

## *Pointing to the Torah and other Hagbaha Customs*

By: ZVI RON

The idea of displaying the text of the Torah to the listening congregation is already found in Tanakh. Before Ezra read to the assembled Jews from the Torah scroll, we are told that “Ezra opened the scroll before the eyes of the people ... and when he opened it, all the people stood silent. Ezra blessed the Lord God, and all the people answered, ‘Amen! Amen!’ with their hands upraised, then they bowed and prostrated themselves before the Lord, faces to the ground” (Neh. 8:5-6). It is not clear if the showing of the Torah and the reaction of bowing was meant to be a onetime practice or something that would accompany every public Torah reading. Still, this source forms the basis of the idea of displaying the Torah scroll as codified in *Masekhet Soferim* 14:13.<sup>1</sup> Just as reported in Nehemiah, *Masekhet Soferim* instructs that the Torah is to be shown before the reading, at which time the congregation should bow: “It is a mitzvah for all the men and women to see the writing, bow and say, ‘This is the Torah that Moses placed before the Children of Israel’ (Deut. 4:44). ‘The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul’ (Ps. 19:8).” This source is quoted by Ramban in his discussion of

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<sup>1</sup> See Morekhai Zer-Kavod, *Da’at Mikra: Ezra v-Nehemia* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), p. 105, note 6. See there also an alternate interpretation that the word *vayiftah* in this verse means “began reading” rather than “opened.” According to that interpretation there was not necessarily a public display of the Torah at this event, and the people reacted to hearing the words of the Torah, rather than to seeing the scroll. See also Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1989), p. 78–81.

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*hagbaha*<sup>2</sup> as well as by other *rishonim*.<sup>3</sup> *Masekhet Soferim* forms the basis for the law as formulated in the *Shulḥan Arukh* (*Orah Ḥayyim* 134:2). In all of these sources the only actions incumbent on the congregation during *hagbaha* are bowing and reciting two verses.

There are a few differences between the way *Masekhet Soferim* describes *hagbaha* and current practice. In accordance with *Masekhet Soferim*, R. Yosef Karo in the *Shulḥan Arukh* has *hagbaha* taking place before the Torah reading, the universal custom in Talmudic times.<sup>4</sup> R. Moshe Isserles adds that the Ashkenazic custom is to do *hagbaha* after the Torah reading, even though the early Ashkenazic work *Kol Bo*, quoting *Masekhet Soferim*, indicates that *hagbaha* is done before the reading.<sup>5</sup> It seems that some textual variants of *Masekhet Soferim* state that *hagbaha* is done after the Torah reading, leading to the different customs.<sup>6</sup> R. Chaim Benvenisti (1603–1673), an important Turkish halakhist, explains in his book *Sha'ayarei Knesset ha-Gedolah* that the Ashkenazic custom originated because uneducated people thought that seeing the Torah at *hagbaha* was more important than hearing the Torah reading, so they would walk out of the synagogue right after *hagbaha*. By postponing *hagbaha*, people would leave only after the Torah reading.<sup>7</sup> Some Sephardic authorities approved of the Ashkenazic custom,<sup>8</sup> and in

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<sup>2</sup> Ramban, commentary to Deut. 27:26.

<sup>3</sup> See *Beit Yosef*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 134:2.

<sup>4</sup> *Arukh ha-Shulḥan*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 147:9.

<sup>5</sup> *Kol Bo*, siman 20. *Darkei Moshe*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 147:4.

<sup>6</sup> See *Bayit Ḥadash*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 147:3. See also *Talmudic Encyclopedia* (Jerusalem: Talmudic Encyclopedia Publishing, Ltd., 1957), vol. 8, p. 167, note 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Sha'ayarei Knesset ha-Gedolah*, *Beit Yosef*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 134:2. This is similar to the contemporary practice in some synagogues to place *Anim Zemirot* in the middle of the service rather at the end so that people do not walk out of the synagogue while the Ark is open. For more on Benvenisti, see Bezalel Naor, *Post-Sabbatian Sabbatianism* (Spring Valley, New York: Orot, 1999), p. 167.

