayer.

Goldhaber 1995, (pp. 223-224 ff. 39) reviews the way that the *mi sheberach* ritual is acted out in the European communities (primarily Germany and Lithuania) starting from the seventeenth century. The primary concern of these populations was to reduce the excessive number of *mi sheberachs* at one Torah reading to no more than two or three. They believed it to be not only disruptive to the prayers, encouraging useless talking, but also painful for the congregation (*tirchat hatzibur*) to sit through these ordeals. In Lithuania they decreed, “As we have seen the greatness of the suffering that resulted in the communities resulting from the many invitees to the Sefer Torah, we have seen it appropriate to decree that only rabbis and heads of the yeshiva should be invited to the Sefer Torah. It is the right of the head of the yeshiva to invite outside the table no more than 6 persons and only two *mi sheberach* are permitted.” In the Polish community of Amsterdam, making a *mi sheberach* on the High Holidays as well as Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot is forbidden, except for those that had a special “mitzvah.”⁶⁶

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Rabbi Avraham Levinson in his *Mekorei Minhagim* (1846, pp. 40-41) continues to be displeased with this ritual behavior. He opens his section on the topic “... in the oaths, pledges and vows made by the individual who comes up to the Torah for those who he wants to be blessed we find that the detriment is greater than the advantage. First he criticizes the useless and excessive talking in the synagogue. Then he denounces the pledging of money which is typically recited in the text of the *mi sheberach*. People vow to donate money or the chazzan vows for them and these oaths

⁶⁵ Cohen 1968 adds an additional 53 *mi shiberachs* including one (52) for those Jews imprisoned by the Gentiles.

⁶⁶ Such as the father of a child being circumcised, husband of a new mother, Bar Mitzva and his father.

are not fulfilled. He also condemns the fact that the majority of these blessings are directed towards the rich in order to mollify them for possible future opportunities, and tend to ignore the poor. Thus Rabbi Levinson recommends blessing only the Torah invitee and the person to whom the pledge is directed, as well as include anyone else he desires (instead of a separate one for each person) in one *mi sheberach*.

In the first half of the twentieth century, Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine reports [the Sephardic custom] in London of not having the invitee to the Torah pledge, while in Amsterdam, Syria, Turkey and Egypt the pledge is made after the last invitee to the Torah makes his final blessing. The chazzan then turns to the congregants and receives pledges from the congregants and makes a *mi sheberach*⁶⁷ for whomever has been requested. On p. 294, the Rabbi writes that in London the *mi sheberach* for the *oleh*'s pledge is made on the Sabbath after the haftarah is read, while during the week it is read when the Sefer Torah is returned to the Holy Ark. In Israel, Syria, Turkey and Egypt, it is read between each *oleh*.

During the Polish the Bohdan Chmielniki massacre of 1648-1649, Rabbi Yom Tov Lipmann Heller⁶⁸ composed the following *mi sheberach*: "He Who blessed our forefathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may He bless all those who guard their mouths and tongues from speaking during the prayer service. May the Lord guard them from all trouble and distress any plague and illness. All the blessings should come upon them that are written in the Sefer Torah of Moses our Rabbi and all the books of the Prophets and Writings. They should be privileged to see living and enduring children and raise them to be involved in Torah, married and good deeds, and serve our God our Lord with truth and pure and let us respond Amen." This prayer – not to talk during the prayer service – was believed to assist in troubled times. Synagogues have adapted it both in cases when there are troubles in the community and when there is excessive talk during the prayer service.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Rabbi Gaguine wants to attribute the source for these pledges to an early midrashic source, the *Yalkut Shimoni* but this conclusion seems to be questionable. On page 282 ff. 328, the Rabbi discusses early rabbinic Ashkenazic sources for selling mitzvot. It was only later that the Sephardim instituted such customs. He praises the congregations that decline to sell the mitzvot and lists 5 reasons for his objection. 1. You need a non-Jew to come to the synagogue and write down the pledges. 2. There are people who pledge and do not pay. 3. The congregants are engaged in useless talk as well as liable about others (*lashon hara*). 4. The competitive atmosphere to purchase the mitzvah causes jealousy and hate. 5. A desecration of G-d's name is caused since the recording non-Jew will go and tell his friends that Jews are doing business with their mitzvot.

⁶⁸ Rabbi Heller was born in Germany in 1579 and died in Poland in 1654.

