

The Value of Reading Torah for Our Community (Cont'd)

The Torah service connects us to our ancestors and to Jews all over the world, sharing the same stories week after week. We may draw strength, not only from the stories themselves, but from the camaraderie of community—from the spirit that fills our hearts when we realize we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

When students from local schools as well as tour groups and visitors enter our congregation for the first time, one of the most powerful moments is when they see the Torah. Many of these individuals are inspired by how much care and respect we show our beloved text by dressing it up and marching it around the synagogue. When we remove the Torah from the ark and bring it into our congregation, we illustrate that its lessons and values become part of who we are. We take these lessons and values with us as we leave the sanctuary and strive to live meaningful lives.

Reading Torah should not be a once in a life time opportunity reserved for *b'nei mitzvah* students. Reading Torah should not be reserved for clergy and Jewish educators. It is a mitzvah that every Jew may draw holiness from—the Torah belongs to the entire Jewish people.

One of the highlights of my first year at Congregation Shalom has been witnessing members of our community read Torah at Shabbat morning services. Not only has it been inspiring to see these individuals lead our community, but it has been a pleasure to witness our community support these individuals.

After a community member leads, we hear the genuine joy and excitement from our congregation as they say together, “*yasher koach*,” meaning “continuous strength,” or “wonderful job!” I believe our congregation creates a non-judgmental atmosphere for community members to read Torah. We value intention, heart, and community.

I would like to encourage more members of our congregation to read Torah at Shabbat morning services because I believe it is an uplifting experience, not only for the individual reading Torah but for our entire community.

Reading Torah for our community is a meaningful way to celebrate a *simcha*, a joyous occasion in one's life. It is a way to commemorate a *yahrtzeit*, celebrate an anniversary, or mark a transition such as a graduation, a retirement, an engagement, or a shift in one's career. Reading Torah may serve as a way to express gratitude as well as a way to seek peace, wholeness, or comfort.

Our lives are filled with moments of joy and moments of struggle. Standing in front of the Torah and sharing our sacred text aloud with the community is a way to mark these moments. It is a way to understand that for thousands of years our people have shared similar life experiences, joys, and struggles. Our sages taught that each letter of Torah is pregnant with spiritual force. When we read our sacred text aloud as a

community, we may be inspired by this force—this energy—this story that has carried our people through it all.

Now, at first glance, reading Torah may seem intimidating. It may seem like a long, overwhelming process to learn Torah or to learn Hebrew itself. Our clergy are here to help; we are excited to lend the resources and support to help community members feel comfortable and prepared to read Torah for our community. If you are interested in reading Torah, please reach out to us, and we will be eager to help you along this journey.

While Torah is sacred and may leave us with a feeling of awe, it should be accessible. May we feel invited to grapple with it, to study it, and to read it aloud for the community. The book of Proverbs teaches us that Torah is a light. We pray that Torah will continue to be a source of light for our congregation and for our entire people. We pray that Torah will illuminate our souls as it inspires us to make our lives a blessing and draw holiness from the strength of community.