<sup>8</sup> R. Ḥayyim Yosef David Azulai, *le-David Emet* (Jerusalem: 1847), 4:2. He notes also that in some communities it was customary not to do *hagbaha* at all for fear that the Torah may be dropped or touched with bare hands, 4:1. See also *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8, p. 167, n. 5–7.

some Ashkenazic communities *hagbaha* is done before the Torah reading.<sup>9</sup>

*Masekhet Soferim* gives two verses (Deut. 4:44, Ps. 19:8) for the congregation to recite during *hagbaha*. These along with various additional verses are found today in Ashkenazic and Sephardic prayer books.<sup>10</sup> Some editions of *Masekhet Soferim* have the word “or” between the two verses, indicating that either verse can be said, and it is not necessary to recite both, so it is not surprising that many prayer books leave out Ps. 19:8.<sup>11</sup> Contemporary Ashkenazic prayer books generally add the words “According to the word of the Lord through Moses” to the verse from Deut. 4:44, and leave out the verse from Psalms.<sup>12</sup> This addition is found in the very influential prayer book composed by R. Isaiah Horowitz (the *Shenei Luhot ha-Brit (Shelah)*, 1565–1630),<sup>13</sup> but is considered unusual since it is only a fragment of a verse with seemingly no connection to Deut. 4:44 or to *hagbaha*.<sup>14</sup> It seems not to be a kabbalistic addition since it does not appear in kabbalistic prayer books before the

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<sup>9</sup> See *Kaf ha-Hayyim, Orat Hayyim* 134:17, Simcha Rabinowitz, *Piskei Teshuvot* (Jerusalem: 2002) volume 2, 134:9, p. 107, note 42. The differences in the placement of *hagbaha* may also be related to the different customs found in Israel and Babylonia regarding standing when the Torah is taken out and returned to the Ark; see Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 8 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 2007), pp. 142–145.

<sup>10</sup> Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), p. 99, note 75.

<sup>11</sup> The word “or” appears in parentheses in the standard Vilna edition of *Masekhet Soferim*; however, the Gra in his notes to *Masekhet Soferim* deletes that word. The version of *Masekhet Soferim* found in *Mahzor Vitry* indicates that both verses are said (p. 707). See also *Piskei Teshuvot* volume 2, 134:8, p. 107, n. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Ps. 19:8 is included in many prayer books at the end of the formula for calling up the first aliya, *v-tigaleh*. This is already found in works of the Rishonim; see for example *Sefer Abudraham* (Jerusalem: Frank, 1995), p. 142, and *Perushei Siddur ha-tefilla l-Rokeah* (Jerusalem: Machon Harav Hershler, 1992), p. 422.

<sup>13</sup> *Siddur ha-Shelah, Sha'ar ha-Shamayim* (Amsterdam: 1717), p. 117b. The addition is not commented upon by the *Shelah*.

<sup>14</sup> See for example *Arukh ha-Shulhan, Orat Hayyim* 134:3, and Eliyahu Munk, *Olam ha-Tefillot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1992), p.185.

*Shelah*.<sup>15</sup> Although this phrase appears multiple times in the Torah,<sup>16</sup> some prayer books note that these words are taken specifically from Num. 9:23, “According to the word of the Lord would they encamp, and according to the word of the Lord would they journey; the charge of the Lord would they safeguard, according to the word of the Lord through Moses.”<sup>17</sup> This verse reference is based on the opinion of R. Hayyim of Volozhin that originally this entire verse was said, but it was mistakenly abbreviated.<sup>18</sup> This verse is considered fitting for when the Torah is in motion, during *hagbaha* and on the way to the Ark.<sup>19</sup> There is no evidence from any early prayer book that the whole verse was ever recited. It has been suggested that these additional words proclaiming that this is the complete divine Torah were added in Ashkenazic lands to negate the theology of their Christian neighbors.<sup>20</sup>

While *Masekhet Soferim* instructs the congregation to bow during *hagbaha*, it is more common today to see people pointing at the Torah during *hagbaha*. This despite the explicit statement by the *Shulhan Arukh* (*Orah Hayyim* 134:2) that one should bow. R. Moshe Isserles writes that this was the custom of Maharil as well.<sup>21</sup> This bow is performed the same way one bows during *Modim* in *Shemoneh Esreh*.<sup>22</sup> Many authorities have decried the fact that some

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Reimer, *Sefer Tefillat Hayyim* (Zrur ha-Hayyim Publications, 2004), p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Num. 4:37, 4:45, 9:23, 10:13, and once in Jos. 22:9.

