
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ARON HAKODESH AND THE PRAYER SERVICE

by Macy Nulman

The *Aron Hakodesh* ("Holy Ark") in the synagogue houses the most sacred object in the religious life of the Jew, the Torah. Placed at the eastern wall, the *Aron Hakodesh* is a reminder of the biblical Ark of the Covenant in which the two stone Tablets were placed. In the synagogue the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* and the worshipers face the Holy Ark which is in the direction of Jerusalem. During the service proper the Holy Ark is opened when the Torah scroll is taken out (*hotza'ah*) to be read on Sabbath, holiday and weekday and when it is returned (*hakhnasah*). The Holy Ark is also opened during the recital of numerous prayers and *piyyutim* (poems) recited at high points in the service and on *Simhat Torah* when all the Torah scrolls are removed to be carried in procession. Whenever the Holy Ark is opened it is customary for the congregation to stand in reverence for the *Sifrei Torah* that it holds.

Numerous laws, customs, and practices have evolved in the relationship between the *Aron Hakodesh* and the prayer service. Standing, sitting, reclining, facing and bowing in front of the Ark are postures that responsa and rabbinic literature have dealt with in detail. Differences in procedure exist when one prays in Israel or in the Diaspora. Many practices in regard to the *Aron Hakodesh* and *Parokhet* within the prayer service are well known to every synagogue attendee. Little is known, however, as to why these laws and customs are observed. This essay attempts to acquaint the reader with and to appreciate the rituals and traditions, whether of a *halakhic* nature or in the category of customs.

NOMENCLATURE FOR THE HOLY ARK

In *Mishnaic* days the Holy Ark was called *Tevah* ("chest" or "box")¹. It housed the Torah and was kept in an anteroom and brought into the synagogue during the prayer service. The *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* prayed in front of the chest that was called *Tevah*. Thus the expressions used in the Talmud for the position of the prayer leader were *Yored lifne hatevah* ("He who descends before the Ark")² and *Over lifne hatevah* ("he who passes before the Ark")³. Today the Holy Ark is built on a platform, on a higher level than the congregation: the reader's desk is made for the prayer leader and is called *Amud* (reader's stand). Occasionally, the word *Amud* is

interchanged with *Tevah*⁴. In the *Tosefta*⁵ the place where the Torah scrolls were kept was called *Kodesh* ("Sanctorium"). Another name coined for the Holy Ark was *Aron* or *Aron Hakodesh* ("Holy Ark")⁶, the biblical name of the Ark of the Covenant. The expression *Aron Hakodesh* became prevalent among Italian, French and German Jews. Sephardic Jewry use the word *Heikhal* ("place" or "Temple") in which the Solomonic Temple designated the sanctuary⁷. Since the Ark was elevated, one had to ascend to it by a few steps. In our days the *Aron Hakodesh* is fixed in the form of a double-doored chest or a niche built into the wall. The Rambam writes, "It is a *mitzvah* to designate a special place for a Torah scroll (i.e. an Ark) and to honor it and glorify it in an extravagant manner."⁸

PLACING THE TORAH IN THE ARK

The Torah scroll in the Ark must be in a standing position and not lying down. The RaDBaZ comments that unlike the Tablets containing the Ten Commandments that were lying down in the Ark at *Horeb* (1 Kings 8:9), the *Sefer Torah* must be upright. The former were not meant to be read, thus they were lying down, but the *Sefer Torah* is for reading and therefore must be in a standing position ready to be read. Another reason that the Tablets were lying down is that the characters were able to be interpreted from both sides (Ex. 32:15) but a *Sefer Torah* must stand facing forward so it can be read.⁹

THE PAROKHET

Suspended before the open face of the Ark is the *Parokhet* (Ark - curtain)¹⁰. It serves to separate the Ark containing the *Sifrei Torah* from the rest of the synagogue.¹¹ The *Parokhet* is hung on the Ark in order to fulfill the verse that reads, "The *Parokhet* shall separate unto you between the holy and the holy of holies" (Ex. 26:33).¹² The Talmud¹³ refers to the curtain as *perisa*. It was removed from the Ark and used as a mat under the scroll when it was laid on the reading desk.¹⁴

The material used for the *Parokhet* is usually a rich material (velvet or silk) and there are different sets for the year, High Holy Days, and festivals. Generally, the traditional colors during the year and on festivals are red and purple. The color used for the High Holy Days is always white in order to symbolize forgiveness and atonement. Until recently the *Parokhet* was artistically woven and embroidered with figurative representations. Currently, more modern designs are utilized and are kept simple.

There is a difference of opinion as to where the *Parokhet* should be hung. *Rashi* believes it should be hung on the inside. *Tosafot* is of the opinion it should be on the outside.¹⁵ Because of these two opinions there arose the custom, in some congregations, to have two; one on the inside and the other on the outside.¹⁶

It is generally accepted that the *Parokhet* in the Ashkenazic synagogue is on the outside, in front of the doors and in the Sephardic congregation it is on the inside behind the doors. Rabbi Shemtob Gaguine clearly shows that it is only the Sephardim of London who place the *Parokhet* at the inside. In Amsterdam there is no *Parokhet* at all, except when on *Tishah b'Ab* a black *Parokhet* is hung on the Ark as a sign of mourning. Otherwise in Israel, Syria, Turkey, Egypt and Morocco the Ark is covered both in front (outside) and at the back (inside).¹⁷ He further throws light on why in the London tradition the *Parokhet* is placed in back, on the inside. It was because in Spain and Portugal they feared that they would be persecuted and forbidden to beautify their synagogues. They therefore were forced to remove the *Parokhet* from the front for the reason that if suddenly they should be interrogated the investigators would see a simple cabinet in the room. This would indicate that they are not holding a prayer service when there was no *Parokhet* on the Ark.¹⁸

