

י"ד טבת תשס"ז / January 4, 2007

Dear Friends,

I write this letter to you after two and a half years of discussion, contemplation, and study among myself and the members of our Religious Practices Committee. We have been discussing the synagogue's policy of how we call people up to the Torah for an *aliyah*. After a thorough, respectful, and learned debate of the various issues, the Religious Practices Committee and I have created a new standard of practice that we believe reflects the values of our synagogue, is theologically compelling, and within the boundaries of *Halacha*, Jewish Law. The two main issues that we addressed were the issues of whether or not women were *halachically* permitted to have the honor of the Cohen and Levi *aliyot*, and the issue of how we honor people with joint *aliyot* (a couple ascending to the *bimah* together to share an *aliyah*).

BNOT KOHEN AND LEVI

The synagogue's current policy regarding women and *aliyot* perpetuates the normative *halachic* position of not calling women up for the Cohen or Levi *aliyah*. The first and second *aliyot* are traditionally set aside for someone who is a Cohen (the first *aliyah*) or a Levi (the second *aliyah*). This practice is one of the only remaining ceremonial roles that Cohanim and Lev'im retain today. Until now, the PJC standard of practice on this issue has been to limit these *aliyot* to men. With the support of the Religious Practices Committee, I have decided to change the existing practice to recognize women who are daughters of *Cohanim* or *Levi'im* as legitimate heirs to the privilege of the first and second *aliyot* to the Torah.

Changing existing religious norms is a serious act that a decisor of Jewish Law (called a *posek*) can only do under very specific circumstances. First, there must be a compelling reason to change the law. This reason may be theological, sociological, legal, economic, or any combination of the above. Second, there must be an existing legal precedent for the change within the *halachic* system, within the corpus of Jewish Law. Third, the impact of the law must engender an encouraging and positive reception by the community (that is to say, even if there is compelling reason and legal precedent for a change, if the resulting change will alienate people from Judaism or cause them to sin, the change is not necessarily appropriate). It is my belief that these three components are present with regard to the question of permitting *b'not kohen* (daughters of Cohanim) to have the honor of the Cohen *Aliyah* and *b'not levi* (daughters of Leviim) to have the honor of the Levi *Aliyah*.

In my judgment, there are a number of compelling reasons for the change. The most important is theological. The prevailing cultural norm during the early rabbinic period (1st and 2nd Century CE) rendered it impossible for women to

attend synagogue services three times a day in order to fulfill the obligation to pray. The role of women within the Jewish community reflected the larger cultural norms of the day. As synagogue rituals developed, gender roles became specific; each honor and responsibility within communal worship was determined according to its *Toraitic* etiology (as determined by the rabbis, of course), and gender roles were assigned as a reflection of this rabbinic understanding. In my opinion, it is impossible to separate this early rabbinic analysis from theology, that is to say, the rabbis were interpreting the Torah and determining normative practice in a way that they believed reflected God's will.

Today, our understanding of gender has evolved, and we no longer understand certain *halachic* categories in the same theological framework as did the rabbis of the Talmud. For example, we would no longer consider a woman taking on a religious leadership role within the public space a "disrespect to the community" for reasons of modesty, as did the rabbis in the second century. Beneath certain *halachic* categories are theologies that no longer reflect our understanding of God's will, and when there is adequate precedent to change these norms, I believe we have the obligation to do so. Girls should not grow up in our community believing that Judaism teaches that one of the most important ritual honors in all of Jewish practice, the honors of the first and second *aliyot*, are limited to males (who are *Cohanim* or *Leviim*) because by virtue of their gender, only they possess the degree of sanctity required to fulfill these honors. Continuing to limit the honors of the Cohen and Levi *aliyot* to men when this practice does not reflect our understanding of gender differences and when there is *halachic precedent for the change* is tantamount to ignoring our Jewish birthright to continue the struggle of determining God's will.

There is compelling precedent within normative rabbinic Judaism to permit women the honors of the first and second *aliyot*, as even in *Toraitic* times, daughters of *Cohanim* retained certain rights that only *Cohanim* had. The *halachic* responsum that details the legal precedent for this change is thorough and masterfully crafted by Rabbi Joel Roth. I have posted this opinion to our website under "Standards of Practice" which can be found under "Religious Life" on the Menu. Please feel free to read it if you are interested. **I will be teaching this responsum to anyone interested on Thursday, January 28th at 7:30pm** since its references to rabbinic texts are many, and its particular *halachic* scholarship is quite dense for those who do not have a strong background in Rabbinics. Please RSVP to me if you intend on coming (rabbi@thepjc.org or 738-6008).

The practical results of this change for our community are as follows:

1. Women who are daughters of *Cohanim* will be honored with the first *aliyah* only. Women who are daughters of *Leviim* will be honored with the second *aliyah* only.

