**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Torah Reading (2): The Aliya

What purpose do the berachot over keri'at ha-Torah serve, and how are they structured? What is the role of the modern ba'al korei? What is the halachic standing of women's readings?

By Laurie Novick, with research by Rivka Mandelbaum

Rav Ezra Bick, Ilana Elzufon, and Shayna Goldberg, eds.

# The Blessings

Now that we've discussed the nature of *keri'at ha-Torah*, we can explore the workings of the *aliyah la-Torah*: the nature and function of the *berachot*, and the roles of the Torah reader and the person called to the Torah. This analysis will lay the groundwork for our discussion of women reading in all-women’s Torah readings (below) or as part of *keri’at ha-Torah* in a minyan where both men and women are present (in the next installment of this series).

We learned [previously](https://www.deracheha.org/keriat-ha-torah-1-the-reading/) of the importance of the community hearing *keri'at ha-Torah*. At its best, hearing *keri'at ha-Torah* is active listening, and a form of learning Torah. But hearing can sometimes become a passive exercise. One way for community members to establish that they actively engage with the reading is by answering the *berachot* recited over it.

Recall that Ezra recited a *beracha* before reading the Torah. The Biblical account emphasizes the communal response to that *beracha*:

*Nechemya* 8:6

And Ezra blessed the Lord God the Great, and all the people answered, “Amen,” raising their hands, and they bowed down and prostrated themselves before God, faces to the ground.

The Talmud Yerushalmi teaches that Ezra's *beracha* glorified God, and The Babylonian Talmud applies this concept to Torah reading in general:[[1]](#footnote-1)

Talmud Yerushalmi *Megilla* 3:7

"And Ezra blessed the Lord God the Great." With what did he [Ezra] make Him [God] great?...Rav Matna said: He made Him [God] great through the *beracha*.

*Berachot* 21a

Whence [do we learn] that the *beracha* recited before [learning] Torah is from the Torah? As it is written, “When I call out the Lord’s name, give greatness to our God.” (*Devarim*32:3).

In a mystical sense, the Torah is the name of God writ large.[[2]](#footnote-2) When we recite a *beracha* before uttering it, we establish our awareness of the significance of what we are about to say. This *beracha*, "*Asher bachar banu mi-kol ha-amim*" ("Who chose us from all the nations"), speaks to our communal identity. By answering "Amen," the community join with the reader as full participants in a ritual that glorifies God

Barechu

The significance of the community responding to the *beracha* prior to *keri'at ha-Torah* is so great that we add another opportunity for response, the reader's recitation of *barechu*:

Yerushalmi *Berachot* 7:3

Behold the *beracha* of the Torah. Behold he says "*barechu*."

Tur OC 139

…”*Barechu et Hashem ha-mevorach*” ("Bless God the Blessed One") out loud, so that the congregation responds “*Baruch Hashem ha-mevorach*” ("Blessed is God the Blessed One").

Although it makes no direct mention of God's sanctity (*kedusha*), *barechu* is considered a[*davar she-bikdusha*](https://www.deracheha.org/minyan/), recited only in the presence of a minyan. Here, as usual, its call and response serve as a convocation, bringing together those present as a halachic community.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Women Reciting Barechu

We saw in our first installment that halacha theoretically permits a woman to read from the Torah.[[4]](#footnote-4) (In practice, this is generally prohibited.) Could a woman reader recite *barechu*? That may depend on a larger debate regarding whether women can recite a *davar she-bikdusha* when a minyan is present. Me'iri maintains that a woman can never recite a *davar she-bikdusha*:

*Beit Ha-bechira* (Me'iri), *Berachot* 47b

A *davar she-bikdusha* is not given over to women.

Others leave open the possibility that women can. In the context of a discussion of mourner's *kaddish* (though without specific reference to *barechu*), Chavot Ya'ir succinctly makes this point:

Responsa *Chavot Yair* 222

A woman is commanded in *kiddush Hashem*

It is possible that *barechu* was instituted for each reader only at a post-mishnaic stage in the development of the enactment. In that case (assuming the reading itself is not technically a *davar she-bikdusha*), the baraita's theoretical allowance for women reading could still be consistent with the view that a woman may not recite a *davar she-bikdusha*.

A couple of later halachic authorities, however, including Chatam Sofer, suggest that each reader recited *barechu* at the time of the mishna or even earlier:[[5]](#footnote-5)

Responsa *Chatam Sofer* OC I:66

…In my humble opinion, even at the time of the mishna, and even immediately with Ezra's enactment, and perhaps even with the enactment of Moshe Rabbeinu, they immediately enacted that each and every one who went up [to the Torah] said "*barechu*" and they [the congregation] responded "blessed is the Blessed One for ever and ever."

In that case, woman readers presumably would have recited *barechu* prior to reading.

# Bookend Berachot

A final *beracha*, "*asher natan lanu Torat emet*" ("Who gave us the Torah of truth"), is recited after the reading is concluded, based on the comparison of Torah to sustenance:

*Berachot* 21a

Rabbi Yochanan said: we learned *birkat ha-Torah* after [the reading] from *birkat ha-mazon*, from an argument a fortiori [*kal va-chomer*]…Just as food, which does not require [a *beracha*] before it [on a Torah level], requires [a *beracha*] after it, Torah, which requires [a *beracha*] before it, does it not logically follow that it requires [a *beracha*] after it.

With "*asher bachar banu*" before the reading and "*asher natan lanu*" afterwards, *berachot* surround *keri'at ha-Torah*. In Mishnaic times, this effect was even more pronounced. The first reader recited the *beracha* before the Torah reading, the last reader recited the *beracha* afterwards, and readers in the middle recited no *beracha*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Mishna *Megilla* 4:1

The one who opens [the readings] and the one who closes [the readings] of the Torah recite a *beracha* [respectively] before and after it…

On this model, although three or more people would read, their readings were clearly integrated into one overarching halachic entity of *keri'at ha-Torah*. Since the *berachot* directly precede or follow the reading and connect to it, the first and last reader would be obligated to recite them for all.[[7]](#footnote-7) [[8]](#footnote-8)

Ran, *Megilla* 12a (Rif pagination)

For the *birkat ha-Torah* does not depend on custom, but he [the reader] is obligated to recite it, and it is specifically only the first and the last [readers] who recite *berachot*, but middle [readers] are exempt because *keriat ha-Torah* is considered one *mitzva* and all of them [the readers] are like one person [reading].

Eventually, the Talmudic sages enacted that **every** reader recite a *beracha* *before* and after reading.

*Megilla* 21b

We don’t do less than them and we don’t add. A baraita teaches: The first reader recites the *beracha* before it, and the last reader recites the *beracha* after it. Nowadays, when all of them [the readers] recite a *beracha* before it and after it [the reading]; the reason is that our sages enacted a decree because of those who enter and because of those who leave.

These *berachot* ensure that those not present for the entire Torah reading are aware that a *beracha* is recited beforehand and afterwards.[[9]](#footnote-9) They effectively treat each individual reading as a distinct fulfillment of *keri'at ha-Torah*.