ENTERING A SYNAGOGUE

Seligman Baer in his *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*¹⁹ writes that, "Before entering the synagogue one should tarry somewhat and utter the verse 'As for me, through Your abundant kindness I will enter Your house; I will prostrate myself toward Your holy sanctuary in awe of You' (Ps. 5:8). After, he should walk quietly with fear and humility and say 'In the House of God we would walk in company' (Ps. 55:15) and 'How goodly are Your tents' (Numb. 24:5) followed by Psalms 5:8; 26:8; 95:6; and 69:14. When saying the word *eshtaveh* (I shall prostrate myself) he should bow toward the *Aron Hakodesh* and when saying the word *ve'ekhra'ah* (and bow) he should bow, bending the knees somewhat."

It is related that when Rabbi Jacob Emden (*Yavez*) would enter the synagogue he would be trembling with fear as when entering the palace of a king. And then when he approached the *Aron Hakodesh* he would bend his head and walk toward it and utter several verses.²⁰ Others, however, felt that one should not bow in front of the *Aron Hakodesh* or in front of the *Sefer Torah* without *Tefillin*. The *Ari*, therefore, would arrive at the synagogue wearing his *Tefillin* and would recite the verse, "As for me" etcetera, and then bow in front of the *Aron Hakodesh*.²¹

It also became a custom to bow opposite the *Aron Hakodesh* even when one is not wearing *Tefillin*. Rabbi Jacob Moellin (*Maharil*) would bow three times to the Holy Ark when he passed it on departing from the synagogue "like a disciple taking leave of his master". When he left the synagogue or walked away from the *Aron Hakodesh* he never walked with his back toward the *Aron Hakodesh* but would turn sideways.²² The *Shiltei Haggiborim*, quoting the Talmud²³ argued, "It follows a fortiori: if we rise before those who study it (the Torah), how much more before that itself!"

Thus he argued, "It seems to me that they said only to stand for the Torah, but not to bow to it. It is not found in the entire Torah that we even bow to the Aron Hakodesh in the synagogue."

DRAWING THE PAROKHET FROM SIDE TO SIDE

The manner or method of moving the *Parokhet* from side to side is as follows: (1) To slide the *Parokhet* from left to right. This procedure is based on the talmudic statement, *Kol pinot she'atah poneh lo yehe elah derekh yemin* ("All turns that are made should be toward the right").²⁴ The same procedure is followed when lighting *Hannukah* candles²⁵ (2) Another way is to move the *Parokhet* from right to left in the manner in which Hebrew is written. This makes it easier to be able to grasp the *Parokhet* with the right hand.²⁶ Of course, if the *Parokhet* opens with a pulley there is no alternative.

WHEN THE PAROKHET IS REMOVED

On *Tishah b'Ab* the *Parokhet* is removed from the Ark. The *Midrash*²⁷ recounts that at the destruction of the Temple the wicked Titus entered the Holy of Holies and slashed the *Parokhet* with his sword. As a remembrance of this desecration the *Parokhet* is removed.²⁸ In some Sephardic synagogues where the Ark normally has no curtain, a black curtain is hung and the Torah scrolls themselves are draped in black mantels. Another reason is based on the phrase in *Eikvah* 2:17 *bitza emrato* ("He has performed His word"; that is, He fulfilled his decree).²⁹ The Sages³⁰ expound the phrase to mean "He tore his garments". At *Minhah*, the next day the *Parokhet* is returned to its regular place.

A HUSBAND WHOSE WIFE IS PREGNANT

It is customary to extend the honor of *Petihat Ha-Aron* (opening the Holy Ark) to a man whose wife is in her ninth month of pregnancy³¹. In *Eretz Yisrael* when a man's wife goes into her ninth month of pregnancy he buys the *mitzvah* of opening the Ark for the entire month so that in merit of this *mitzvah*, his wife's labor pains will be bearable and she will give birth in a state of tranquility.³²

SPECIAL RECITALS SAID WHEN OPENING THE HOLY ARK

It has been said that opening the Holy Ark when reciting special prayers is symbolic of opening the gates of heaven. Thus when reciting *Avinu Malkenu* as well as other prayers during the High Holy Days and on fast days the prayer is preceded by the phrase "Open the gates of heaven to our prayers".

או כִּשְׁמַת כֶּסֶן זָהָבִים דָּאס אַרֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ וְאֵינֶם כֶּסֶן פֶּתַח שְׁעָרֵי שָׁמַיִם לְהַפְלִיחֵנוּ :
 אָבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, חֲטֵאוֹנוּ לְפָנֶיךָ : אָבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, סִלָּח וְסַחֵר, לְכָל עֲוֹנוֹתֵינוּ;
 אֵ"מ, אֵין דְּנוּ מִלָּה, אֵלֶּא אַתָּה : אָבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, מַחֵה וְהַעֲבֵר, כָּשָׁעֵינוּ
 אָבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, עֲשֵׂה עִמָּנוּ, דְּמַעַן שְׂמִיךְ : נַחֲמָאֲתֵינוּ, כִּנְגֵד עֵינֶיךָ :

Another occasion for offering a special recital is the one said just before opening the Ark at *Anim Zemirot* on festivals. This prayer requests of the Almighty every aspect of well being in merit of our ancestral lineage.