2. Both male and female Cohanim and Leviim may have the *acharon aliyah*,¹ an additional *aliyah* that may be added to the requisite seven.
3. If a *bat cohen* or *levi* does not want the honor of the first *aliyah*, she may opt to have an *acharon aliyah* (the additional *aliyah*).
4. Just as a man who is a Cohen may not be called up for a joint aliyah with a spouse (who is not a Cohen) for an *aliyah* other than the first (or the additional one), a woman who is a *bat Cohen* may not be called up for a joint *aliyah* other than the first (or additional one).
5. A woman is a bat Cohen or Levi as determined by her father, as is the case with men. Therefore, a woman is only a *bat Cohen* if her father is a Cohen and her husband's status does not affect her status.

If you are a woman whose father is a Cohen or a Levi, it is important that you contact the Board Chair for Religious Practices Roger Krulak (636-0952 or rkrulak@frcr.com) in order to inform him so we can honor you appropriately with the Cohen or Levi *aliyah*. **As always, I am more than happy to speak with you about your status if you have any questions or concerns. I treat these matters with great seriousness, so no question or concern is inconsequential.**

JOINT ALIYOT

In an effort to accommodate large numbers of people within a community, some synagogues began the practice of permitting married couples to ascend to the *bimah* together in order to recite the blessings before and after the Torah reading. Reading from the Torah each week is a communal *mitzvah*, one in which we are re-enacting revelation. We declare our values each week when we read Torah, and we demonstrate to our children that we have a sacred book and tradition which guides us through life. It is an extremely important *mitzvah*. As with the performance of any *mitzvah*, we sanctify the act through the recitation of a blessing. Rabbinic theology insists on the power of words to create opportunities of sacred connection as well as to destroy them. The recitation of a blessing reflects our awe; with radical amazement we declare the act of reading from our holy Torah as sacred and life changing through the blessings before and after each *aliyah* (section) is read. It is imperative that these blessings are recited with dignity and respect, otherwise they defeat the purpose of the sacrosanct act.

Do an experiment. Try to have two people recite (chant!) something together in a foreign language with which they are not entirely comfortable. It is likely that you will have a hard time making out the words being chanted because that would require near

¹ On Shabbat, we are required to read a minimum of seven *aliyot* from the Torah. Except on Holidays, we always conclude the Torah reading with a repetition of part of the seventh *aliyah*, which is called the *Maftir*. One is permitted to add *aliyot* to the existing seven by dividing up the reading into shorter readings and thus, adding more *aliyot*. These additional *aliyot* increase the opportunity to give out more honors and are called "*hosafot*." For instance, if one *aliyah* consists of verses 1 through 10, it may be made into two *aliyot*: the first comprised of verses 1-5 and the second verses 6-10. Of these "extra" *aliyot* (*hosafot*), the final one (called *acharon*) may be given to a Kohen, Levi, or Yisrael.

perfect timing. It is for this reason that the rabbis of the Talmud declared that two people saying a blessing together at the same time is tantamount to nobody saying a blessing. This rabbinic principle should be taken seriously, as its assumption is that the recitation of a blessing, the use of God's name, must be performed with integrity and seriousness. For this reason, the blessings before and after the Torah reading have been recited by one person only.

Years ago, the PJC permitted married couples to come up to the *bimah* in order to recite these blessings together when there was a *simcha* (such as a bar or bat mitzvah) and on the High Holy Days. When dealing with Jewish Law, one must recognize the difficulty in undoing a leniency that was permitted by an earlier rabbinic authority. In deference to this principle, we are not changing the existing standard of practice of the PJC with regard to joint aliyot. But I urge you to consider the following order of preference for joint aliyot:

1. Couples have separate aliyot to the Torah.
2. Couples ascend the *bimah* together, but only one of the two people is called by name and only that person recites the blessings.
3. Couples ascend the *bimah* together and are both called up by name, but one person recites the first blessing alone and the other recites the second blessing alone.

The Religious Practices Committee and I have decided not to prohibit joint aliyot (with both people being called up to the Torah and reciting the blessings together) out of respect for the custom that was decided on in the past. But we would like to strongly recommend that when a married couple does take a joint aliyah for a *simcha* or on the High Holy Days, they follow one of the above procedures. I believe that having only one person recite the actual blessing is an act of *k'vod haTorah*, of honoring the Torah. However, we leave this decision up to the individual couple, and we will respect and honor whatever decision you make. I also want to remind you that if one of the people in the couple is a Cohen or Levi, the spouse may not be *called* up with him or her unless the spouse is also a Cohen or Levi. As always, I am happy to meet with you to talk about any questions that you might have regarding this policy suggestion.

I am honored to struggle with you in order to determine the ways in which we can further our mission to create a sacred space for all to worship God, and for us to find spiritual meaning together as a community. I am excited to see our synagogue become completely egalitarian now through permitting women to have the Cohen and Levi aliyot, and very proud to be a part of a community eager to ensure that the Torah blessings are recited with proper *k'vod*, honor.

All of the above changes will begin on the Shabbat of January 5/6.

With great respect,

Rabbi David A. Schuck