⁶⁹ I thank Dr. Israel Singer (Touro College, New York) for bringing this *mi sheberach* to my attention.

According to the custom in Rome, a *mi sheberach* was read for women who prepared the Torah sash (known in Europe as the wimple). It reads “He who blesses our Mothers Sara, Rivka, Rachel and Lea, He should bless all the daughters of Israel who prepared the coat or the sash in honor of the Torah and prepares a candle in honor of the Torah. May the Lord pay her deserved reward and award her good fortune. And let us say Amen.”⁷⁰

In recent years, there has been a great demand to recite *mi sheberach* prayers for the sick. Between each portion of the Torah reading, the invitee to the Torah often requests a blessing (*mi sheberach*) to be recited for the recovery of a sick person. The text for this prayer is found in all contemporary prayer books. An investigation of the source of this custom has revealed very little. The codes of law do not discuss it, and the majority of the sources on custom and ritual do not include it. Originally this blessing invoking the power of the Sefer Torah was used for life-threatening cases, thus justifying its reading on the Sabbath, a time (as discussed above) when one does not make requests from G-d. Yaari (1958, p. 124) traces the *mi sheberach* for the sick to Worms in 1190. The text of the prayer includes the offer of a charitable donation.⁷¹ In order to justify the custom of reciting a *mi sheberach* for any level of illness, the words “though the Sabbath prohibits us from crying out, may a recovery come speedily” is added. The *Rama* (*O.H.* 288:10) rules “It is also permitted to make a blessing for a sick person in mortal danger on that day.” The *Arukh Hashulchan* (*O.H.* 287:2), first quoting the *Geraz*, summarizes the law, “When we recite the *mi sheberach* for the sick in the synagogue [during the Torah reading] one should not say as during the week stating “the Lord should send a cure” but rather ‘though the Sabbath prohibits us from crying out, may a recovery come speedily’ but we bless ‘and the Lord should send a total cure, etc., though the Sabbath prohibits us from crying out, may a recovery come speedily’ as printed in the prayer books. I do not know who permitted this, for it is only for a very dangerously sick person [life-threatening] who is immediately in danger.” *The Mishnah Berurah* (*O.H.* 288:28) commenting on the *Rama* writes “But not for someone who is not in mortal danger.” He then continues to explain: “When a *mi sheberach* prayer is said for a sick

⁷⁰ See Hamberger 2000, p. 362

⁷¹ Avraham Levinson in his *Mikorei Minhagim* (section 16) writes that in contrast to other synagogue donations that need not be paid until the sexton asks for the funds, in the case of a sick person one must pay immediately.

person not in mortal danger, the words ‘though the Sabbath prohibits us from crying out, may a recovery come speedily’ should be said during the prayer.” In this rationalization, saying the *mi sheberach* for a person in a non-life threatening situation reflects the view of many later rabbinical authorities such as the *Magen Avraham*.⁷²

It has become the custom in contemporary synagogues that during the reading of the Torah congregants desiring a *mi sheberach* for an ill person to line up in front of the sexton who stands besides the Torah and submits the name of the sick person in need of the *mi sheberach*.⁷³ The sexton then recites one *mi shebeyrach* for all those who are ill in one *mi sheberach*. The great demand for blessings for the non-fatally ill has become very popular in the last few decades. The above systems were developed to satisfy this demand and not overburden the congregation with excessive *mi sheberach*'s. A similar procedure was already common in many synagogues where a list was prepared beforehand of the sick and the sexton would read the names out loud within one *mi sheberach*.

Special attention was paid to a woman who was having a difficult pregnancy or had given birth. Back in the fifteen century Rabbi Yisroel Isserlein, the author of the *Responsas Terumat Hadeshen*, offered to recite a *mi shebeyrach* for a woman who was having difficulty in such cases. Hamburger (1995, pp. 393-398) offers a survey of the Ashkenazi rabbis who discuss this prayer for a woman after birth. He concludes that the new father donates for his wife, the new mother, while reciting the *mi sheberach* at the Sefer Torah. The funds were used for the lighting of the synagogue (candles). In Worms, France two *mi sheberachs* were recited, one specifically for the well-being of the mother and one for the donation to buy the candles for the synagogue. This ritual was also observed in Frankfurt. Since following the introduction of electricity there was no need for candles, other purposes were designated such as the upkeep of the synagogue. Different texts were developed for the *mi sheberach* for the new mother, but all retained the phrase “that her husband donates charity for her.” The *Mishnah Berurah* (O.H. 288:28) summarizes the view of many later rabbinic authorities when he writes, “Blessing a woman having difficulty in labor is

⁷² For a discussion and presentation of different later rabbinical authorities see the *Oz Vhadar* edition of the *Mishnah Berurah*.