קורם פתיחת הארון לאנעים ומירות

בְּשִׁמַת כֶּסֶן זָהָבִים דָּאס אַרֹן הַקֹּדֶשׁ צוֹא אֲנַעִים וּמִירוֹת וְאֵינֶם כֶּסֶן דָּאס :
 אָבִינוּ מִלְּפָנֶיךָ, פֶּתַח שְׁעָרֵי שָׁמַיִם, לְתַפְלִיחֵנוּ, שְׁעָרֵי רַחֲמִים, שְׁעָרֵי
 תַפְלָה, שְׁעָרֵי תַחֲנוּנִים, שְׁעָרֵי עֵת רְצוֹן, שְׁעָרֵי עֵת בִּקְשָׁה,
 שְׁעָרֵי רְפוּאָה וְשְׁלִימָה, שְׁעָרֵי קְדוּשָׁה, שְׁעָרֵי תוֹרָה, שְׁעָרֵי חַיִּים
 מְזֻבִּים, שְׁעָרֵי גְאוּלָּה וְיִשׁוּעָה, שְׁעָרֵי גְדוּלָּה, שְׁעָרֵי בָּנִים וּבְנֵי בָּנִים,
 שְׁעָרִים שֶׁל צְדִיקִים, וְתַלְמִידֵי חֲכָמִים, וְאֲרִיכַת יָמִים וְשָׁנִים, וְעוֹשֵׁקִים
 בַּתּוֹרָה וּבִמְצוֹת, לְשִׁמְחָה, שְׁעָרֵי שְׂמֻעוֹת מְטוֹבוֹת, שְׁעָרֵי פְשׁוּרוֹת מְטוֹבוֹת,
 בְּזֻכוֹת אֲבוֹת הַקְּדוֹשִׁים, אַבְרָהָם, יִצְחָק, יַעֲקֹב, מֹשֶׁה, אַהֲרֹן, דָּוִד,
 וְשְׁלֹמֹה אֱלֹהֵינוּ, אֵלֵינוּ, וּבְזֻכוֹת אֲמִחוֹת הַצְדָקָנוֹת, שְׁרָה, רַבֵּקָה, רָחֵל,
 לֵאָה, בְּלָהָה, וְלֵפֶת, הֵנָּה אֲבִיגַיִל, וּבְזֻכוֹת מְרַדְכִי וְאַסְתֵּר, בְּשׁוֹשֵׁן הַפִּירָה:

Some have the custom to recite the following verses when removing the Torah scrolls from the Holy Ark.

תורת יי תמימה משיבת נפש	The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul;
עדות יי נאמנה מחכימת פתי	The testimony of the L-rd is sure, making wise the simple;
פקודי יי ישרים משמחי לב	The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
מצות יי ברה מאירת עינים	The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. (Psalm 19:8-9)

*Tosafot*³³ writes that there are forty words in *Torat Hashem Temimah* corresponding to the forty days in which the Torah was given. The *Bach* in his marginal notes explains that there are twenty words from *Torat Hashem Temimah* to *mitzvat Hashem bara me'irat einayim* and the other twenty words are from verses, similar in content, from 2 Samuel 22:31-32; *Ha'el tamim darko to biladai Elohenu*. Two more verses are recited by the person honored with taking out the Torah scroll from the *Aron Hakodesh*. When he approaches the *Aron Hakodesh* he says:³⁴ "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God and this the gate of heavens". Gen. 28:17)

מה נורא המקום הזה אין זה כי אם בית אלקים וזה שער השמים

He then takes out the *Sefer Torah* with his right hand and says³⁵.
 “Let His left hand be under my head, and his right hand embrace me” (*Shir Hashirim* 2:6).

שמאלו תחת לראשי וימינו תחבקני

In the Sephardic rite some have the custom to recite the *Mi Sheberakh* for the soldiers in the Israeli army while the Ark is open.

בעת פתיחת ההיכל יש אומרים :

מִי שְׁכַרְךָ אֲבוֹתֵינוּ אֲבָרָהֶם יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב. הוּא יְבָרְךָ אֶת
 חִילֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. הַעֲוֹמְדִים עַל מִשְׁמַר אֲרָצֵנוּ וְעָרֵי אֱלֹהֵינוּ,
 מִגְּבוּל הַלְכָנוֹן וְעַד מִדְּבַר מִצְרַיִם, וּמִן הַיָּם הַגָּדוֹל עַד לְבוֹא
 הָעֶרְכָּה. בִּיפְשָׁה, בְּאוֹר, וּבָיִם.

יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 לְפָנֵיהֶם. הַקָּדוֹשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא יִשְׁמְרֵם וְיַצִּילֵם מִכָּל צָרָה
 וּמִצּוּקָה וּמִכָּל נֹגַע וּמִחֲלָה, וְיִשְׁלַח בְּרָכָה וְהַצְלָחָה בְּכָל
 מַעֲשֵׂי יָדֵיהֶם. יְדַבֵּר שׁוֹנְאֵינוּ תַּחְתֵּיהֶם, וְיַעֲטֹרֵם בְּכֹתֶר
 יְשׁוּעָה וּבַעֲטֹרֶת נִצְחוֹן. וְיָקִים בָּהֶם הַכְּתוּב, “כִּי
 יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה יִהְיֶה אֱלֹהֵינוּ
 אֵיבֵיכֶם לְהוֹשִׁיעַ אֶתְכֶם”. וְנֹאמֵר אָמֵן :

They also have the custom to recite the *Mi Sheberakh* for the sick at the same time.