Before the enactment of *berachot* for each reading, one could argue either that the obligation to recite them only applied to the first and last readers, or that the middle readers discharged their obligation through hearing the initial and final *berachot*.[[10]](#footnote-10)

There are two primary ways to look at the significance of these bookend *berachot*.[[11]](#footnote-11) Both are relevant to understanding what a woman reader would have recited and why:

**I. Birchot Ha-mitzva** Some view the *berachot* (at least the first one), primarily as *berachot* recited over mitzva performance (*birchot ha-mitzva*), even though *birchot ha-mitzva* typically include the phrase “*asher kideshanu be-mitzvotav ve-tzivanu*,” “Who has sanctified us through His commandments and commanded us,” and *birchot ha-Torah* do not. Rashi takes this view.[[12]](#footnote-12)

*Sefer Ha-ora* (attributed to Rashi), Buber edition 1:11

What is the reason that we recite a *beracha*…Because it [*keri'at ha-Torah*] is an independent mitzva, as Ezra enacted, and it is like the mitzva of *tefillin* or of *tzitzit* or other *mitzvot*, that if one performs it, he must recite a *beracha*…

**II. Birchot Ha-shevach**  Given that the *berachot* do not employ the classic formula of *birchot ha-mitzva*, they may be blessings of praise, *birchot ha-shevach*, instead. The Talmud Yerushalmi implies as much, noting that the *berachot* serve to show honor to the Torah, ensuring that it not be left bare:

Yerushalmi *Megilla* 4:1

Rav Shmuel bar Nachman said: Rav Yonatan was passing in front of the Torah [reading]. He heard their voices reading and not reciting *berachot*. He said to them: Until when will you make the Torah totally bare?

Tur seems to take this view as well, noting that even a Torah reader who has already personally recited *birchot ha-Torah* upon arising must repeat the *beracha* of "*asher bachar banu*" upon reading the Torah, because the *beracha* was enacted in order to show honor to the Torah.

Tur OC 139

Rav Yehuda Barceloni wrote in the name of Sa'adya Ga'on…even though he has already recited a *beracha* on the Torah in the morning before reciting *korbanot*, he goes back and recites "*asher bachar banu*" when he reads the Torah, and this is not a *beracha* in vain, for it was enacted out of honor to the Torah when he reads in public.

Even if the *berachot* are *birchot ha-shevach*, Tur presents them as part of the enactment of *keri'at ha-Torah*. Thus, they would not be recited outside of the halachic context of *keri'at ha-Torah*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

# Women Reciting Berachot

We've seen that women could, in theory, be included among those who read Torah for the community, but that this is overridden by considerations of *kevod ha-tzibbur* (which we will discuss in our next installment). Theoretically, if a woman were to read the Torah as part of *keri'at ha-Torah*, would she also recite the *berachot*?

In a discussion of women reciting *berachot* over voluntary mitzva performance, Tosafot address this question and consider three possible approaches. (We've numbered them for convenience.)

Tosafot *Rosh Ha-shana* 33a s.v. *Ha Rabbi Yehuda*

**[I]** And Rabbi Yitzchak bar Rav Yehuda brings a proof that women recite a *beracha* over any positive time-bound mitzva from that which we say (*Megilla* 23a) "Everyone counts towards the number seven, even a woman and even a minor" even though a woman isn’t commanded to occupy herself with Torah, as it says in the first chapter of *Kiddushin* (34a) and in the beginning of the third chapter of *Eiruvin* (27a). **[II]** And Rabbeinu Tam says that this is not a proof, for *birkat ha-Torah* before and after [the reading] is not [recited] because of Talmud Torah, for even if he recited the *beracha* of "*ve-ha'arev na*" or discharged the obligation [of reciting personal *birchot ha-Torah*] with *ahava rabba*, he recites the *beracha* again [for the reading]…**[III]** further, that one can say that this, that a woman can count, is in the middle [readings] for they weren’t in the habit of reciting the *beracha* [for those] as is brought in the third chapter of *Megilla* (21a)….and nevertheless "count toward the number seven" sounds like the end of the seven…

**I. Recited as Birchot Ha-mitzva** If these are *berachot* over a mitzva, and women are exempt from the *mitzva* of *keri'at ha-Torah*, then whether a woman recites them might depend on whether she generally recites [*berachot* over voluntary *mitzva* performance](https://www.deracheha.org/beracha-on-voluntary-performance/). This seems to be the view of Rav Yitzchak bar Rav Yehuda, who maintains that women readers would recite the *berachot* over performing the mitzva voluntarily.

**II. Recited as Birchot Ha-shevach** If the *berachot* are not *birchot ha-mitzva*, but *berachot* of praise, in honor of the Torah, then perhaps a woman could recite them when she reads as part of *keri'at ha-Torah*, much as she recites any *beracha* of praise. This seems to be the view of Rabbeinu Tam, who maintains that women readers recited the *berachot*, but not as *birchot ha-mitzva*.

This seems to be in line with Rabbeinu Mano'ach’s position that it is appropriate for a woman reader to recite *berachot* over the Torah, because of her general obligation in *mitzvot*:

*Sefer Ha-menucha,* *Tefilla* 12:17

For women were commanded in the *mitzvot* written in the Torah, and if so they can recite the *berachot "asher bachar banu*" and "*asher natan lanu*" and read from the Torah like men, were it not for *kevod ha-tzibbur*…

**III. Not Recited?** If the *berachot* are meant to discharge an obligation to recite *berachot* over a mitzva, or even to recite *berachot* of praise enacted to be said over a mitzva, then perhaps a woman **could not** recite them, because she is not obligated in the mitzva.

This view might motivate Tosafot's suggestion that a woman could only read middle readings from the Torah, at the stage **before** the middle readers recited *berachot*. Me'iri suggests something like this:

*Beit Ha-bechira* (Me'iri) *Megilla* 23a

…There is one who explains that these things were said only regarding a time when they would read the middle [readings] without a *beracha*, then a woman would be able to read in the middle. But nowadays, when everyone recites a *beracha*, a woman does not read at all, and thus logic dictates, for how will she recite a *beracha* when she is exempt?…

Ran also understands the reader’s *berachot* as discharging obligations. However, he offers a different understanding of the halachic implications of the shift to multiple *berachot*.

Ran *Megilla* 13a (Rif pagination)

According to the fundamental law also that only the first and the last recite a *beracha*, a woman and a minor don’t read the first or the last because of the *beracha* because it is impossible that other readers would discharge their obligation through their [women’s and minors'] *beracha*. Nevertheless, now that our sages have enacted that all [readers] recite a *beracha*, a woman and a minor read even the first and the last, and since they read, they certainly recite a beracha.

On Ran's view, once all the readers recite *berachot,* no specific reader is needed to discharge another’s obligation. In that case, a woman could read any of the readings in *keri'at ha-Torah* and recite the *berachot* over her own reading. This view would square with the Tosafot's final observation that the language of the Talmud seems to imply that a woman would have recited the final *beracha* as the final reader.

Thus, though there is a view that would prohibit it, a number of halachic paths could justify a woman reader reciting the *berachot* as part of *keri'at ha-Torah*, were it permissible for her to read.

# The Ba'al Korei

Reading the Torah properly is no simple proposition. Yet the enactment calls for multiple readers.[[14]](#footnote-14) Two primary strategies for ensuring a proper *keri'at ha-Torah*, despite the difficulty of reading, emerge from rabbinic literature.

**I. A Single Reader** The Tosefta describes a situation in which a synagogue has only a single viable reader. In that case, that one reader would read in seven installments.