<sup>17</sup> See *ArtScroll Siddur*, p. 146. *Rinat Yisrael*, which usually provides chapter references, does not do so for this passage.

<sup>18</sup> R. Avraham Landa, *Siddur Zluta d-Avraham* (Tel-Aviv: Grafika, 1958), p. 373.

<sup>19</sup> R. Isaac Landa, *Mikra Soferim* (Suwalki, Poland: 1862), 13:4; see also his commentary *Dover Shalom* in *Ozar ha-Tefillot*, p. 422. Based on this, in *Ishei Yisrael*, a prayer book based on the teachings of the Vilna Gaon, the entire verse is brought, Isaac Moltzin, *Ishei Yisrael* (Tel Aviv: Yakov Landa, 1968), p. 164.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Sperber, *Minhagei Yisrael*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1994), pp. 95–102.

<sup>21</sup> *Darkei Moshe*, *Orah Hayyim* 147:4.

<sup>22</sup> *Talmudic Encyclopedia*, vol. 8, p. 170, n. 44.

people today do not bow during *hagbaha*.<sup>23</sup> Various reasons have been offered to justify this. R. Isaiah di Trani (c. 1235–c. 1300), known as Riaz, is quoted in *Shiltei Gibborim* (*Kiddushin* 14b) as saying that one should stand for the Torah but not bow to the Torah. He explains that there is no source anywhere that indicates that people should bow to the Torah or the Ark.<sup>24</sup> Some authorities understood this to mean that it is in fact prohibited to bow to the Torah and only standing for the Torah is allowed.<sup>25</sup> This ruling is considered the main justification for those who do not bow during *hagbaha*.<sup>26</sup> The statement of Riaz seems to be in direct conflict with *Masekhet Soferim*, a source that clearly mandates bowing. Hida reconciles this blatant conflict by explaining that Riaz was not referring to an open Torah scroll, only to a closed one, and thus one should bow to the open Torah during *hagbaha*.<sup>27</sup> Others have justified not bowing during *hagbaha* because the Torah may not be kosher,<sup>28</sup> or because the person lifting the Torah is standing between the congregation and the Torah scroll,<sup>29</sup> or that *Masekhet Soferim* only meant that it is good to bow during *hagbaha*, but not obligatory.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the justification, today in many congregations pointing is much more prevalent than bowing.

Pointing during *hagbaha* is not mentioned in any early sources and is not found in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, or in the traditional commentaries to the *Shulḥan Arukh*. Some works claim that there is no real source for this custom and it should be avoided.<sup>31</sup> Certain rab-

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<sup>23</sup> See Yehuda Levi Ben-David, *Sefer Kara Ravatz* (Jerusalem: Birkei Yosef, 1996), p. 267.

<sup>24</sup> ולא נמצא בכל התורה שמשחתוין אפילו לארון הקודש.

<sup>25</sup> See R. Hāyyim Yosef David Azulai, *Birkei Yosef*, 134:3, where he discusses this at length.

<sup>26</sup> Simḥa Rabinowitz, *Piskei Teshuvot*, volume 2, 134:7, p. 105, n. 28.

<sup>27</sup> R. Hāyyim Yosef David Azulai, *Birkei Yosef*, 134:3.

<sup>28</sup> Yekutiel Yehudah Halberstam, *Divrei Yaziv* (Jerusalem: Shefa Hāyyim, 1997), *Orah Hayyim* vol. 1, 76:6.

<sup>29</sup> *Piskei Teshuvot*, volume 2, 134:7, p. 106, n. 29. This would explain why bowing during *hagbaha* is more prevalent in Sephardic congregations where the person doing *hagbaha* is not blocking any of the writing.

<sup>30</sup> *Sefer Kara Ravatz*, p. 267.