SAYING GADELU WHILE FACING THE HOLY ARK

When the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* says *Gadelu la-Shem iti* (“Declare the greatness of Hashem with me, and let us exalt His Name together”) he turns to the Ark and bows slightly.³⁶ The verse *Gadelu* has six words corresponding to the six paces of those who bore the Ark, as it is written, “And it was so that when those who bore the Ark of the Lord had gone six paces” (2 Samuel 6:13).³⁷ On Sabbath and festivals two additional verses are added prior to *Gadelu*; they are *Shema* and *Ehad*. Sephardic Jewry recite *Gadelu* only on all days that the Torah is read. Seligman Baer notes that it is only in Poland and in a few Ashkenazic communities who recite *Shema* and *Ehad* on Sabbath and festivals.³⁸

Turning to the Ark at *Gadelu*, however, is perplexing. If the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* faces the congregation and proclaims *Shema* and *Ehad* to

the worshipers, all the more reason to face the congregation when saying *Gadelu*, calling upon them to join him in praising God. Moreover, if he faces the congregation it will enable him to go to the right and fulfill the dictum, "All turns that you make must be to the right".³⁹ There is, however, an opinion that the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* should face the Ark since he utters the word *iti* ("with me"). He thus should face in the same direction as the congregation so as to include himself among the other worshipers. It may also be that since there are Ashkenazic communities who do not recite the verses *Shema* and *Ehad* even on *Shabbat*, the initiators of the custom made a distinction between *Shema* and *Ehad*, that they be recited while facing the congregation and to say *Gadelu* toward the *Aron Hakodesh*.⁴⁰

DECORUM

It is a practice among some communities to sell the *mitzvah* of taking out the Torah scrolls from the Ark and putting them back in, because of the principle that "the glory of the king is in the multitude of people", that is, the more people there are performing a *mitzvah* together the better.⁴¹ Selling the *mitzvah* is not considered making a commercial sale.⁴² The Talmud⁴³ writes, "Accounts of a religious nature, one is allowed to calculate them on *Shabbat*; "therefore, assigning charity for the poor on *Shabbat* is permitted. One should heed speaking idle talk (*devarim beteilim*) in the synagogue during the time of selling the *mitzvot*; looking into a *sefer* is recommended.⁴⁴ Speaking mundane talk or words of Torah when the *Aron Hakodesh* is being opened is also prohibited. It is a time of mercy⁴⁵ and prayers of supplication are uttered at that time.⁴⁶

An additional practice that adds for decorum is to inform the worshipers who will be receiving the honor of *petihah* (opening of the Ark) on the High Holy Days. At Jerusalem's "Yeshurun" Synagogue a card is handed out specifying the particular prayer at which to open the Ark. Since there are two large sliding doors to the Ark, two persons are given this honor. The card also specifies when and at which side to walk up, and at which words to close the Ark. (See facsimilie).

עולים במדרגות אל ארון הקדש במילים
ברכות והודאות מעתה ועד עולם
פותחים הארון במילים שיד המעלות
סוגרים הארון אחרי המילים מכל עונותינו
י"ש כחך!

הסדרות ישרון
בית הכנסת המרכזי
מתכבדים להזמין את כב'
לפתח שערי היכל ארון הקדש
לאסירה
שיד המעלות ממעמקים
סגור שפאל
ומאחלים לכב' ולבני ביתו
כתיבה וחתימה טובה

ירושלים תתשכ"א

יום ב' של ראש השנה תש

Facsimile of card for the *Petihah* honor handed out at Jerusalem's "Yeshurun" synagogue.

REMOVING THE TORAH SCROLL FROM THE ARK

A congregant, and not the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur*, withdraws the Torah scroll from the Ark.⁴⁷ The *Mishnah*⁴⁸ writes that when the High Priest came to read the *parashah* of the day, the Torah was passed from one official to the other to display honor of the Torah. The congregant, too, when handing the Torah over to the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* is following in the same manner as in ancient days.⁴⁹ The *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* does not select the person who should take out the Torah. This task is in the *Gabbai's* domain.⁵⁰ If a *hatan* (groom) is present in the congregation it is customary to bestow upon him the honor of taking out the Torah from the Ark and putting it back in.⁵¹

If a mourner (during the *shivah* period) happened to be in the synagogue on Monday or Thursday, he is permitted to open the Ark if the honor was bestowed upon him. The reason is that a mourner is prohibited from learning Torah but opening the Ark is not considered study or reading the Torah.⁵²

REMOVING TWO SIFREI TORAH FROM THE ARK

On a day when two *Sifrei Torah* are read, the two scrolls should be taken out of the Ark at the same time. The *Rema* is of the opinion that there is no contravention of the requirement that *mitzvot* should not be performed in clusters but individually simply because the Torah scrolls are taken out together.⁵³ A reason given for taking them out together is so as not to trouble the congregation to stand up twice in honor of the *Sefer Torah*.⁵⁴ Yemenite Jewry take out the first *Sefer Torah*, read from it, return it, and then withdraw the second *Sefer Torah*.⁵⁵ This is done in order to bestow honor for the day we are obligated to remove two *Sifrei Torah* for reading.⁵⁶