Tosefta *Megilla* 3:12

A synagogue where they have only one person who can read, he stands up and reads and sits down, and stands up and reads and sits down, stands up and reads and sits down, even seven times

The implication is that the need for a proper reading supersedes the requirement for distinct readers. Someone incapable of reading properly would simply not be called to the Torah.[[15]](#footnote-15)

**II. A Reader's Helper** A second strategy was to have a helper, initially the *shali'ach tzibbur* (prayer leader), assist the reader, sometimes reading each and every word in a whisper for the reader to repeat at full volume.[[16]](#footnote-16)

Tosafot explain that this assistance was put into place so that the inexpert reader would not be embarrassed. This follows the model of *mikra bikkurim* (the formula recited upon bringing first fruits to *beit ha-mikdash*), which was repeated word for word by the person obligated to recite it:

Tosafot *Menachot* 30a s.v. *Shemoneh*

…For in the days of the Sages it was not the normal practice for the *shaliach tzibbur* to assist the Torah reader … and the custom nowadays for the *shaliach tzibbur* to assist the Torah reader is in order not to shame one who does not know how to read, as with the matter that we find in *Bikkurim* (3:7), that they established that they read the entirety [of *mikra* *bikkurim* for the person bringing first fruits] to repeat…

According to most views, the obligation to recite the *berachot* falls specifically on the reader. Therefore, the repetition of the *shali'ach tzibbur*'s words by the "reader" would be critical.

Over time, the two strategies converged to prevent a reader from overestimating his abilities and insisting on reading unassisted. The *shali'ach tzibbur* would read the entire portion aloud. More recently, the *shali'ach tzibbur* has been replaced in many communities by a dedicated Torah reader, known as a *ba'al korei*, and the person once referred to as the "reader" is more properly called an "*oleh*," one who "comes up" to the Torah for an "*aliyah*."

What remains unclear, though, is how an *oleh* can recite the *berachot*, given that, according to most opinions, the obligation to recite them falls specifically upon the person who is reading from the Torah scroll. We find three central suggestions for how this can work, none of which is clear-cut.

**I. Reading Along** Rosh suggests that the *oleh* maintain his status as a Torah reader by reading quietly along with the *ba'al korei*.

Rosh *Megilla* 3:1

…Since not everyone is expert in the cantillation for the reading, and the community do not discharge their obligation with his reading. But in his own eyes, he knows [how to read] and if they do not allow him to read from the Torah, he may come to quarrel with the *shali’ach tzibbur*. Therefore, they established that the *shali’ach tzibbur*, who is expert in reading, should read. In any case, the one who stands up to read should also read quietly and precisely along with the *shali’ach tzibbur*, so it will not be a *beracha le-vatala* [in vain]. It is not proper for the *shali’ach tzibbur* to read for someone who does not know how to read [even with assistance], and this is a *beracha le-vatala* and it does not make sense for him to recite a *beracha* over the reading of the *shali’ach tzibbur*…

Shulchan Aruch supports this suggestion as a preferred halachic course of action.[[17]](#footnote-17) This arrangement could theoretically work for a female *ola* as well.

It's not clear, though, that reading along suffices on its own. Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach articulates what might be lacking:

Halichot Shelomo, Keriat Ha-Torah 12, note 3

…The principle of the thing is not clear, because if we suspect that his *beracha* is *le-vatala*, what do we gain from his also reading to himself along with the reader…for he is not reading in public, and this requires study.

Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach views the berachot of keri'at ha-Torah as berachot over reading aloud for the community, not just over reading from a Torah scroll during keri'at *ha-Torah*. If that is the case, then an *oleh* who cannot be heard by the community may need to avail himself of another path in order to connect to the public reading. As we'll see, such paths might also create complications for a theoretical female *ola* or *ba'alat korei*, even were *kevod hatzibbur* not at issue.

**II. Shomei'a Ke-oneh**  Perhaps the *oleh* need not read along at all, but rather is himself still considered the reader, through the halachic mechanism of *shomei'a ke-oneh*, that one who hears is tantamount to one who responds—or, in this case, *shomei'a ke-korei*, tanatmount to one who **reads**. Beit Yosef raises this possibility:[[18]](#footnote-18)

*Beit Yosef* OC 141

For one can say that as long as the *oleh* hears what the *shali’ach tzibbur* reads, and has intention for his words, it is as if he is reading, for *shomei’a ke-oneh* [a listener is like a responder] (*Sukka* 38).

The problem is that it's not clear why *shomei'a ke-korei* should apply to the *oleh* any more than to anyone else listening, such that specifically the *oleh* should be considered the reader and recite the *beracha*. In his *Bei'ur Halacha*, Mishna Berura raises this problem and suggests a potential solution.

*Bei’ur Halacha* 141

…When he does not read himself, he is no different from the rest of the people of the congregation who hear. If so, how is he allowed to recite a *beracha* – the Sages did not enact a *beracha* over *keri’at ha-Torah* for the listeners. [Note: One can resolve this in a forced way…that the *shali’ach tzibbur* has in mind to discharge only the obligation of the *oleh* for whom he is reading…and for the rest of the congregation, it is mere hearing [for the *shali’ach tzibbur* does not intend to discharge their obligation at all, and actual *shomei’a ke-oneh* does not apply to them] and thus the *beracha* applies to him [the *oleh*] and not to them [the congregation]…

Mishna Berura himself calls this solution, that the *ba'al korei* could have in mind for only the *oleh* to be *shomei'a ke-korei*, "forced." Alternatively, when possible, an *oleh* might distinguish himself from the other congregants by both relying on *shomei'a ke-oneh* and reading along quietly from the scroll.

Now, if *keri'at ha-Torah* conforms to standard halachic models, then *shomei'a ke-korei* might be able to connect the *oleh* to the *ba'al korei* only when the *ba'al korei* is—or both parties are—subject to the communal obligation of *keri'at ha-Torah*. *Kevod ha-tzibbur* aside, that might rule out women from acting as *ba'alat* *korei* who would have to initiate the relevant halachic mechanism—or even as *ola*—when the *ba'al korei* and *oleh* are distinct people. This could be problematic unless it suffices for an *oleh*, or *ola*, to read along quietly without recourse to *shomei'a ke-oneh*.

The multiplicity and complexity of attempts to define the mitzva of *keri'at ha-Torah*, the nature of its *berachot*, and how the modern *oleh-ba'al korei* relationship works complicate analysis of whether a woman could theoretically serve as *ola* or *ba'alat korei* when those roles are separate.[[19]](#footnote-19)

# Women's Readings

So far, we've investigated the workings of an *aliya la-Torah* in the context of a *minyan*, during *keri'at ha-Torah.* Is there a possibility for an *aliya la-Torah* in any other context? Starting in the 1970's, the women's *tefilla* movement has raised this question by popularizing all-women's Torah-readings, typically taking place monthly and on special occasions.

This mission statement of Women's Tefilla at Sha'arei Tefilla in Newton, MA is typical of current women's *tefilla* groups:[[20]](#footnote-20)

Women's Tefillah Group (www.shaarei.org), Congregation Shaarei Tefillah, Newton MA

Our Women's Tefillah Group aims to support the spirituality of women and girls of all ages and levels of Jewish education. We provide a **makom tefillah** for prayer services and life cycle events (bat mitzvah, **Shabbat kallah**, yahrtzeit, etc) at a level with which each individual is comfortable. Events include **Shacharit** services a few times a year, monthly **Mincha** on **Shabbat mevorachim**, **Megillot** readings, **Kabbalat Shabbat** services, and a **Simchat Torah** service and celebration. We also teach women seeking to lead services by **leyning**, or functioning as a **chazzanit** or **gabbayit**.

