

Dear Rabbi

Dear Rabbi

In some synagogues, couples are called up for *aliyot* [Torah blessing honors]. This is a lovely tradition. Why isn't this allowed at BEKI?

Signed, Questioning Couple

Dear Couple,

Numerous references in the law codes and in case history governing Torah reading practice indicate that only one person at a time may read the Torah, and by extension, recite the Torah blessings, in public worship. The codes, based on the Talmud (and in this case also the Jerusalem Talmud), apply the rule the halakhic rule of "*trei qalei la mishtamei* -- two voices are unintelligible" to the issue of joint aliya. As a legal category, this rule means that were two or more voices to join in reciting the blessing or reading Torah, it "wouldn't count" as a proper reading. Calling up more than one person simultaneously might also violate the rule against *berakha le-vatela*, a blessing said in vain, also considered a significant ritual offense (cf. *Biur Halakha* on 141:2 "le-vatala.")

The case law is instructive. A question arose concerning a Monday morning service when there were two bridegrooms present, neither of whom was a Kohen or Levi. The question was, who was entitled to the third aliya? The Kohen and Levi were needed for the *Minyan* (quorum), so they could not leave, and they were entitled to the first and second aliyot by virtue of their tribal status. That created competing claims for the one remaining aliya, viz., the third aliya, by each of the two bridegrooms.

Had this been Shabbat, they could have simply added an extra aliya so each could have one. But on weekdays there is a rule that prohibits adding an aliya lest services be lengthened, which might make people late for work. Numerous solutions were proposed, including those that "bent" the rules, and ultimately a solution was found. But the idea of two people sharing an aliya was not even suggested, as it clearly violated firmly established procedure.

The problem experienced by the modern Bar or Bat Mitzva family is not a new problem. What do you do when you have a lot of people whom you want to honor? Too many uncles and aunts, too few honors. Whenever there was a need to provide more honors, more aliyot were added on a Shabbat morning. This has always been the solution to the scarcity of aliyot. Never were two called at once.


The prospect of joint aliya would create numerous additional halakhic problems. None of these is overwhelmingly important in and of itself, but they are worth noting.

For example, it is the custom among many Ashkenazic communities (although not at BEKI) not to allow relatives of the first degree to have consecutive aliyot. That is, you cannot call up two siblings or a parent and child one after the other. The reasons for not calling them in succession would apply even more for calling them simultaneously.

Another problem, one that would apply at BEKI, is that we determine a woman's tribal status for pur-

Continued on page 16

MICHAEL MARTONE
MANAGER



Arnold's Jewelers

DIAMONDS - WATCHES - GIFTS
CHINA - SILVER - CRYSTAL

NORTH HAVEN SHOPPING CENTER
NORTH HAVEN, CONN. 06473
203-239-4291

WATCH AND
CLOCK REPAIRING

Office Hours by Appointment
(203) 389-9174

RAVIT AVNI-SINGER, MSW LCSW

Child, Adolescent and Adult Psychotherapy

214 Amity Road
Woodbridge, CT 06525

Dear Rabbi

Continued from page 15

poses of aliya based on her father's tribe, i.e., we call a daughter of a Kohen or Levi for the Kohen or Levi aliya. There is also a convention that says a Kohen and Levi must get the first and second aliya, respectively, and the next aliyot are reserved for people who are not a Kohen or Levi. Under this system, a couple of different tribal status could not have an aliya together. Joint aliya creates a series of new unsolvable problems. We would be creating a situation in which some but not all couples could have a joint aliya, or, alternatively, we would violate the privilege extended to the Kohen or bat-Kohen.

A person having an aliya is supposed to follow along with the Torah Reader in the scroll. That is why the Torah Reader shows the honoree the spot where he or she is reading, and that is why the Torah Reader always uses a pointer in the scroll. If there were a pair or a group of people standing around the table, it could become impossible for all of them to see the Torah and perform their aliya properly.

If there were no limit on the number of people who may go up for an aliya at once, then what if a Bar or Bat Mitzva family were to want to send up a group of five or ten at once? And what if two groups of ten are called up in succession? The result might violate even our minimal demands of decorum. If we were to limit joint aliya to two people per aliya, then on the one hand we would run into some family that will be just as disappointed with that limit as some families might be with the limit of one person per aliya. We put ourselves in the untenable position of setting a limit based on a committee's sense of "decorum" while ignoring the halakha. That would be a dubious way to make Synagogue policy, and one liable to create discontent and foster contempt for law and tradition as well as for the Synagogue leadership.

I agree with Rabbi Avram Israel Reisner's *teshuva* (responsum) "Joint Aliya" approved by the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly, the highest halakhic body in the land, on 28 October of 1992, that prohibits the practice of joint aliya. Rabbi Reisner simply could not find a legal

justification for joint aliya. While there have been teshuvot written that justify the practice, they are not, in my judgment, persuasive.

