

RITUAL AND MEANING: Being Called to the Torah

A ritual is more than a behavior. Ritual enables us to speak in a language of action and symbol as we assert our commitment to ideas and values more powerfully than by words alone.

The public reading of the Torah is a symbolic reenactment of Moses teaching Torah to the People Israel. Each person called to the Torah for an *aliyah* takes a turn in the role of Moses for this reenactment.

When you are called to the Torah, perform these rituals (“action symbols”):

1. Take the shortest path to the reading table, showing eagerness to be close to the Torah. In doing so, begin a personal *counterclockwise* procession around the reading table, emulating the ancient choreography of the Temple priests, who proceeded in a counterclockwise circle around the altar.
2. Note the location of the start of the reading, thereby expressing your intention to teach this particular passage. Signify this by touching the corner of a *tallit* or a Torah belt near that location. Most people then kiss the corner of the *tallit* or belt, a sign of love for the Torah.
3. Grasp a Torah roller (עץ חיים *ets hayyim*) in each hand, affirming literally that the Torah “is a *tree of life* to those who hold onto it” (Proverbs 3:18).
4. Hold the scroll open, look straight ahead or to the ברכות *berakhot* at the side, and recite the first ברכה *berakhah*. We are grateful for God’s gift of Torah.
5. If you are not the public reader, intend that the public reader teaches on your behalf. Move a bit to the right, continue to grasp the right עץ חיים, and read each word quietly as the reader chants, reminiscent of God’s charge to Joshua (Joshua 1:8): “Let this Torah not cease from your lips.”
6. After the reading, touch the scroll again with *tallit* or belt, grasp also the left עץ חיים, and close the scroll. Recite the second ברכה, expressing gratitude for God’s gift of Torah and for its timelessness that we ensure by our continuing study and interpretation.
7. Move counterclockwise (see 1) to the side of the table, and linger throughout the next *aliyah*, showing reluctance to depart from the Torah.
8. After yet another person is called, leave the table, again showing reluctance by taking a long route back to your seat. In doing so, you complete a personal counterclockwise procession around the reading table (see 1).

Being called to the Torah is an experience of personal and intimate contact with the Torah and also a public statement of acceptance of one’s role in the religious Jewish community. Replete with ritual riches, it combines ideas and values spanning millenia, including:

- We reveal our attitude to the Torah by both words and actions.
- We connect with our history through adapted reenactments of past events.
- We serve as teachers in our generation as others did in their generation.

Ritual speaks through history, symbol, role-playing, allusion, and metaphor. Let us attune ourselves to the language and meaning of ritual, so it speaks to us as well as *for* us.