⁷³ Some modern synagogues have the congregants quietly from their seats state the name.

certainly permitted [on the Sabbath], since she is considered a person in mortal danger. It also appears to be correct that according to all opinions one need not be stringent in forbidding making a blessing for a woman in her first week after childbirth.”

The *Tzitz Eliezer* (volume 5 chapter 17) explains that the reason for blessing the ill during the Torah reading is that for them it is a time of mercy. Furthermore, since the rabbi is present and answers "amen" to the prayer, this endows the request with greater strength. The *Arukh Hashulkhan's* view (*O.H.* 282⁷⁴) supports this opinion when he rules that one should listen and answer amen when hearing a *mi shebeyrach*, for that will then fulfill the mitzvah of “love your neighbor as yourself.”

e. *Physical contact with the Sefer Torah*

Our discussion until now has focused upon the congregants' mindsets and feelings towards the Sefer Torah and its mystical powers as the word of G-d in this world. During the rituals the majority of the synagogue attendees had no physical contact with the Torah scrolls. The possibility for such contact (except on the holiday of Simchat Torah which is a topic for a separate essay) is available during the procession to and from the Holy Ark when they are permitted to kiss the Torah.

f. *Kissing the Torah*

The *Or Zarua* (volume 2 section 48) writes. “After [the Torah], is read the sexton goes and sits on the platform and all the little children go and kiss the Sefer Torah when it is rolled. This is a beautiful custom for the purpose of educating the little children to mitzvot.”⁷⁵ The *Rama* 149:1 follows the ruling of the *Or Zarua* and rules accordingly. Rabbi Margolish in his *Shaarei Efraim* (section 410:4) takes a more all-encompassing approach and concludes that all those who are in proximity of the Sefer Torah should kiss it. He summarizes this approach: “All that approach the Torah kiss it with their mouth and recite, ‘O that you would kiss me with the kisses of your mouth’ (*Songs of Solomon* 1:2.). If he is close enough to embrace the Torah with his arms he should embrace it to his right and say ‘and his right hand embraced

⁷⁴ Quoted in Moshe Sklar's *Hayei Moshe* 2009, section 149 p. 192 note 6.

⁷⁵ He bases this upon Tractate *Sofrim* chapter 18:7-8.

me.' (Songs of Solomon 2:6). If he cannot kiss the Torah with his mouth he should kiss it with his hand.⁷⁶

The *Leket Yosher* testifies that his Rabbi, the *Trumat Hadeshen*, would hug and kiss the Sefer Torah while both the removing and returning it to the Holy Ark. A halakhic discussion evolved on whether it is considered honorable for the Torah to be transported or extended to the “kisser” or whether the “kisser” must come to the Torah. Rivam Steinbuch in his *Ikarei Dinim Lbenei Yisroel* writes that anyone who so desires can approach the Sefer Torah and kiss it, but the *chazan* should not extend the Torah to a congregant even to kiss it. He considered such behavior as a denigration of the Torah scrolls and even compares it to desecrating G-d's name. Rabbinical adjudicators who share a similar approach include Rabbi Avraham Glick in his book of *Responsas Yaad Yitzchak* (volume 3:196), Rabbi Yitzchak Weiss in his *Siach Yitzchak*,⁷⁷ and Rabbi Eliezar Waldenberg in his *Tzitz Eliezar* (volume 12:40).

As noted above, the rabbis were concerned with the manner in which the Sefer Torah was kissed. The *Kitzur Hashela* in *Laws of Sefer Torah* (137) adds that the mitzvah is specifically to kiss the Torah scrolls with one's mouth. The *Shulkhan Arukh Hakatzar* from the Yemenite Jewish community adhered to this view and ruled accordingly. Rabbi Eliezer Papo in his *Damesek Eliezar* (section 40:20) quotes the *Zecher Nathan*, who argues that kissing the Torah with one's hand was foolishness (*burut*) for how could one transfer the holiness of the Sefer Torah through his hand? The *Damesek Eliezer* retorts that kissing with one's hand is an expression of love for the Torah and therefore permissible. He offers proof from other Jewish artifacts that are kissed, such as phylacteries, *mezuzah*, *matzah* and *maror* on Passover, etc. The rabbis emphasize that it is advisable to kiss the Torah with one's hand only when there is no possibility to kiss it with the mouth. Other rabbinical authorities as the *Hidah* and the *Chazon Ish*⁷⁸ practiced kissing the Sefer Torah with their mouth.