ESCORTING THE TORAH BACK TO THE ARK

Both the person who raises the Torah and the person who rolls up the Torah must accompany it until it is in front of the Holy Ark.⁵⁷ It is also a *mitzvah* for all those in front, when the Torah scroll passes, to accompany it until it is in front of the Holy Ark into which it is put.⁵⁸ Accompanying the Torah to the Ark is in accord with the verse, "After Hashem your God you shall go" (Deut. 13:5).⁵⁹

RETURNING THE TORAH TO THE ARK ON PURIM MORNING

There are two opinions when to return the Torah to the Aron Hakodesh on *Purim* morning after reading *Parashat Amalek* (Ex. 17:8-16). Most have the custom to take back the Torah and then to read the *Megillah*.⁶⁰ Some say to return the Torah after reading the *Megillah*.⁶¹ According to the former opinion, returning the Torah before the reading of the *Megillah*, is because if a person would hold the Torah while the *Megillah* is being read he may not be able to concentrate on hearing the *Megillah* read properly.⁶²

The latter sentiment, to hold the Torah while the *Megillah* is read, underscores the idea expounded in the Talmud⁶³ *Orah zu Torah* ("Light refers to Torah"). When the Torah is on the *Bimah* while reading the *Megillah* one is able to gaze at it, especially when reading the phrase *Layehudim hayetah orah* ("and to the Jews there was light; Esth. 8:16).⁶⁴

STANDING WHEN THE ARK IS OPEN

According to the *Turei Zahav* (*TaZ*)⁶⁵ one is not obligated to stand when the *Aron Hakodesh* is open since the *Sefer Torah* is considered to be in a private domain (*reshut bifne atzmo*). It is customary, however, that the congregation stands only out of a sentiment of respect and esteem.⁶⁶ Similarly, writes the *TaZ*⁶⁷, that when the rabbi delivers his sermon there is no violation of *kavod ha-Torah* (dishonor to the Torah) when he has his back to the *Aron Hakodesh*.⁶⁸ In any event he must prove himself to be a scholar if he faces the congregation with his back to the *Aron Hakodesh*.⁶⁹

THE SEAT AND PLACE OF THE *SHELI'AH TZIBBUR* AND RABBI

The prayer desk of the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* is placed south of the Holy Ark (to the right). The *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* takes the place of the *Kohen* who performed the Temple service. Prayer replaces the *Tamid* offering; the prayer desk is in place of the Altar; and the Altar stands to the south. The rabbi's seat is to the left of the Holy Ark as it is written, "at its left wealth and honor" (Prov. 3:16).^{69a} Another reason that the rabbi's seat is to the left of the *Aron Hakodesh* is because the Talmud⁷⁰ states, "He who desires to become wise should turn to the south". The rabbi's seat is therefore placed to the left, north of the *Aron Hakodesh* because if he were seated south of the *Aron Hakodesh*, it would appear as if he were turning his back to the Ark.⁷¹

STANDING DURING PRAYER WHEN THE ARK IS OPEN

The Ark is opened when reciting special prayers, especially during the High Holy Day season.⁷² Several reasons offered are: (1) It awakens mercy so that the doors of Heaven open to our prayers.⁷³ (2) It enhances the worshiper's intention in the prayer, similar to the entrance of the High Priest into the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur.⁷⁴ The *piyyutim* (prayer-poems) are considered a form of *davar bikedushah* (an act of sanctification). Any words of praise of God that are not in the structure of a verse, or in the form of a blessing constitute a *davar shebikedushah*. Standing when the Ark is open is therefore not in honor of the Torah scrolls but rather for these *piyyutim* that represent a *davar shebikedushah*.⁷⁵

BIRKAT KOHANIM AND THE HOLY ARK

When the Priestly Blessing (*Duchenen*) takes place in the synagogue the *Kohanim* ascend to the area before the Holy Ark when the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* begins the blessing of *Retze*.⁷⁶ When ascending, they face the Holy Ark and wait to be called. The *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* then calls *Kohanim* and they recite the blessing. Halfway through the blessing, they turn toward the congregation, their faces and hands covered by a *Tallit* and the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* continues to prompt the *Kohanim* with each word of the threefold blessing.

When the *Kohanim* descend from the platform they should not turn their backs to the Holy Ark. They should position themselves sideways, just as when a pupil takes leave of his Torah teacher he turns his face to the teacher when he goes away from his presence.⁷⁷

TAHANUN AND THE HOLY ARK

When saying the *Tahanun* supplication on weekdays (also referred to as *nefilat apayim*; “falling on the face”) one should assume the posture of being seated, bent over, with face lowered on the forearm only in a place where there is a Holy Ark which has Torah scrolls inside it.⁷⁸ For it is written with reference to the war of *ai*, “and he (Joshua) fell on his face... before the Ark of the Lord” (Josh.7:16). Another reason is the verse, *niplah na beyad Hashem* (“let us fall now into the hand of the Lord”; 2 Sam. 24:14). The word *yad* is interpreted as a place. That is, it should be a place where there is a Torah scroll.⁷⁹ The *Mishnah Berurah*⁸⁰ comments that the Holy Ark is not an essential requirement but the presence of a Torah scroll by itself is also sufficient.⁸¹ If there is no Ark with Torah scrolls inside it one should say the *Tahanun* without covering the face (i.e. without assuming the above position).⁸² In Jerusalem however, one may say *Tahanun* in a reclining position even in a place where there is no Torah scroll because of the holiness of the city.⁸³

Sephardim have the custom of reclining when saying *Tahanun* even in a place where there is no *Sefer Torah*. They believe that this supplication should not be different from all other prayers which can be recited in a place that has no Holy Ark of Torah scroll.⁸⁴

HIGH HOLY DAY PRAYERS AND THE HOLY ARK

Melekh Elyon-Melekh Evyon

A *piyyut* recited in the *Kerovah* section of *Musaf* on the first day of Rosh Hashanah is *El Dar Bamarom*. The poem begins with *Melekh Elyon* (“Supreme King”) and ends with the refrain, *La'ade ad yimlokh* (“He shall reign supreme forever and ever”). Originally *Melekh Elyon* was followed each time by a stanza beginning with *melekh evyon* (“mortal king”); that is, God’s deeds are recounted in contradistinction to man’s deeds. The only stanzas with *melekh evyon* that are said currently toward the end of the poem

are those that start with the letters *bet* and *tav*.