Per this description, women participating in women's readings seek a combination of spiritual support and ritual leadership. Though Halacha recognizes active listening to *keri'at Ha-Torah* as fulfilling a mitzva, some women also wish to take a leading role, to be close to a Torah scroll, and to learn how to read from the Torah, opportunities in short supply outside of the women's tefilla context.

Women's *tefilla* groups, and especially women's readings, have drawn substantial rabbinic opposition, perhaps most famously in a 1985 responsum co-signed by a number of prominent Yeshiva University Rashei Yeshiva and in a full-fledged ban on them issued by the Va'ad Rabbanim of Queens in 1997. Contemporaneous reporting noted that the Queens ban centered on the Torah reading and it is also an important component of the Rashei Yeshivas' ruling.[[21]](#footnote-21)

While denominational concerns surely played some role in this decision, there was also an independent halachic basis to the ban. Elements of what we have learned about *keri'at ha-Torah* can help us understand the halachic discussion of women's readings.

We have seen that *keri'at ha-Torah* requires a minyan, that women are generally not considered obligated in *keri'at ha-Torah*, but theoretically could have counted as readers on at least a limited basis (though this is ruled out in practice*)*, and that a woman reading in the presence of a minyan would likely have recited the *berachot*.

Sincewomen's *tefilla* groups take place without a minyan, they cannot halachically include *keri'at ha-Torah*. Rather, Torah reading in these groups has the halachic status of group study from a Torah scroll. Since women's readings have the status of Torah study and not of *keri'at ha-Torah*, our discussion of women's theoretical ability to read and recite the *berachot* as part of *keri'at ha-Torah* in a minyan does not transfer to women’s readings.

These readings, or study sessions, raise a few central questions, some of which relate to our analysis of *keri'at ha-Torah* and the aliya:

**I. Using a Scroll for Study** May women use a Torah scroll for study? As we discuss [here](https://www.deracheha.org/contact-with-sefer-torah/), the Tosefta, permits study from a Torah scroll to both men and women, even those who are ritually impure:

Tosefta *Berachot* 2:12

The *zavim*and the *zavot* and the *niddot* and the *yoldot* are permitted to read Torah, Prophets, and Writings, and to learn mishna, midrash, halacha and aggada.

Rambam[[22]](#footnote-22) and Shulchan Aruch[[23]](#footnote-23) rule accordingly.

At the same time, we are typically careful not to take a Torah out of the *aron kodesh* or to move it from place to place when not necessary. As the Yerushalmi teaches, we follow the Torah, and not vice versa:

Talmud Yerushalmi *Yoma* 7:1

Everywhere, you say that we follow the Torah.

Moving a sefer Torah is often permitted so that women can fulfill the mitzva of hearing parshat [*zachor*](https://www.deracheha.org/arba-parashiyot/), but in that situation fulfilling a Torah-level obligation is potentially at stake. One point of debate about women's readings is whether women's paucity of opportunities to be close to a Torah scroll creates another state of necessity warranting its use for women's readings. This might roughly correspond to educational institutions taking out a *sefer Torah* to show it to students outside the context of *keri'at ha-Torah*.

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank rules that a Torah written for the purpose of individual study may be moved freely.

Responsa *Har Tzvi* OC I:71

Regarding a Torah scroll of an individual, which was initially written for himself to study with, I already said that it's possible that they only prohibited moving the Torah scroll when it is one that was dedicated from the outset for the purpose of a synagogue. But a Torah scroll that from the outset was written for the individual to learn from it, he is permitted to move it with him wherever he is.

Using a privately owned scroll, rather than one kept by a synagogue, might help address halachic concerns about taking out or moving the Torah when not halachically necessary.

**II. Not Attending *Keri'at ha-Torah*** May a woman choose to attend a women's reading over attending *keri'at ha-Torah*?

As we've [discussed](https://www.deracheha.org/keriat-ha-torah-1-the-reading/), active listening to *keri'at ha-Torah* and learning from it fulfills a mitzva. Women are widely understood as not obligated to attend *keri'at ha-Torah*, but should still make an effort to be attentive to *keri'at ha-Torah* when present for it. This means that not attending *keri'at ha-Torah* is **not** a transgression. Indeed, when a woman would not otherwise attend *keri'at ha-Torah*, studying Torah with other women could be preferable to other activities.

At the same time, if a woman would otherwise attend a *keri'at ha-Torah* and deliberately chooses not to in order to attend a women's reading, she actively forgoes the opportunity to fulfill a mitzva in favor of a spiritual experience. In his responsum on women's tefilla groups, Rav Hershel Schachter summarizes his concern about this type of choice:

Rav Hershel Schachter, *Tze’i Lach Be'ikvei Ha-tzon*, 22.

The *mitzvot* are incomplete [in women's *tefilla* groups]…For they [women attending the groups] don’t have a fulfillment of *keri'at ha-Torah*, but were they to come to synagogue to hear *keri'at ha-Torah* with responding to *barechu*, this fulfillment would be in hand…

This argument is at its most compelling in communities that make concerted efforts to encourage women to attend *keri'at ha-Torah* in general.

**III. Creating a Ritual** When, if ever, is it appropriate to create a new ritual, in place of a halachic one? The Sifra, followed by the Talmud, teaches us that our sages would enable women to perform a simulated act of *semicha*, leaning on sacrifices, in *beit ha-mikdash,* in order to provide spiritual gratification for women:

Sifra, *Dibura De-Nedava* II 2:2

Rabbi Yosei and Rabbi Shimon say: Women lean [as a matter of] *reshut*. Rabbi Yosei said: Abba Elazar said to me: We had a calf for a peace offering, and we brought it out to the women’s courtyard, and the women leaned on it. Not because leaning is [the law] with women, but rather because of *nachat ru’ach shel nashim*[women’s gratification].

Women's readings might seem to follow in this tradition, by giving women the feeling of conducting a *keri'at ha-Tora*h, and thus *semicha* may provide a halachic precedent for them. However, a number of halachic authorities, have strenuously objected to this analogy.

Rav Hershel Schachter, for instance, has argued that the quasi-*semicha* performed by women was only permitted because women could not perform true *semicha*. In our case, women have the option to fulfill the mitzva of *keri'at ha-Torah* by attending synagogue and hearing *keri’at ha-Torah*.

Rav Hershel Schachter, *Tze’i Lach Be'ikvei Ha-tzon*, pp. 22; 36

…Even though we have found that the Tannaim at the time of the Temple permitted women to lean on their sacrifices in a partial way…it seems simple that this is specifically in this case, where it is impossible for them really to fulfill the mitzva. But regarding a mitzva which one can fulfill fully, certainly it is incorrect to ruin it and to perform [the act] in a way that will not fulfill it [the mitzva]…[From a letter appended sent by Rav Schachter and other Roshei Yeshiva] It seems that these practices are halachically prohibited for a number of reasons…and this entails an element of falsifying the Torah…

Rav J. David Bleich, too, articulates special concerns about creating alternative rituals for experiential and spiritual purposes.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Rav J David Bleich, *Contemporary Halachic Problems III*, Part I, ch. 5 Sefaria Edition

In instituting *Kri'at ha-Torah* complete with *aliyot* (although without recitation of blessings) there is manifest a clear desire to establish a formal, innovative, liturgical ritual. That, in itself, is objectionable….The concern is not with regard to the act per se; the act itself is indeed perfectly innocuous and no ostensible halakhic objection can be raised. The objection is that the practice acquires the characteristics and overtones of a divinely mandated ritual and as such itself becomes a *ziyuf ha-Torah*—a falsification of the *mesorah*, i.e., of the Law handed down from generation to generation…One hesitates to state that Torah reading and aliyot, at least as now practiced by women's prayer groups, fall within the category of the forbidden ritual innovations prescribed by Rambam in Hilkhot Melakhim. Nevertheless, it appears that such practices come dangerously close to being so.