Others objected to the practice of kissing the Torah with the mouth. Rabbi Avraham Meshkenov in his siddur *Tzlotah Davraham* felt that it was unhealthy, for one does not know whose mouth has kissed the

⁷⁶ In his commentary, *Pitchei Shaarim*, Rabbi Margolith elaborates on his view and presents the view of the Kol Bo and the *Kitzur Hashela* who mock those who kiss the Torah with their hands, for it gives the impression that the Torah's holiness becomes stamped on one's hand.

⁷⁷ Printed Jerusalem 1952.

⁷⁸ Rabbi Avrohom Yeshaya Karelitz b. Kosava, Belarus 1878 d. Bnei Brak, Israel 1953.

Torah and what dangerous germs were left behind. Furthermore, Rabbi Menachen Sofer in *Menachem Meshiv*⁷⁹ argues that since so many of the congregants want to kiss the Torah, it is permissible to give them all the possibility to observe this ritualistic behavior and extend the Torah for them to kiss. He offers a proof text from TB *Yoma* 70a which discusses the bringing of the Torah to the Temple on Yom Kippur. To solve the problem of too many individuals struggling to reach and embrace the Sefer Torah, Rabbi Palagei in his *Sefer Hayim* (section 3:6) relates the custom of pointing one's finger at the Torah and then kissing one's finger. Alternately one could use the *talit* fringes. The *Yalkut Meam Loez* (*Deuteronomy* 27:26) writes that one should point the little finger at the Torah text and then kiss it. Rabbi Hanken relates that when he was visiting in the Caucasus he encountered a custom of which he greatly approved. The congregants would not have any physical contact with the Torah and instead of actually kissing it, they would point at the Torah and then kiss their finger. He approved of this custom since there are only a limited number of individuals who could actually embrace the Torah and it was questionable as to who would be worthy of this honor. Furthermore, Rabbi Henkin⁸⁰ was concerned about germs being transferred through the saliva from one individual to another by kissing the Torah cover. (cited in Goldhaber 2005, p. 117)

g. The Wimple

While men were permitted limited physical contact with the Sefer Torah, women's contact was almost nonexistent. Throughout Jewish history, women were not encouraged to come to synagogue and when they did come they were thoroughly segregated from the men. Even in contemporary "modern" orthodox synagogues, where the approach to women is more liberal than in the past, the parade with the Torah scrolls rarely reaches the women's section of the synagogue. Even though, as discussed above, large numbers of women would make efforts during the prayer service to see the Torah, the *Rama* (*O.H.* 88:1) reports that although not prohibited, it was the custom that menstruating women not be permitted to come

⁷⁹ Quoted in Goldhaber 2005 p.116.

⁸⁰ Born in White Russia in 1881 and died in New York in 1973.

to the synagogue or even touch a holy book. The *Magen Avraham* adds that they were prohibited from looking at the Sefer Torah. The *Turei Zahav* (quoting earlier rabbinic sources) clarifies that menstruating women should not look at the Torah when the chazzan displays it to the congregants (during *hagbahah*). To allow women to express their need to be attached to the Sefer Torah, prior to World War II it was common in Europe for the women to prepare the Torah's sash, or what was popularly called a wimple.⁸¹ It was a long usually linen sash used as a binding for the Sefer Torah. In some cases it was made from the cloth used to swaddle a baby boy at his circumcision.

Hamberger 2000, pp. 332 – 604 offers a lengthy presentation of all aspects of the wimple from the time of the Talmud to the present. From the period of the early rabbis women had been involved in its preparation. It was considered a mitzvah to sew and embroider the wimple, even on Saturday night when it was customary for women not to work. Illiterate woman had the men prepare the text, and then they would embroider over it. In some communities, virgins or brides were sought after to perform this task. Others saw this deed as a *segula* (virtue) for barren women. It was most popular for mothers of a new born boy to use the cloth from the circumcision to prepare the wimple. If the mother lacked the talent to do the work, her immediate female relatives were called upon. In some cases outside professional help was sought.