<sup>31</sup> Yehudah Chesner, *Siah Tefilla* (Ofakim: 2003) p. 248.

binic leaders in modern times, such as Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Eliyashiv, would not point to the Torah during *bagbaha*.<sup>32</sup> The earliest mention of pointing during *bagbaha* is found in *Divrei Mordekhai*, a book of responsa by R. Moredekhai Krispin, a rabbi in Rhodes in the 1800s. No source for the custom is given, only a justification for why it is not considered inappropriate. In *Bamidbar Rabbah* (2:3) R. Ḥanina explains that while it is generally considered insolent and punishable by death to point to the image of a king using a finger, because of His great love for the Jewish People, God allows young children to point to His Name in the house of study. R. Krispin writes that this is what people rely on when they point to the Torah.<sup>33</sup> This justification is quoted by R. Ḥayyim Palaggi (1788–1869), who served as the *Ḥakham Bashi*, the Chief Rabbi of the Ottoman Empire, in his book *Sefer Ḥayyim* when he discusses this custom.<sup>34</sup> This work is the most common source referenced for the custom.<sup>35</sup> R. Palaggi discusses this custom in other works as well. In his book *Ruah Ḥayyim* he explains that pointing with a finger is not considered inappropriate in connection with God, bringing proofs from the Talmud and midrash. For example, the famous comment at the end of *Ta'anit* (31a), based on Isaiah 25:9, that in the Garden of Eden the righteous will form a circle around God and point to Him with their finger.<sup>36</sup> He references *Divrei Mordekhai* there as well.<sup>37</sup> In his book *Lev Ḥayyim*, R. Palaggi once again discusses the custom of pointing to the Torah. This time he explains that the most appropriate finger to point with is the index finger, since it is the second finger if we begin counting

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<sup>32</sup> Avraham Schigel, *Doleh u-Mashkeh* (Kiryat Sefer: 2007), p. 95, n. 272.

<sup>33</sup> R. Mordekhai Krispin, *Divrei Mordekhai* (Salonika: 1836), siman 9.

<sup>34</sup> R. Ḥaim Palaggi, *Sefer Ḥayyim* (Salonika: 1863), 3:6. This book is often mistakenly referred to as *Sefer ha-Ḥayyim*.

<sup>35</sup> See for example *Doleh u-Mashkeh* (Kiryat Sefer: 2007), p. 95, and *Aliba d-Hilkheta* 31, Shevat-Adar 5769, p. 34, where R. Ḥayyim Kanievsky references R. Palaggi as the source of the custom.

<sup>36</sup> A similar exposition of Psalms 48:15 found in the Jerusalem Talmud *Mo'ed Katan* 3:7 is suggested by Jacob Neusner to be the source for pointing as showing respect and thus pointing to the Torah. See Noam Neusner, "The Pinkie Paradox," *Jerusalem Post Magazine*, June 13, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> R. Chaim Palaggi, *Ruah Ḥayyim* (Izmir: 1876), *Yoreh De'ah* 285: 4.

with the thumb, corresponding to the second word in the series of five-word statements describing the Torah in Psalms 19:8–10. In each of the six statements, the second word is the Name of God. For example, “The Torah of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the Lord is trustworthy, making the simple wise, תורה ה' תמימה משיבת נפש, עדות ה' נאמנה מחכימת פתי (Ps. 19:8). Pointing with the second finger is therefore ideal since the entire Torah is understood to be the Name of God.<sup>38</sup>

A popular explanation for the custom to point is based on the idea found in *Menahot* 29a that the word *zeb* in the Torah implies pointing with a finger. “A Tanna of the school of R. Ishmael stated, ‘Three things presented difficulties to Moses, until the Holy One, blessed be He, showed Moses with His finger, and these are they: the menorah, the new moon, and the creeping things. The menorah, as it is written, ‘And this was (*v-zeb*) the work of the candlestick’ (Num. 8:4). The new moon, as it is written, ‘This (*ba-zeb*) month shall be unto you the beginning of months’ (Ex. 12:2). The creeping things, as it is written, ‘And these are (*v-zeb*) they which are unclean’ (Lev. 11:29). Others add, also the rules for slaughtering beasts, as it is written, ‘Now this is (*v-zeb*) that which thou shall offer upon the altar’ (Ex. 29:38).”<sup>39</sup> Thus, when reciting the verse ‘This is (*zoh*) the Torah that Moses placed before the Children of Israel’ (Deut. 4:44) during *hagbaha*, people point with their finger.<sup>40</sup> Other *derashot* connecting the word *zeb* to pointing with a finger are found in rabbinic literature,<sup>41</sup> but always only in connection