Though Rav Bleich stops short of calling women's readings a clear violation of the halacha against falsifying the Torah, he argues that creating an experiential ritual meant to emulate *keri'at ha-Torah* while lacking its halachic force is "dangerously" misleading.

In more measured tones, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein writes that the spiritual gratification women's readings can provide does not outweigh their potential negative effects:

Responsum of Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, *Bat Mitzva*, Matan (Jerusalem: 2002), 514.

I understand the feelings of those who advocate for these frameworks when they try to advance the establishment of such a ritual…I, personally, have doubts about developing separate groups, and as follows, also do not recommend holding a Torah reading for girls, and what is associated with it in their framework…I accede to the credible testimony of women who indicate that specifically in these frameworks their spiritual experience is exalted…I am concerned that from an overall perspective and in the long term, the suggested change will split the congregation, undermine the custom and heritage of Israel, and even harm the halachic fulfillments of *tefilla* itself…

Rav Lichtenstein seems concerned that an experiential ritual can undermine halachic ritual. His voice is representative of many halachic authorities who do not prohibit the readings, but view their ritual overtones warily.

**IV. Berachot** May women's readings include *berachot*, or alternative recitations?

Participants in women's readings are often interested in the opportunity to read from the Torah or to receive an "*aliya*." When there is no minyan for *keri'at ha-Torah*, however, halachic consensus is that the *berachot* enacted *for* *keri'at ha-Torah* cannot be recited and that care should be taken not to give the impression that the reading has the status of a *keri'at ha-Torah*. For example, in a community that cannot field a full minyan, the Torah may be read, but without *berachot* and generally by only one reader.[[25]](#footnote-25)

*Sha'arei Efrayim* 7:38

Communities where there is no minyan, that want to read the portion in the Torah in their group without a *beracha* at all are permitted [to do so]. They can also say the haftara from Prophets without a *beracha* at all. And they should not call *olim* to the Torah, only one [reader] should read the entire portion from the *sefer* [Torah], and the rest should hear.

With respect to women's groups, Rav Moshe Feinstein reportedly ruled that even a woman who has not recited her *birchot ha-Torah* upon arising, and thus should still recite them, should not do so aloud prior to participating in a women's reading.

Rav Moshe Feinstein, cited in Aryeh and Dov Frimer, "Women's Prayer Services—Theory and Practice," *Tradition* 32:2 (Winter 1998), 34.

They [women] may also read from the Torah, though they should be careful not to do so in such a manner as to create the erroneous impression that this constitutes *keriat ha-Torah.* Thus, for example, they should not recite the Torah benedictions [*birchot ha-Torah*] aloud, but should either rely on the benedictions recited earlier [in *birchot ha-shahar*] or, in a case where they have not yet made these blessings, should recite them privately.

Rav Moshe reportedly later added that he thought it unlikely that women's readings could meet the standards required to be permissible.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Women's readings thus are often engaged in a delicate tug of war between participants' desires to make the women's reading resemble *keri'at ha-Torah* and at the same time to have the women's reading conform to halacha and not misrepresent it.

Different communities have addressed this issue in a number of ways. Some have participants read the Torah without making any ritual recitations while some have participants recite verses in praise of Torah that echo the ideas and language of *berachot*. Particularly popular is the following verse from *Tehillim*, precisely because it closely resembles a *beracha* about learning Torah without technically being one.

*Tehillim* 119:12

Blessed are You, God, teach me your ordinances.

Other women's readings instruct participants to jump through a number of halachic hoops in order to skirt the prohibition of reciting a *beracha* in vain and to have the ability to recite "*asher bachar banu*" prior to a reading. Here is one example, from a women's *tefillah* in Manhattan, taking up a suggestion popularized by Rav Avi Weiss:[[27]](#footnote-27)

"Women's Tefillah at Ramath Orah," (www.ramathorah.org) Ramath Orah, Manhattan NY

Women aren’t obligated in the mitzvah of *kriyat haTorah b’tzibur*, communal Torah reading, so they cannot constitute a minyan to allow for official *aliyot*. Therefore, the *kriyat haTorah* of a women’s *tefillah* group constitutes an act of Torah study, not a communal Torah reading. At our women’s *tefillah* group, we will say the *bracha* of אשר בחר בנו (*asher bachar banu*) before an *aliya* (which is the same *bracha* said in a regular minyan, just without *barchu*). We cannot say *barchu* because it is one of the *devarim shebikedushah* which can only be said in a minyan…Women who receive an *aliya* in the women’s *tefillah* group shouldn’t say the *bracha* of *asher bachar banu* in the morning, rather they should delay their recitation of the *bracha* and say it only on their *aliya* in the women’s *tefillah*…Saying *ahava rabbah* before *shema* can be counted as your *birkot haTorah* if you haven’t yet said them. Therefore, when you say *ahava rabbah,* you must keep in mind that it doesn't count as your *birkot haTorah* so that you are able to say them when you get an aliya. An alternate suggestion is not to say *ahava rabbah* since women aren’t obligated in it…It is best to silently recite *laasok b’divrei Torah* immediately before you say *asher bachar banu* out loud in order to say them together. Women cannot say the *bracha* that is usually said after an *aliya* since it is a *bracha* on the mitzvah of communal Torah reading which women aren’t obligated in. Therefore, we will substitute the text of *baruch hamakom* and *lamdeni chukecha* (a pasuk from Tehillim, not a *bracha*) to say in place of this *bracha*.

The suggestion that a woman who ordinarily recites *birchot ha-Torah* or *ahava rabba* deliberately delay or omit them from her prayer for the sake of the women's reading presents some difficulties. Ideally, women should recite the *berachot* every morning [upon arising](https://www.deracheha.org/prayer-3-upon-arising/), and halachically this recitation should take precedence over experiential ritual. It is also unclear how a woman who has omitted these *berachot* would justify listening to the women's reading, yet waiting until after other women have read to recite her own.

As above, Rav Moshe Feinstein was opposed to a woman who had not yet said *birchot ha-Torah* reciting any part of them aloud in public as part of a women's reading, specifically lest that leave the impression that women were reciting *berachot* over *keri'at ha-Torah*.

A number of halachic authorities, including Rav Baruch Gigi, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, object directly to this delaying strategy:

Responsum of Rav Baruch Gigi, *Bat Mitzva*, Matan, (Jerusalem, 2002), p. 519.