It is customary to recite *El Dar Bamarom* responsively while the Ark is opened and the congregation is standing. The Ark is opened at the beginning, closed for *melekh evyon*, and reopened again before *aval Melekh Elyon*. This is to praise and emphasize God as ruler Who is contrasted with the shortcomings of mortal man.⁸⁵

Alenu

Although *Alenu* ("It is our duty") is recited at the conclusion of the evening, morning, and afternoon services⁸⁶, the only time the Ark is opened is in *Musaf* on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Essentially the prayer belongs to the High Holy Day *Musaf* service, when it introduces the *Malkhuyot* section. Its transference as a daily recital took place about 1300⁸⁷ and together with *Al ken nekaveh* ("We hope therefore"), it became a closing prayer.

The prayer *Alenu* is a recitation of great praise to God and therefore the Ark is opened only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Opening the Ark is to emphasize the importance of the prayer so that it should be recited the entire year with great devotion.⁸⁸ Just like the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies once a year so that his devotion (*Kavanah*) may increase, so the *Aron Hakodesh* is opened only on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when saying *Alenu* so that our devotion be heightened when saying the prayer the entire year.⁸⁹

The Ark is closed at *shelo som helkenu kahem* ("Who has not designed our destiny to be like theirs") and reopened at *va'anahnu kore'im* ("and we bend the knee"). The reason for reciting *Alenu* prior to the *Malkhuyot* section is, that unlike other people, we praise God Who gave us the wisdom to accept His Kingship.⁹⁰ No doubt this prompted the closing of the Ark when we utter, "Who has not designed our destiny to be like theirs" inasmuch as they worship idols of vanity and emptiness and pray to gods that cannot help.

TAKING OUT THE TORAH SCROLLS AT KOL NIDRE

On Yom Kippur eve at *Kol Nidre* two *Sifrei Torah*⁹¹ are removed from the Ark and the verse *Or Zaru'a* ("Light is sown; Ps. 97:11) is pronounced three times.⁹² Removing the *Sifrei Torah* from the *Aron Hakodesh* symbolizes at the outset, that on Yom Kippur the second Tablets of the Law were given⁹³ and the children of Israel were informed that God forgave their transgression of the Golden Calf.⁹⁴

On Yom Kippur night some are accustomed to stay overnight in the synagogue and to recite psalms and prayers all night. When they desire to sleep, the law stipulates, they should do so far away from the Holy Ark.^{94a}

OPENING THE ARON HAKODESH AT NE'ILAH

From the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur's* repetition of the *Amidah* until after the final *Kaddish* it is customary that the *Aron Hakodesh* is left open.⁹⁵ The reason that the Ark is open for the entire service is to awaken the hearts of the worshipers that they pray with much fervor and conscientiousness. The *Néilah* service takes on the aspect of final appeal of the day and if not now, when then?⁹⁶ It is also customary for the worshipers to stand during the entire service.

In many synagogues the *Sheli'ah Tzibbur* opens the Ark. It is also customary to sell the honor of opening the Ark at *Neilah* for a large sum of money; this is a practice among the Sephardim.⁹⁷

PLACING A CANDLE IN THE ARK

When taking the Torah scrolls from the Ark on *Hoshanah Rabbah* and *Simhat Torah* it is customary to place a lit candle inside the Ark. This is in accord with the verse *Ki ner mitzvah ve-Torah* or ("For a commandment is a lamp and the Torah is light"; Prov. 6:23). That is, the commandments light up all our ways and the Torah gives forth light to every Jew.⁹⁸ Another reason is to show that the light of the Torah is not interrupted when the scrolls are removed⁹⁹ and that the light of the candle symbolizes the light of Torah which is constantly found there.¹⁰⁰

In Israel a candle is not placed in the Ark after removing all the scrolls for *Hakafot*. *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah* are celebrated on the same day in Israel and occasionally they can fall on *Shabbat* when lighting a candle is prohibited. Therefore, in order not to make exceptions, it became the accepted practice never to place a candle in the Ark.¹⁰¹

LISTING OF THE PETIHOT

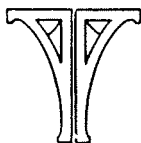
The Ark plays a central role in prayer, in addition to its use as a receptacle of the Torah scrolls. The opening of the Ark for taking out and returning the Torah scrolls on the occasion for public reading or for reciting special prayers is indeed a solemn occasion. Most *Siddurim* and *Mahzorim* specify when to open the Ark (*petihat ha-Aron*) and when to close the Ark (*segirat ha-Aron*). So significant was this aspect of synagogue prayer that the Synagogue of Würzburg, Germany printed a listing of all the prayers of the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur service that require opening and closing of the Ark. This listing follows:¹⁰²