The wimple was brought to the synagogue when the circumcised boy reached a certain age. Each community designated the age they thought appropriate. This ceremony usually had little or nothing to do with the mother, but rather focused on the father and son. They would be called to the Torah to present the wimple. If the boy was too little to come with the father (e.g., at the age of 6 months), the mother would bring the baby to the synagogue (and then give him to his father) and at the same time while visiting the synagogue, the mother would recite the customary blessing said after birth. If the woman came to pray in the woman's section the boy would sit with his mother until called. After the Torah reading was completed the boy would then return to his mother. Women would also buy the honor of folding the wimple. There were a number of synagogue functions that were considered women's tasks and would be auctioned off as their mitzvah; these included preparing candles, sweeping the synagogue and folding the wimple. In some

⁸¹ A Yiddish word from the German "cloth." In old German it meant to cover up.

congregations, after the Torah scroll is unrolled, the wimple was brought to the women's section and the women would fold the sash, passing it from one to another and thus giving all the women a chance to feel an attachment to the Sefer Torah. On the whole, women were a passive participants in the synagogue, the Torah reading and rituals as well as the general prayer service. This was a woman's opportunity to be active. Not only the folding of the sash but the whole process of its preparation was an occasion for women to physically feel connected to the holiest of Jewish artifacts, the Torah scrolls.

Discussion and Conclusion

This essay has focused primarily upon customs and rituals offering the majority of the congregants the opportunity to interact with the Sefer Torah and its sacred nature. Rudolf Otto (1958, pp. 5-7 and throughout the entire monograph) discusses the concept of "holy" above and beyond the traditional rational understanding of "goodness." He introduces the word "numinous" to "first, to keep the meaning clearly apart and distinct, second to apprehend and classify connectedly whatever subordinate forms or stages of development it may show." By "numinous" he meant the numinous category of value as well as the numinous state of mind which is reflected in feeling. He explains (p. 12) "it grips or stirs the human mind with this and that determinate affective state." The numinous also contains the "mysterium tremendum" (mystical awe) which includes the element of awe or the feeling of fear or religious dread, the fear of G-d or the representation of the holy. One may experience a personal state of submission and self surrender before an awe-inspiring unapproachable object, an object which becomes attractive and fascinating. This object can be inanimate, and the extraordinary capability to evoke feelings of the "wholly other or consciousness" is attributed to it (Otto. 1958, p, 27). The identification with a religious object can motivate varied feelings or expressions such as passion, excitement, vitality and impetus. One can feel this sensation without a clear concept or expression of what this evokes. These mindsets will motivate the individual to bring the numen into his circle or have physical contact with the numinous object. Otto (1958, p. 33) argues "possession of and by the numen becomes an end in itself."

Otto's understanding of the holy sheds an interesting light upon our understanding of the Sefer Torah. Our initial point of departure is the belief that the content of the Sefer Torah is the word of God given to Moses at Sinai. In themselves, the scrolls are nothing more than inanimate objects, parchment with ink. The conviction in the doctrine of religion (the irrational) permits rabbis through the laws (the rational) to transform the object and awaken the believer to the level of the numinous, experiencing such emotions as awe and excitement. Symbols, in contrast to the beliefs of Tillich (1957, p. 43), can be produced intentionally to be developed from within the individual or the collective unconscious. The non-rational conveyed through the numinous becomes structured through the eyes of the rational rabbinic legal system; strict laws alone would not be sufficient to induce and arouse spiritual excitement and feeling, which must be based on personal belief, in our case that the Torah represents the word of G-d. Specific and detailed requirements contribute to and enhance the feeling of creation of the numinous. From the outset, the parchment on which the Torah scroll was written had to be taken from a kosher animal and prepared according to very precise instructions. Any deviation from the rules eliminated and prohibited the use of the parchment as well as the ink. Fear results from the possibility of mishandling the Torah scrolls, and of the punishments that accompany this. The grand ritual ceremony of removing the Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark, and the actual display of its content, kindles the congregant's religious awe and emotional attachment to its power and holiness. The moment of the removal of the Torah from the Holy Ark is the point where the inanimate object (the Torah) acquires the numen through its contact with the congregation. The opportunity for engaging in physical contact and kissing the "holy" intensifies the power attributed to the Sefer Torah.