…It’s obvious that *keri’at ha-Torah* requires ten, and therefore if only women are present, it is not possible to read from the Torah, for this is one of the *devarim she-bikdusha* that require ten…It is the custom in a few places that women gather to read from the Torah without *berachot*, and regarding this—even though in my humble opinion it is not recommended to do thus, because of the breach that it may cause—in any event there is no halachic impediment. In my humble opinion, one should not allow women to recite a *beracha* before the reading, even if they did not recite *birkat ha-Torah* that they recite every day, out of concern that they will come to err and permit recitation of the *beracha* [at the women's reading] on a regular basis. All the more so, there are no grounds at all to permit a final *beracha* after *keri’at ha-Torah*…

Although he does not recommend them, Rav Gigi does not think that there is a clear halachic impediment to women's readings without *berachot*, and does not rule out reciting verses preceding or following each reading. As a document circulated a few years ago by JOFA (Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance) attests, a fair number of women’s *tefilla* groups that JOFA surveyed comply with this type of ruling.

However, ten out of twenty-three groups surveyed do allow for *berachot* to be recited, without *barechu*. The reasoning for this likely resembles that of the group at Ramath Orah, though only one group reports itself as actively clarifying this for participants. [[28]](#footnote-28)

Pam and Liat Greenwood, "Torah Service in Women's Tefillah Groups,"

There are many different women's *tefillah* groups around the world, with significant variations in practice. The most variable area concerns the blessings women recite before and after their *aliyot*….In Spring 2015, JOFA surveyed women’s *tefillah* groups to better understand their variety of approaches for conducting the Torah Service….When asked how each group refers to the Torah Service, five groups responded that their service is called a *Limmud Torah* (Torah Learning), fifteen responded that their service is called a *Kriyat HaTorah* (Torah Reading) and two reported that they use either term. One group frames the service as *Limmud Torah* by having the congregation recite [*Birkat HaTorah*](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B98tXj0ZVTbfR1ZyaEcyZ3Y5NXc/view?usp=sharing) together before reading from the Torah. In all but two of the groups, a woman approaches the Torah and recites a blessing or Biblical passage before the reading. In many groups -- but not all -- the woman recites a closing blessing/passage as well. The [standard *aliyot* without *Barchu*](https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B98tXj0ZVTbfSWp6QUlRSm9HY3c/view?usp=sharing) are recited by women called to the Torah. (10 groups) Women who are being called to the Torah are reminded beforehand to omit the recitation of [*Birkat HaTorah*](https://drive.google.com/open?id=0B98tXj0ZVTbfR1ZyaEcyZ3Y5NXc)during the morning service. (1 group) A woman recites the standard *aliyah* without *Barchu* but she omits *shem v’ malchut* (*Hashem elokeinu melech ha’olam*) if she has already said *Birkat HaTorah* that morning. (2 groups)…The blessing *Baruch atah Hashem lamdeini chukecha* (*Tehillim* 119:2) is the most popular for alternative *aliyot*. It is used in a variety of ways -- either before or after the Torah reading -- often in combination with other passages. (6 groups).

Even this description blurs the halachic meaning of "aliya" and "blessing." In practice, as this document makes clear, the distinction between Torah study and *keri'at ha-Torah* is not clearly maintained in many groups, and nearly all groups that responded to the JOFA survey include recitations before and after the readings so that they resemble *aliyot* as much as possible.

Given the weight of the halachic objections to women's readings and the wide range of practices and perspectives on them, it is critical for women potentially interested in participating in a women's reading to clarify in advance how it is conducted and under whose halachic guidance.

What broader questions do women's readings raise?

It's important for women to connect over shared love of Torah and to learn Torah together. Learning to read the Torah with cantillations can deeply enrich anyone's understanding of Torah.

Though women's readings are a potential venue for these activities, they have met with halachic objections, centering on use of the Torah scroll, imitation of keri'at ha-Torah, and reciting berachot le-vatala. Some groups address the concern about using the Torah scroll by having their own or by using a chumash. Several groups address the concern of reciting berachot le-vatala by reciting verses rather than berachot, or by simply omitting recitations with the reading. Other groups may instead have received rulings that allow reciting berachot under certain circumstances, though such rulings remain outside of halachic consensus.

The question of imitation may present the greatest challenge for women's readings. At the end of the day, a woman reading from a Torah in a tefilla group is indeed reading from the Torah in public, yet halacha does not recognize this act as keri'at ha-Torah. Is the goal of a woman's reading to approximate keri'at ha-Torah as possible, or to find a different mode of coming together for study?

A young woman, writing for the JOFA's The Torch blog, explains what motivates her to participate in women's readings, making it clear that resembling keri'at ha-Torah is what she seeks:[[29]](#footnote-29)

Josephine Schizer, "Revitalizing Women’s Tefilla Groups," *The Torch* (Blog)

Women’s tefillah has enormous value for Modern Orthodox women today….Anyone can lead, *leyn*, or [have an](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/aliyah/)*aliyah*(be called to the Torah). The davening is almost the same as the main minyan, just sans the men and the *devarim shebekedusha* …When I sit in the main minyan and listen to men davening, reading Torah, and getting *aliyot*, I feel like a passive audience member, rather than an active participant. While the boys *daven* in the main minyan at school, the women’s side of the *[mechitza](https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/mehitzah-separate-seating-in-the-synagogue/" \t "_blank)*(divider between the men’s and women’s sections of an Orthodox congregation) is largely silent as the girls either zone out or talk….If something has meaning to a group of people and is not halakhically forbidden, why not allow it? Women’s *tefillah* makes women feel included and important in Modern Orthodox Judaism…

Whatever one might think of her argument, the issues she raises about the prevalence of women's detachment in synagogue are real and pressing. In a letter to the Israeli newspaper Mekor Rishon, women from the women's tefilla group of Neve Daniel write about similar tensions from a different perspective:[[30]](#footnote-30)

Avital Cohen-Brenner, Shelomit Eitam, Miriam Adler, and Tanya Regev, “A Sacred Women’s Space,” Makor Rishon, 25.1.2013

Our women’s *tefilla* takes place every Shabbat and *Chag*, and is conducted almost identically to the *tefilla* in the synagogue, except for *devarim she-bikdusha* (which require a minyan of ten)…The *tefilla* includes reading from the Torah (sometimes from a *chumash* and sometimes from a scroll), discussion of the weekly Torah portion, bat mitzva ceremonies, baby-naming ceremonies, and acknowledgment of special life cycle events. Girls get the chance to sing “*Anim Zemirot*” together, and sometimes one sees a boy also joining the group….We are still seeking our special path as a community of praying women. The questions constantly arise: Are we interested in imitating the “male” minyan exactly?

Though this group also speaks of its resemblance to a minyan and desire for women's ritual leadership, the focus here seems to be less on the scroll than on creating a female space for prayer. Imitation is both a starting point and an open question.

Perhaps the women of Ezra's time, and of Talmudic times, felt especially connected to keri'at ha-Torah because the Targum was in place, largely to meet their needs. Though many women of today do feel fully satisfied with attentive listening to keri'at ha-Torah from the ezrat nashim, others don't.

Halacha recognizes listening and thinking about the Torah reading as an active form of participation. Common perception, though, is that these are passive activities and only the readers and olim la-Torah are active.

As many women seek more communal modes of serving God, the questions that women's tefilla groups address—as well as those they raise—continue to challenge our communities.

Can we distinguish active participation in ritual from the opportunity to lead it? How can communities make the most of women's thirst for Torah and spiritual solidarity? Can and should we create opportunities for women to be physically close to a sefer Torah and to learn the intricacies of its cantillation? When women do come together over Torah, what would we like that to mean, and to look like?

These questions are critical ones for our communities to raise and address, even when women's tefilla groups are not at issue.