פתיחת וסגירת הארון הקדש בתפילות ראש השנה ויום הכפורים
בבית הכנסת דק"ק בוירצבורג



Öffnen und Schließen der hl. Lade beim Gottesdienst
am Roschhaschonoh und Jom Kippur
in der Synagoge zu Würzburg



יום:	נומער:	פתיחה קודם:	סגירה אחר:
א' דראש השנה שחרית	א	שמנה עשרה	ברכת מחיה המתים
	ב	ובכן נמליכך	להומך המימיו ביום דין
	ג	אבינו מלכנו	אבינו מלכנו
מוסף	א	שמנה עשרה	ברכת מחיה המתים
	ב	מלך עליון	תהלתו עומדת לעד לעדי עד ימלך
	ג	האוחז ביד מרת משפט	וכל מאמינים שהוא תמים פעלו
	ד	a עלינו	כמשפחות האדמה
	b	ואנחנו כרעים	ועל הארץ מתחת אין עוד
	ה	אוחילה	ה' צורי וגואלי
	ו	היום האמצני	וברצון את תפלתנו אמן
ב' דראש השנה שחרית	א	שמנה עשרה	שמע ה' קילי אקרא
	ב	מלך עליון	להומך המימיו ביום דין
	ג	אבינו מלכנו	אבינו מלכנו
מוסף	א	שמנה עשרה	ברכת מחיה המתים
	ב	האוחז ביד מרת משפט	וכל מאמינים שהוא תמים פעלו
	ג	a עלינו	כמשפחות האדמה
	b	ואנחנו כרעים	ועל הארץ מתחת אין עוד
	ד	אוחילה	ה' צורי וגואלי
	ה	היום האמצני	וברצון את תפלתנו אמן

יום:	נומער:	פתיחה קודם:	סגירה אחר:
יום כפור כל נדרי	א	יעלה	יעלה
	ב	אבינו מלכנו	אבינו מלכנו
	ג	שיר הכבוד	שיר הכבוד
שחרית	א	ברוך הפתח לנו שערי רחמים	אירות מאפל אמר ויהי nach dem 2.
	ב	ברוך שם כבוד מלכותו	יענה ויאמר שלחתי
	ג	שמנה עשרה	ברכה כחיה המתים
	ד	אמרו לאלקים	והיא כבודך
	ה	האדרת והאמונה	והתפארת לחי עולמים
	ו	לאל עורך דין	להומך תמימיו ביום דין
	ז	שפט כל הארץ (בשבת) שרי קדש	לעלת ההמיד (בשבת) שבת אחים גם יחד
	ח	היום האמצני	לכל עונותינו
	ט	אבינו מלכנו	אבינו מלכנו
מוסף	א	שמנה עשרה	ברכה מחיה המתים
	ב	האוחז ביד	תמים פעלו
	ג a	עלינו	כמשפחות האדמה
	ב b	ואנחנו כרעים	ועל הארץ מתחת
	ד	אוחילה	ה' צורי וגואלי
	ה	פזמון ה' שמעה	פזמון ה' שמעה
	ו	היום האמצני	והסלח לכל עונותינו
מנחה	א	שמנה עשרה	ברכה מחיה המתים
	ב	פזמון יי יי	פזמון יי יי
נעילה	א	שטנה עשרה	אבינו מלכנו
	ב	שמות	שמות

FOOTNOTES

1. Ta'an. 2:1; Meg. 3:1.
2. *Mish. Ta'an.* 2:2.
3. *Mish. Ber.* 5:3.
4. Isaac Lipiec, *Sefer Matamim Hehadash*, Warsaw, 1885, reprinted in Israel, 1993, 153:54.
5. Meg. 4:21.
6. Cf. 2 Chron. 35:3.
7. 1 Samuel 3:3.
8. *Hilkhos Sefer Torah*, 10:10.
9. Responsa 965.
10. *Magen Avraham* 147:10.
11. *Orah Hayyim* 154:3; *Rema* 154:6.
12. Rabbi Y.M. Epstein; *Arukh Hashulhan*, 16.
13. Meg. 26b.
14. Meg. 32a.
15. Meg. 26b.
16. Rabbi G. Felder, *Sefer Yesodei Yeshurun*, pt. 2, 1956, p. 144.
17. *Keter Shem Tob*, vol 1, p. 232.
18. *Ibid.* 232:275.
19. Rödelheim, 1868, p. 8.
20. *Siddur Bet Ya'akov*, p. 29.
21. Rabbi A. Katz, *Sefer Leket Hakemah Hehadash*, 46-88, London, 1961, p. 14, in name of *Sefer Orah Ne'eman*.
22. *Orah Hayyim* 132, *Magen Avraham* 6.
23. Kidd. 33b.
24. Yom. 15b.
25. *Perishah* 128:23.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Vayikra Rabbah* 22:2.
28. Rabbi A. E. Hirshowitz, *Sefer Minhage Yeshurun*, Vilna, 1899, Chap. 138.
29. *Rema* 559:2.
30. *Eikhah Rabbah* 1:1.
31. *Kaf Hahayyim*. 134:12.
32. Ya'akov Gelis, *Minhage Eretz Yisrael*, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 1968, 55:2; cf. also *Sha'are Hayyim* to *Sha'are Ephraim* 10:2.
33. Meg. 32a: s.v. *Gollelo Mibehutz*.
34. R. Ya'akov Emden, *Siddur Bet Yaakov*, p. 82.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
36. *Abudraham*, p. 127; cf. also *Arukh Hashulhan*, 282:1.
37. *Sefer Matamim*, 198:105.
38. *Siddur Avodat Yisrael*, *ibid.*, p. 222.
39. Rabbi A. Landa of Tcechenov, Poland, with notes by Rabbi J. P. Werdiger, *Seder Tefillah - Tzeluta D'Avraham*, vol. 1, Tel-Aviv, Va'ad Lehotza'at Sifrei Admur mi-Tcechenov, 1958-1961, p. 364.
40. Cf. S.P. Gelbard, *Rite and Reason*, vol. 1, Mifal Rashi Publishing, Petach Tikvah, Israel, 1998, p. 129.
41. *Mishnah Berurah* 147:8.
42. Rabbis O. Yosef and Yitzchak Yosef, *Sefer Yalkut Yosef*, vol. 2, 1990, 1:2.