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<sup>38</sup> R. Chaim Palaggi, *Lev Hayyim* (Jerusalem: Siah Yisrael, 1996), vol. 2, 167:6.

<sup>39</sup> *Exodus Rabbah* (15:28) adds a fourth, the anointing oil, based on the verse “This (*zeb*) shall remain for Me oil of sacred anointment for your generations” (Ex. 30:31).

<sup>40</sup> Yosef Lewy, *Minhag Yisrael Torah, volume 1* (Brooklyn, New York: Fink Graphics, 1990), p. 181. He introduces his discussion of the custom by stating that he searched through many books and could not find anywhere a reference to pointing during *hagbaha*.

<sup>41</sup> See *Torah Temima*, Gen. 25, note 30 and Ex. 13, note 29 for examples from the Jerusalem Talmud and midrashic literature. There the custom to point to the matzah and *marror* at the *seder* is explained based on the verse “And you shall tell your son on that day, ‘It is because of this (*zeb*)

with the word *zeh*, never *zobt*. This would make pointing irrelevant to *hagbaha* where the verse recited uses the word *zobt* and not *zeh*. Still, in his discussion of Lev. 11:2 ‘These are (*zobt*) the creatures that you may eat from among the animals that are upon the earth,’ R. Eliyahu Mizrahi indicates that the idea of pointing can be learned from both *zeh* and *zobt*, so this is considered by some a support for the custom.<sup>42</sup> However, in the discussion of this verse in the Talmud (*Hullin* 42a) it says only that God showed Moshe the kinds of *tereifot*, without specifically mentioning showing with a finger. Still, this explanation is very popular, and seems to resonate with many people. This reasoning, along with the opinion of Divrei Mordekhai as quoted by R. Palaggi, are the explanations given in the popular *Ozar Ta’amei ha-Minhagim*.<sup>43</sup>

These sources are concerned with justifying a preexisting practice and bringing support to something commonly done,<sup>44</sup> but raise the question of why people started pointing to the Torah in the first place. It has been suggested that it arose from people attempting to kiss the Torah as it is taken from the Ark to the *bimah*. People who were far away and could not reach the Torah would stick out their hands in the direction of the Torah, sometimes holding *zizit*, and then kiss the *zizit* or their finger. In Sephardic congregations where *hagbaha* takes place right after the Torah arrives at the *bimah*, some people would still be sticking their hands out during *hagbaha*, leading to the impression that people should point to the Torah during *hagbaha*.<sup>45</sup> This would explain why all the early references to the custom of pointing appear in Sephardic sources. R.

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that the Lord acted on my behalf when I left Egypt’ ” (Ex. 13:8). Similarly, *Tiferet Yisrael* on the Mishnah (*Sanhedrin* 8:4) explains that when the parents of a rebellious son (*ben sorer u-moreh*) declare “This (*zeh*) son of ours” (Deut. 21:20) they point to their child with their finger.

<sup>42</sup> *Minbag Yisrael Torah* also references the commentary *Iyun Yaakov* to *Ein Yaakov*, *Hullin* 42a, where the word *zobt* in Lev. 11:2 is understood as indicating pointing with a finger. See also Efraim Greenblatt, *Rivivos Ephraim* (Brooklyn, NY: Mazel, 1993) *Orabī Hlayyim*, vol. 6, no. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Shmuel Gelbard, *Ozar Ta’amei ha-Minhagim* (Petah Tikva: Mifal Rashi, 1996), p. 224.

<sup>44</sup> Yehudah Chesner, *Siah Tefilla* (Ofakim: 2003) p. 248, n. 65.