# Further Reading

Sara Friedland ben Arza ed., *Bat Mitzva*, Jerusalem: Matan, 2002.

Rabbi Aryeh and Rabbi Dov Frimer, “Women, Keri’at ha-Torah and Aliyyot.” *Tradition* 46:4 (Winter 2013), pp. 67-238. Available here: <https://traditiononline.org/special-supplement-women-keriat-ha-torah-and-aliyyot/>

Rabbi Aryeh and Rabbi Dov Frimer, "Women's Prayer Services—Theory and Practice," *Tradition* 32:2 (Winter 1998), pp. 5-118. Available here: <https://traditiononline.org/womens-prayer-services-theory-and-practice-part-i-theory/>

Rav Binyamin Hamburger, "*Ha-korei Ba-Torah*." *Zechor Le-Avraham*, 5762-3, pp. 679-726.

Rav Yehuda H. Henkin, *Benei Banim* IV:2. Available here: <https://www.sefaria.org.il/Responsa_Benei_Banim%2C_Volume_IV.2.1?lang=he&with=all&lang2=he>

1. This passage has also been taken to refer to the individual's daily recitation of birchot ha-Torah upon arising in the morning. See here: https://deracheha.org/prayer-3-upon-arising/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ramban, Introduction to Torah Commentary on *Sefer Bereishit*

   Furthermore, we have in our hands a received tradition of truth, that the whole entire Torah is names of the Holy One, blessed be He.

   Zohar, vol. 2 (*Shemot*), *Parashat Yitro*, p. 87a

   We have taught, the entire Torah is a Holy Name, for there is no word in the Torah that is not included in the Holy Name [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ra'avan compares *barechu* here to the *barechu* recited at the beginning of *shacharit* and *ma’ariv*. He seems to view the obligation of *keri’at ha-Torah* as individual, and understands *barechu* as a mechanism for the community to signal its acceptance of the leader discharging the obligation of each member.

   Responsa Ra’avan 73

   My brother R’ Chizkiya asked me: One who reads from the Torah, why does he say to the congregation “*barechu et Hashem ha-mevorach*”? Let him bless *birkat ha-Torah*, and that is enough. And I answered him, because Ezra enacted for Israel that they read the Torah on Monday and Thursday and Shabbat, and the Torah reader discharges the community of their obligation to read; therefore, he says to the community, 'you must recite a *beracha* and read like me. Consent to my reading and to my *beracha* and recite the *beracha* with me,' and they respond and [thus] recite the *beracha*. And similarly the prayer leader says with “*yotzer*” and “*ma’ariv*,” since he discharges the obligation of the community and says to them, ‘consent to my reading and to my *beracha* and recite the *beracha* with me,' and they respond and [thus] recite the *beracha* and discharge their obligation. And similarly the one who recites *birkat ha-mazon*, since he discharges [the obligation of] those at the meal, he says to them ‘consent.’ And all these, the sages linked to an enactment of Moshe, who said, “When I call upon God’s name” and you shall “give greatness to our God” and bless Him with me. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Megilla* 23a

   Our rabbis taught [in a baraita]: Everyone counts toward the count of seven, even a minor and even a woman. But our sages said: A woman may not read the Torah, because of *kevod ha-tzibbur* [the honor of the congregation]. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Penei Yehoshua *Megilla* 23a

   The Beit Yosef wrote in OC 282 in the name of the Ge’onim that they enacted for seven to read on Shabbat, lest there is some person who did not hear *barechu* on one of the seven days of the week; therefore, they enacted that he should answer *barechu* seven times after the reader says it. (But in my humble opinion, this requires study, for in the days of the mishna only the first and last reader recited a *beracha*. Perhaps even though the middle [readers] did not recite the actual *birkat ha-Torah*, even so, each one said *barechu*, which is more appropriate for the textual derivation “When I call upon God’s name, give greatness")… [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Though, as we saw above, Chatam Sofer suggests that *barechu* was recited by every reader, even before the *berachot* themselves were. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This may be the implication of the beginning a discussion of the berachot in the Yerushalmi, which considers the first and last reader each reciting a beracha over the Torah as potentially comparable to the mezammen, discharges the obligation to recite a beracha of all participants in zimmun. This also seems to be the view of Me’iri:

   Talmud Yerushalmi *Megilla* 4:1

   R’ Ze’ira asked: these three who read, how do you consider them, like three who ate as one, or like three who each ate separately? If you consider them like three who ate as one, the first [reader] recites the first *beracha* and the last [reader] recites the last *beracha* and the middle [reader] does not recite a *beracha* at all. If you consider them like three who each ate separately, even the middle [reader] recites a *beracha* before it and after it [his reading]. R’ Shemuel bar Avudama said: They learned *birkat ha-Torah* from *birkat ha-mazon*, only regarding a public [reading]? If [only] for the public [reading], [then] even if he is alone, he does not recite a beracha. Rav Abba Mari brother of R’ Yose said: They made it like all the other *mitzvot* in the Torah. Just as all the other *mitzvot* require a *beracha*, so this [reading] requires a *beracha*.

   *Beit Ha-bechira* (Me’iri), *Megilla* 21b

   For the entire reading is one mitzva, and a *beracha* is only [recited] at the beginning and end of the mitzva, so the middle [readers] are exempted by the *beracha* of the first and last reader. But it seems to me that the middle readers need to be there from the beginning until the end so that they can hear the *berachot* and fulfill their obligation by hearing them, and in any case, if they want to make each reading a single mitzva and for each of them to recite the *beracha*, there is no problem of *beracha le-vatala*. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Alternatively, perhaps we can view the *berachot* themselves as a communal obligation, so that any member of the community, and not only the reader, could recite them.

   New Responsa of Rashba (from ms.), 14

   Since *keri’at ha-Torah* is a communal obligation, he is well able to recite the *beracha* even though he does not read. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rashi ad loc.

   Because of those who enter [late] – for if a person enters the synagogue after the first [reader] has recited the *beracha*, then if he did not hear the others recite a *beracha*, he will say: there is no *beracha* over the Torah beforehand.

   And because of those who leave [early] – and did not hear the last reader recite a *beracha* afterwards, and the first [readers] did not recite a *beracha* [after their readings], those who leave will say: there is no *beracha* over the Torah afterwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Taking the second view, Sefer Ha-michtam raises the possibility that the enactment of a *beracha* for each reading was designed to ensure that a reader not arrive late or leave early, and thus miss one of the *berachot* obligatory on him.

    *Sefer Ha-michtam*, Tractate *Megilla*

    …Now, when the public goes in and out during the reading, if none of them recite the *berachot* except the opening and closing [readers], perhaps [someone] will enter between the middle readings and need to read, and read without a *beracha* beforehand, or perhaps [someone] who has already read will leave between the middle readings, so that he will not have recited the *beracha* beforehand [correction: afterwards]… [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See here: <https://www.deracheha.org/prayer-3-upon-arising/> for a parallel discussion of the birchot ha-Torah recited every morning before studying Torah. The second of the two berachot recited each morning is identical to the initial beracha recited over keriat ha-Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Available here:

    <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=8961&st=%d7%a7%d7%a8%d7%99%d7%90%d7%aa+%d7%94%d7%aa%d7%95%d7%a8%d7%94&pgnum=180&hilite>=

    This also seems to be the view of Rashba, who compares the *berachot* of *keri'at ha-Torah* to those recited before and after *hallel* and *megilla.*

    Responsa Rashba VII:540

    …For there [regarding *keri’at ha-Torah*] it is an enactment of Moshe and Ezra, and over enactments we recite *berachot* before them and after them, as we recite *berachot* for *hallel* and for *megilla* reading… [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Masechet Soferim seems to describe an individual reading privately from a Torah scroll as reciting berachot before and after as well. However, this is not normative halacha. See, for example, Orchot Chayyim, who presents a possible reason for why this view is rejected.