43. Ket. 5a.
44. *Sefer Yalkut Yosef*, ibid.
45. *Hesed Le'alafim*, 135; cf. also *Sefer Hahayyim* 2:12.
46. *Sefer Yisasschar, Dinei Kri'at Sefer Torah*, 2.
47. *Or Zaru'a*, 42:11.
48. Yom. 7:1.
49. *Or Zaru'a*, ibid; cf. also *Arukh Hashulhan* 282:1.
50. *Sha'arei Ephraim*, 10:2.
51. *Revid Hazav*, 1:7.
52. Cf. *Sefer Yalkut Yosef* 134:13 and footnote 21.
53. *Mishnah Berurah* 147:28.
54. *Kaf Hahayyim* 147:3 in name of *Emet le- Ya'akov*.
55. Rabbi S. Mann, *Sefer Zot Hatorah*, Jerusalem, 1992, p. 113, note 1.
56. Cf. *Rite and Reason*, vol. 1, ibid., p. 127.
57. *Mishnah Berurah* 149:8, in name of the *Levush* and *Sha'arei Ephraim*.
58. *Rema* 149:1.
59. *Levush* 149:1.
60. *Rokeach* 229; cf. also *Derekh Hahayyim*, 192:2.
61. *Kol Bo* 45.
62. *Bi'ur Halakhah* 693:4.
63. *Meg.* 16b.
64. *Kaf Hahayyim*, 693:25.
65. *Yoreh Dei'ah* 242:13.
66. Cf. *Sha'ar Hatziyon*, 146:1.
67. 282:1.
68. The same may apply to saying *Bo'i Veshalom* on Friday evening. Cf. Rabbi O. Yosef, *Yehaveh Da'at*, 3:19.
69. *Sefer Matamim Hehadash* in name of *She'eirut Haberakhah* 79:10.
- 69a. *Sefer Matamim*, ibid., 14:12.
70. B.B. 25b.
71. *Peri Megadim*.
72. *Sefer Maharil*, p. 282; cf. also Rabbi Yitzhak I. Tirnau, *Sefer Haminhagim, Minhag Shel Yom Kippur*, 160.
73. *Sefer Matamim*, ibid., 164:23.
74. *Levush, Orach Hayyim*, 133.
75. Rabbi H. Schachter, *Nefesh Harav*, Jerusalem, 1994, pp. 162, 163.
76. *Sot.* 38b.
77. *Mishnah Berurah* 128:61.
78. *Rema* 131:2.
79. *Sefer Matamim*, ibid., 229:39-40.
80. 131:11.
81. Cf. also *Taz* 131:5.
82. *Rema*, ibid.
83. *Minhage Eretz Yisrael*, ibid., 48:3, cf also footnote no. 3.
84. Rabbi S. Gaguine, *Keter Shem Tob*, England, 1934, 78:8.
85. Israel Hayyim Friedman, *Likkutei Mahari'ah*, vol. 3, Marmaros, Sziget, 1911, p. 176.
86. *Rokeach*, chap. 324.
87. I. Elbogen, *Hatefillah Beyisrael, Dvir*, Tel-Aviv, 1972, p. 65.
88. Rabbi Abraham Isaac Sperling, *Ta'amei Haminhagim*, sec. *Likkutim*, 179, in name of the *Levush*.
89. *Sefer Minhagei Yeshurun*, 67:10.
90. *Bet Yosef*, 591.

91. Some remove all the Torah scrolls in the Ark.
92. *Arukh Hashulhan*, 619:6.
93. Cf. *Rashi*, *Shemot* 33:11, s.v. *Veshav El Hamahaneh*.
94. Rabbi Y.D. Singer, *Sefer Ziv Haminhagim*, Givat Shmuel, Israel, 1965, 195:100.
- 94a. Rabbi S. Ganzfried, *Kitzur Shulhan Arukh*, 132:5.
95. *Mishnah Berurah*, 623:7; cf. also *Matteh Ephraim* 623:7.
96. *Elef Hamagen to Matteh Ephraim*, 623.
97. *Sefer Ziv Haminhagim*; *ibid*, 207:129.
98. *Sefer Matamim*, 105:134.
99. *Sefer Ziv Haminhagim*, 245:211.
100. E. Kitov, *Sefer Hatoda'ah*, vol. 1, Machon Lehotza'at Sefarim, Jerusalem, 1958, p. 130.
101. *Sefer Ziv Haminhagim*, *ibid*.
102. This listing was prepared by the late Hazzan Reuben M. Eschwege, Chief Cantor of Würzburg. The writer of this article is indebted to Mr. Henry Eschwege, a son of Hazzan Eschwege, for making this listing available.

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