Additional elements such as art further enhance the emotions evoked towards the Torah. Otto (1958, pp. 65-70) argues "the most effective means of representing the numinous is the sublime." Religious sculptures and paintings have throughout history accomplished this. Judaism, based on the explicit ruling of the Decalogue, "You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4), could not allow for most of the artwork that can evoke the spiritual feelings created by great artistic

masterpieces. But some types of artwork are permitted in Judaism. Among such “permitted” works we have the Holy Ark and its curtain that are directly associated with the numinous. As mentioned above, the designs or pictures on the curtain were carefully chosen to create an association between the Torah scrolls and the Decalogue. It is not pure aesthetic beauty but rather symbolism that is reflected in the image of the tablets.

The models we have discussed for symbolic representation of the Sefer Torah are summarized by Malina’s theoretical structure (1986, p. 74) as a “system of symbols generally establish powerful, pervasive and enduring feelings and motivation in people by formulating conceptions of value objects and outfitting these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the feeling and motivations which the symbols generate are perceived to be reality.” Lessa (1979, p. 91) expounds on this understanding: “The ability of religious symbols also to evoke powerful emotions seems to derive both from the historical experiences and social conditions of the individuals and societies as well as from universal features of human psychology.” The discussion throughout this essay has presented the historical and social experiences of the Jewish congregant that would evoke and substantiate such emotions. Furthermore, these individuals who are identified with the society and who become committed to the symbol are socialized into the system. Symbols function as communicators. They deliver a message that will cause a specific effect and achieve a purpose. One area in which symbols convey a message – and thus a purpose – is commitment to the society. Malina (1986, p. 78) explains that symbols refer to the “ability to get results in social interaction by appealing to and affecting another person’s personal internalized sense of obligation, sense of duty, or sense of belonging.” The symbolism of the Torah scrolls through its rituals and customs can prompt such an effect of identification of congregants with the Jewish social structure. The message the Torah is sending to the members, the congregants, is that they are part of the whole group who accept the Torah as the word of G-d. Thus we find that the group will rally around the Torah, and thus rituals as the *mi sheberach* can be recited in the presence of the Torah for the congregants, its leaders and specific individuals with special needs or status. Furthermore, since the scrolls are viewed as holy and the word of G-d, the need to have physical contact with the Torah is greatly sought after. Since The Torah evokes a

sense of belonging, the rituals are shared and result in greater unification of its actors. These rituals, as Elkin (1965, p. 284) states, “preserve and inculcate the historical traditions and social sanctions (or authority) of the tribe and thereby strengthen the social sentiments; in the second place, they enable the members of the assembled group or groups to express and feel their unity and common life – a life which in the ritual wells up from the past and becomes available for the future.” What we earlier termed pseudo-totemic symbols or artifacts, such as the Torah scrolls, have evoked a relationship between the object and the member where the group is even (as a totem) organized around the scrolls, and thus creates the social solidarity necessary for the group to appropriately continue and function.

In his writings, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik summarizes the premise presented in this essay. He writes (1989, p.154): “The Torah aspires to bring down the Divine Presence into the worldly arena of space and time, into the midst of earthly life. Not a flight to a higher world that is wholly good, but its mission is to superimpose, however imperfectly, the eternal world upon ‘them that dwell in houses of clay’ (*Job* 4:19).” After stating that it is the Torah that transports the holiness or sanctification to earth he continues on to the next level, where the Torah acts as a catalyst of unity for the Jewish people. Rabbi Soloveitchik in his discussion of the Simchat Torah holiday when the congregant dances around the *bima* with Sefer Torah writes: (2010, p.321), “Therefore, the reader (*chazan*) should stand before the Holy Ark which contains the Sefer Torah. Through the congregation circling the Holy Ark, their prayers embrace the prayers of all Israel, just as the tribe of Israel encircled the Ark of the Covenant during their encampment in the desert.” The Torah scrolls, G-d’s written word in this world, therefore create through their presence and centrality a sense of unity for all Israel.