    *Masechet Soferim* 13:6

    How does he bless? With ten, he says “Bless God, who is blessed,” privately when he gets up early to read he says, “Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who gives Torah from heaven, eternal life from on high, Blessed are you, God, Who gives the Torah,” and he rolls it up and says, “Blessed are you, Lord our God, King of the universe, Who has given us the Torah of truth and planted eternal life within us, Blessed are You, God, Who gives the Torah.”

    *Orchot Chayyim* I, Laws of Talmud Torah 2

    Some ask, why don’t they recite a *beracha* afterwards like one who reads Torah in public? And they answer that in reading in synagogue in public they don’t interrupt with greetings and not with anything else, but with a Torah in his home it is impossible not to interrupt with speech with his students or with greetings; therefore, they did not establish a *beracha* afterwards. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. A midrash teaches that Rabbi Akiva himself declined the opportunity to read when he felt underprepared, and Shulchan Aruch rules that preparation is obligatory before reading:

    *Midrash Tanchuma, Parashat Yitro* 15

    A story of Rabbi Akiva, when the *chazzan* called him in public to read from the sefer Torah for the community, and he did not want to go up. His students said to him: Rabbeinu, did you not teach us thus: for it [Torah] is your life and the length of your days? Why did you refrain from going up? He said to them: in fact, I did not refrain from reading except because I did not go over that *parasha* two or three times, for a person may not say words of Torah before the community until he reviews it two or three times by himself.

    *Shulchan Aruch OC* 139:1

    In a place where the custom is for the *oleh* himself to read aloud, if he did not first go over the *parasha* two or three times by himself, he should not go up. Rema: In a place where the *chazzan* reads, he [the *chazzan*] needs to go over it first. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Sefer Ha-itim* 178

    Someone who does not know how to read the Torah at all is exempt from reading the Torah at all, and is not even permitted to go up and read from the Torah. And if halacha maintains that one who does not know how to read can go up and another will read in his behalf, if so why do we learn in the Tosefta "Members of a synagogue where they have only one person who can read, , he stands up and reads, sits down and stands up and reads, even seven times… [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Responsa Rashi 274

    Rash z”l wrote: It is a mitzva for each one to read, and if the *oleh* does not know how to read with precision, the *chazzan* should assist him in a whisper. Alternatively, if the *oleh* did not learn, the *chazzan* should say each word for him in a whisper and the reader should read aloud in order that the community will hear and thus discharge its obligation. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Shulchan Aruch* OC 141:2

    Two should not read [simultaneously], but the *oleh* reads and the *shali’ach tzibbur* is silent, or the *shali’ach tzibbur* reads and the *oleh* does not read out loud, and in any case he needs to read along with the *shali’ach tzibbur* in order that his *beracha* not be *le-vatala*, but he needs to read quietly so as not to be heard. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rav Moshe Feinstein makes a related suggestion, that the *ba'al korei* acts as the halachic agent, *shali'ach*, of the *oleh*.

    Responsa *Iggerot Moshe* OC II:72

    …The *oleh* who recites the *beracha* is considered to be the reader who makes it heard to the community, and this is based on the law of *shelichut* [agency], that the reader is his *shali’ach* [agent] to make it heard to the community.

    On this view, though the *ba’al korei* performs the action of reading, the reading is at the *oleh*'s behest and on his behalf, which leaves room for the *oleh* to recite the *berachot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rav Aryeh and Rav Dov Frimer have marshaled extensive halachic support for the argument that a woman could not function as ola or ba'alat korei nowadays because of the dependence on shomei'a ke-oneh or shelichut, independent of kevod ha-tzibbur considerations.

    Rav Aryeh and Rav Dov Frimer, "Women, Keri'at Ha-Torah and Aliyyot." *Tradition*, 46:4

    …Women are not obligated in *keri’at ha-Torah* and concomitantly lack *arevut* for this ritual. Without *arevut*, the Torah reading benedictions of the *oleh* will be unconnected to the reading and, hence*, le-vattala*…. Without obligation and the connectivity of *arevut*, women can serve neither as olot nor as *ba’alot keri’ah*.

    However, they acknowledge that, according to some views, *shomei'a ke-korei* **could** work with a male *ba'al korei* and a female *ola*, even if she does not read along quietly (p. 93-94, 119), and also that there are some halachic authorities who would permit a woman to read the Torah in a pressing situation, but do not relate to these issues as a matter of concern (n. 264). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Available here: <https://www.shaarei.org/womens-tefillah-group.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. [Norimitsu Onishi](https://www.nytimes.com/by/norimitsu-onishi), "Reading the Torah, an Orthodox Women's Group Takes On Tradition." NY Times, 2.16.97

    …A local rabbinical association, the Vaad Harabonim of Queens, issued a resolution prohibiting women's prayer groups, in part because the women broke Jewish tradition, the rabbis said, by publicly reading the Torah….A founding member of the Vaad, which was created in the 1950's, said the rabbis would not have objected if the bas mitzvah had not included a Torah reading.

    Available here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1997/02/16/nyregion/reading-the-torah-an-orthodox-women-s-group-takes-on-tradition.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rambam understands the permission to learn and read Torah as applying to handling the *sefer Torah* itself:

    *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Tefillin* and *Mezuza* and *Sefer Torah* 10:8

    All those who are ritually impure and even *niddot* and even a non-Jew are permitted to hold the *sefer Torah* and read from it, for words of Torah are not susceptible to impurity. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Shulchan Aruch follows suit, quoting Rambam.

    *Shulchan Aruch YD* 282:9

    All the ritually impure, even *niddot*, are permitted to hold the *sefer Torah* and read from it. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Available here: <https://www.sefaria.org/Contemporary_Halakhic_Problems,_Vol_III?lang=bi&p2=Contemporary_Halakhic_Problems%2C_Vol_III%2C_Part_I%2C_Chapter_V_Women.23&lang2=en> [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Available here: <https://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=34320&st=&pgnum=202> [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See Frimer and Frimer, “Women's Prayer Services—Theory and Practice,” p. 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Rav Avi Weiss, *Women at Prayer* (Ktav: 1990), pp. 80-81. A synagogue rabbi consulted wrote that Rabbi Saul Berman pioneered this approach. The full text from Ramath Orah is available here: <https://images.shulcloud.com/585/uploads/CRO-Women%E2%80%99s-Tefillah-halachot.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Available here: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1_JecD7JocVVw-U8l-2t76fbnUZXNqZd9xEVqjTxeZTs/edit> [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Available here: <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/the-torch/revitalizing-womens-tefillah-groups/> [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Available here: <https://musaf-shabbat.com/2013/01/25/%d7%9e%d7%a2%d7%91%d7%a8-%d7%9c%d7%9e%d7%97%d7%99%d7%a6%d7%94-%d7%94%d7%a4%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%9e%d7%99%d7%aa-%d7%aa%d7%92%d7%95%d7%91%d7%95%d7%aa/> [↑](#footnote-ref-30)