If a synagogue is going to abandon the traditional halakhic framework in the realm of Shabbat Torah reading, then there are a lot of things that could be done. We could have the Torah Readings on Friday night, which might be more convenient for some people. We could read only one verse per aliya, making the reading shorter and easier. We could read the same verse repeatedly, so the Bar Mitzva has to learn only one verse. We could read it in English, or out of a Humash, which is much easier. We could even give an aliya to a goldfish. These practices are no more (and no less) prohibited by halakha than joint aliya. If we are willing to go beyond the established rules, then there is a lot we can do, including some things that we might agree are desirable. But if we want to run the services according to law, then we can only have one person called for an aliya at a time.

The historic origin of joint aliya, dating to the 1950s through 1970s in various communities, had to do with the development of the role of women in synagogue ritual. As recently as the mid-20th century, women were not allowed to participate in synagogue ritual in many communities. As the calls for women's presence on the bima increased, it was decided, in some places, that a woman could ascend the bima for one of the seven aliyot if, and only if, she were accompanied by a man (a spouse, fiancé or brother). This was done in order to expand the role of women in the service.

A woman could be allowed to go to the bima for a "joint aliya" because she didn't count. The theory that permitted joint aliya for a woman with a man was that since she didn't count, there was no concern that the practice violated any of the rules described above. She was viewed, at least for the purpose of the law, as if she were not there at all. I have found no evidence from any written teshuvot from that era for permission for two men to share an aliya. The only "Joint Aliya" ever authorized was for a woman *with* a man.

Dear Rabbi

I witnessed a “joint aliya” in a Connecticut Conservative congregation. The elderly *gabbai* (usher) called the couple up to the Torah with this language: “*Ya`amod Ploni ben Ploni `im ishto – Come up, Mr. So-and-so with his wife.*” The woman was called not as an equal but as an appendage.

Joint aliya played a legitimate role in the progress toward equality for women. It got women up on the bima for the first time, overcoming what for some was a major psychological barrier to women’s participation in synagogue ritual. Now that era has passed. Now women count. A woman does not need to go up with her husband, fiancé or boyfriend for an aliya; she can have her own if she wishes.

Three reasons are given for wanting joint aliya. First, it allows a celebrant’s family to hand out more honors. But when joint aliya is allowed, celebrating families to whom the Synagogue extends the honor of selecting the honorees could be under even greater pressure to include everyone. As it is, if such a family may pick only a limited number of people to honor, everyone who does not receive an honor understands that the family was limited. However, if the family is essentially unlimited, by being able to call up more than one person at a time for an aliya, then anyone who is not called up has greater grounds to feel slighted.

A second reason for wanting joint aliya is that one of the proposed honorees does not know the blessings. In such cases, I strongly urge the individuals to learn to recite the blessings for themselves. We offer a photocopy of the blessings, a cassette tape, and a tutor to review the blessings with them. If someone does not know the blessings well enough, they should learn. Only then can they have an aliya. We impose very minimal standards on those receiving aliyot in our congregation – they just have to be Jewish. But they must at least be willing to say the berakha on their own, or even with coaching. If a 12- or 13-year old can find the courage to stand in front of their elders, and before the Throne of Glory, and lead prayers, then the aunts and uncles or grandparents must find the courage to stand up and recite three Hebrew sentences. To say that someone who would not even read the blessings in transliteration had an “aliya” detracts from the honor of all other olim (honorees) and of the congregation. In addition, it would be in violation of the law (Shulhan
May 2002

Arukh OH 139:2). For people with special needs, there are ways for them to perform the aliya within the law.

The third reason for wanting joint aliya is that some people simply think it is nice for a couple to go up together. We allow a couple to open the ark and take out the Torah together, or lift and bind the Torah together, serve as Torah reader and honoree together. There are many other ways couples can do things together in the service. There are many ways people can be involved as couples and be fully in keeping with law and tradition.

While there are people who are disappointed that they could not have a joint aliya, there are also people – especially women – who as a result of these rules mustered the courage to have an aliya for the first time. For these people, that first aliya was daunting, but also exhilarating and inspiring. It was emotionally and spiritually satisfying. People have thanked us afterwards for “forcing” them to do it. Had there been joint aliya, these people might never have taken this important step.

Furthermore, this position, whether one agrees with it or not, is based on a clear analysis of the law as well as an evaluation of the implications of the policy for this Congregation. I have always been willing to talk about it with anyone interested, and I am always open to evaluate any special circumstances or alternative viewpoints. At the same time, we respect the right of other congregations to follow alternative practices, which may be fitting for their own unique circumstances or values.

In short, calling more than one person up to the Torah is prohibited by several rules of Halakha and standard procedure. The problems that joint aliya seeks to solve can be addressed through other means. Joint aliya for women had its place in history, but it is inconsistent with a Congregation that upholds equality of men and women.

When our children go to camp and college and participate in the larger Jewish world, I want them to be able to know that what they learned and practiced at BEKI was the traditional, normative way to do things. And when our mothers and daughters go up to the bima for an aliya, I want everyone to know that their voices count.