

Carrying the Torah to the People

Shabbat Nitzvim 5775

September 11, 2015

Rabbi Barry Block

Once upon a time in Reform Judaism, the Torah scroll was taken off the *bimah* once a year. We marched with the Torah only on Simchat Torah, the festival when we are specifically enjoined to rejoice with the sacred scrolls. For the last several years, though, the *hakafah*, bringing the scroll into the congregation has become a staple of our Shabbat morning worship.

For some Reform Jews, the *hakafah* smacks of an orthodoxy they have thoughtfully decided to reject. Others love it, because it evokes the warmth of a traditional Judaism they embrace. Still others find the *hakafah* distasteful, for it is a departure from the established decorum of Reform Jewish worship. There are also those who welcome what they view as a new ritual, bringing Reform Jews closer to the Torah scroll than ever before.

For some, the *hakafah* smacks of idolatry. The ritual focuses our attention on a specific symbol. We turn to face the Torah. We kiss it. Are we worshipping the Torah? Are we lavishing upon the Torah scroll a level of adoration that ought to be reserved only for God? Are we venerating the Torah as a physical object, while ignoring the Torah as God's teaching?

These questions are not merely theoretical. In recent years, Reform congregations have embraced increasing numbers of traditional Jewish rituals. In some congregations, rituals have taken precedence over good works, which used to be the primary focus of Reform Judaism. If the *hakafah* and other traditions focus us exclusively on our religious observances, if we consequently ignore our duties to humanity, then the scroll of the Torah will have defeated the will of God.

The principled argument in favor of the *hakafah*, though, answers this challenge directly: A ritual that venerates the symbol of God's word may actually inspire us to do God's word. Many are moved by the Torah procession, recalling earlier years when they had never previously been so close to the Torah scroll. Coming close to the Torah scroll places us in the commanding presence of God's word, which may inspire more of us to do it.

The *hakafah* also responds to a criticism that has often been leveled at modern American Jews. Some say that Jewish lay people have left their Jewish obligations to be done by rabbis alone. Instead of performing the mitzvah of *bikkur cholim*, visiting ill and infirm members of our Jewish community, congregations have deployed rabbis to do this task on their behalf. Instead of observing the commandment to study Torah, to be knowledgeable Jews, congregations deputize their rabbis to know the Jewish tradition for them.

We may certainly dispute this charge. Members of our own Temple do take their Jewish obligations seriously. Moreover, since most congregants must attend full-time to school, work, and family demands, none can be expected to spend as much time as rabbis do fulfilling the requirements of Judaism. After all, that's my full time job.

Still, who would dispute that there's room for growth? As the Torah scroll is carried off the *bimah* and through the congregation, we affirm that the word of God is incumbent upon all Jews, and not on rabbis alone.

That's the point of tonight's Torah reading, after all. Torah is not up in heaven, or across the sea, that we need some specially trained sage or seer to go retrieve it for us. The *hakafah*, carrying the physical scroll to the people, symbolizes the responsibility of every Jew to study, to learn, and to observe the commandments of the Torah.

Rabbis are expected to be masters of the Jewish tradition who teach the Torah and interpret its commandments for the people. Rabbis are not priests, who intercede for the people before God. Each individual Jew is empowered to pray to God directly, requiring no intermediary. Each individual Jew is required to do what God demands in the Torah. By bringing each congregant into close proximity with the scroll of God's word, the *hakafah* signifies the direct relationship between the people and God.

That relationship is one of the historic insights of Judaism. Years ago, I had the opportunity to study with Dr. Jeffrey Tigay of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Tigay is an expert in the religion and sociology of ancient Israel and the Middle East. Through his studies, Dr. Tigay has learned that Judaism was unique among ancient Near Eastern religions in teaching that lay people should study and do God's laws.

Dr. Tigay reminds us of a selection from the Book of Nehemiah. Ezra the scribe reads the Torah to all the people of Israel, women as well as men. This

passage has no parallel in other ancient Middle Eastern religions. Their scrolls were read and studied by kings and priests exclusively.

A mosaic, discovered by archeologists in Dura-Europus and explained by Dr. Tigay, paints the picture clearly. It depicts a Babylonian king, holding his legal scroll, rolled up, closed, in the firm grip of his hand. After all, the teaching of his Babylonian god applied only to him. Since he already knew what it said, he had no need to open it. That same mosaic also depicts an ordinary Jew. He is holding the Torah, and it is open. The teaching of our God belongs to every Jew. There is more in it than any among us can ever hope to know, so we must keep it open, keep it in our midst, and study it.

The *hakafah*, then, imposes a double responsibility, for both rabbis and lay people are included. We rabbis must impart what we have learned, and help our community to know the tradition that is ours to do. Tomorrow morning, when Daniel and Harold carry the scrolls into the congregation, we will be asked to recommit ourselves to this task. For congregants, turning to kiss the Torah calls upon you also to embrace God's word. Receive the *hakafah* as a symbol of sharing the responsibility to study the Torah and to perform the *mitzvot*.

If the Torah procession gets us hung up on rituals, to the exclusion of our Jewish responsibilities, it must be abandoned. On the other hand, let the *hakafah* inspire us to share our Jewish responsibilities, rabbis and congregants together. Torah does not belong to kings or priests, ancient or modern, and is not the exclusive possession of rabbis. Torah belongs to all.

Amen.