Appendix 1
Classic Rabbinical Texts cited in this Essay

Arukh Hashulkhan Yechiel Mechel Halevi Epstein b. Bobruisk, Belorussia 1829 d. Novogradok, Russia 1908.
Ben Ish Chai Chaim Yosef Abdula b. Iraq 1832 d. Iraq 1909.
Baruch Sheamar Baruch Halevi Epstein b. Russia 1860 d. Belarus 1941.
Darche Tishuva R. Zvi Hirsh Shapiro b. Poland 1850 d. Hungary 1913.
Damesek Eliezar Eliezer Papo b. Bosnia 1785 d. Bulgaria 1828.
Gra or Beyur Ha Gra R. Eliyahu of Vilna (Vilna Gaon) b Lithuania 1720 d. Lithuania 1797.
Graz Gaon Rabbeinu Shneyur Zalman of Lyady b. Russia 1745(6) d. Russia 1813.
Hilchot Ketanot Mordechai R. Yaakov Chagiz b. Morocco 1620 d. Turkey 1674.
Igtrot Moshe Moshe Feinstein b. Belarus 1895 d. New York 1986.
Ittur R. Yitzchak ben Abba Marl b. Provence c. 1122 d. Provence c. 1193.
Kaf Hachaim R. Yaacov Hayim Sofer b. Iraq 1870 d. Israel 1939.
Keter Shem Tov Shemtob Gaguine b. Israel 1884 d. England 1953.
Kitzur Hashela Mechel Segel Epstein d. Germany 1707.
Kneset Hagedolah R. Hayim Benbenishti b. Turkey 1603 d. Turkey 1673.
Kolbo author unknown first published Naples 1490.
Leket Yosher R. Yosef ben Moshe b. Bavaria (Germany) c. 1420 d. Bavaria c. 1490.
Machzor Vitri R. Simcha of Vitry d. France 1105.
Magen Avraham R. Avraham Abale Gombiner b. Poland 1634 d. Poland 1682.
Maharik Rabbi Yosef colon b. France c. 1420 d. Italy 1480.
Manhig R. Avraham Ha Yarchi b. c. Provence 1155 d. Spain 1214.
Mekorei Minhagim Avraham Levinson Published Berlin 1846.
Mishnah Berurah Israel Mayer Hacoheh (Hafetz Hayim) b. Blarus 1838 d. Radin 1933, Poland.
Mishnah Torah Maimonides R. Moshe Ben Maimon b. Spain 1135 d. Egypt 1204.
Maharik Rabbi Yosef Colon b. France 1410 d. Italy 1480.
Mitpachat Sefarim Yaakov Emden b. Germany 1697 d. Germany 1776.
Mordechai Mordechai B. Hillel Ashkenazib. b. 1240 d. Germany 1298.
Nachmanides Torah Commentary R. Moshe Ben Nachman b. Spain 1194 d. Israel 1270.
Noda B'yehudah R. Yichezkel Landau b. Poland 1713 d. Czechoslovakia 1793.
Or Zarua Yitzchak of Vienna b. Bohemia late 12th century d. Vienna mid 13th century.
Pri Eitz Chaim R. Chaim Vital b. Italy 1543 d. Syria 1620.
Rama R. Moshe Issereles b. Poland 1530 d. Poland 1572.
Ran R. Nissim b. Spain 1290 d. Spain 1375.
Rashbah R. Shlomo B. Avraham Aderet . b. Spain 1235 d. Spain 1310.
Rosh Rabbeinu Asher B. Yechiel b.1250 Germany d. Spain1327.
Responsa Yosef Ometz R. Chaim Joseph David Azulai (Hida) b. 1724 Jerusalem d. 1806 Italy.
Responsas Terumat Hadeshen Yisroel Isserlein b. Germany c. 1390 d. Austria 1460.

Sefer Hamachkim Nathan ben Rabbi Yehudah lived at the end of the 11th century beginning of the 12th century.

Siddur Rabbi Amram Gaon R. Amram Gaon d. Babylonia (Iraq) 875.

Siddur Tzalota D'Avraham R. Avraham Landau b. Poland 1784 d. Poland 1875.

Shaarei Efraim Efraim Margolith b. Ukraine 1760 d. Galicia 1828.

Sheyarei Kneset HaGedolah Chaim Benveniste b. Turkey 1603 d. Turkey 1673.

Shibolei Leket R. Tzidkiyah HaRofei b. Italy 1230 d. Italy 1300.

Shulkhan Arukh and Bet Yosef Joseph Karo b. Spain 1488-1575.

Tur R. Yaakov Baal Ha Turim b Germany c. 1275 d. Spain c. d. Israel 1340.

Turei Zahav (Magen David) R. David HaLevi b. Poland 1586 d. Poland 1667.

Tziz Eliezer R. Eliezer Waldenberg b. Israel 1915 d. Israel 2006.

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