<sup>45</sup> *Siah Tefilla*, p. 249, n. 65.

Palaggi specifically notes that most people hold their *zizit* in their hand when pointing to the Torah (although he explains that it is not necessary to do so),<sup>46</sup> and the custom in many Sephardic congregations today is to lift the *zizit* towards the Torah during *hagbaha* with or without a finger extended,<sup>47</sup> further indicating that the custom may have arisen as a long-distance way of kissing the Torah with the *zizit* on its way to the *bimah*.

Another factor that may have contributed to the prevalence of pointing is the practice of looking at letters in the Torah during *hagbaha*. The kabbalistic work *Sha'ar ha-Kavanot* compiled by R. Shmuel Vital, son of R. Haim Vital, relates that R. Isaac Luria, the Ari, would get close to the Torah during *hagbaha* so that he could see the actual letters, and that this practice draws down a great light.<sup>48</sup> This was quoted by R. Abraham Gombiner (c. 1633–c.1683) in his *Magen Avraham (Orah Hayyim, 134:3)* and was later included in *Sha'arei Efraim (10:13)* and the *Mishnah Berurah (134:11)*. Previous to kabbalistic influence, an indistinct view of text of the Torah during *hagbaha* was considered sufficient, but making out individual letters was not stressed.<sup>49</sup> By being included in the *Magen Avraham* and *Mishnah Berurah*, this kabbalistic custom became well known and widely practiced. R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad (the Ben Ish Hai, 1832–1909) adds that he saw in a book that during *hagbaha* a person should look for a word in the Torah that begins with the first letter of his name.<sup>50</sup> This idea is included in R. Yaakov Hayyim Sofer's *Kaf ha-Hayyim (Orah Hayyim 134:13)*. While none of these sources instruct people to point at the Torah, pointing is a natural way for people to make sure they can make out an actual letter, and certainly to find a particular letter. Justifications for pointing to the Torah are found only after the time of the *Magen Avraham*, when the kab-

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<sup>46</sup> *Sefer Hayyim*, 3:6.

<sup>47</sup> *Sefer Kara Ravatz*, p. 275.

<sup>48</sup> Shmuel Vital, *Sha'ar ha-Kavanot* (Jerusalem: Yerid ha-Sefarim, 2005), *Inyan Kriyat ha-Torah, derush alef*, p. 48b.

<sup>49</sup> Moshe Hallamish, *Kabbalah in Liturgy, Halakhah and Customs* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University, 2000), p. 311 (Hebrew).

<sup>50</sup> R. Yosef Chaim of Baghdad, *Sefer Ben Ish Hai* (Jerusalem: 1932), year 2, *Toldot* 16, p. 19a.

balistic practice of looking at the letters during *hagbaha* became more widely known.

In contemporary synagogues when the Torah is opened and lifted up during *hagbaha*, many congregants can be seen pointing to the Torah with their little finger. The earliest reference to this custom is found in the encyclopedic work *me-Am Lo'ez*, a Ladino commentary to Tanach. This work was begun by R. Yaakov Culi in the 1700s to facilitate Torah study among Turkish Jews who were not fluent in Hebrew. Rabbi Culi died in 1732, having completed the commentary on Genesis and most of Exodus. The rest of *me-Am Lo'ez* on the Torah was written by different authors. The custom of pointing to the Torah using the little finger is mentioned as part of the commentary to *Ki Tavo* (27:26) in a discussion of customs related to *hagbaha*.<sup>51</sup> There it simply states, "It is customary to point to the writing with the little finger and to kiss it." No explanation is given for the custom. *me-Am Lo'ez* on Deuteronomy was begun by R. Isaac Behar Arguiti of Constantinople and completed in 1772. However, beyond the commentary to the first three portions of Deuteronomy, *Devarim*, *va-Ethanan* and *Eikev*, only a few pages of his work were found. The rest of the *me-Am Lo'ez* commentary to Deuteronomy, including the discussion of *hagbaha*, was written by R. Shmuel Kroizer (1921–1997),<sup>52</sup> a fifth-generation Jerusalemite who lived most of his life in the Beit Hakerem neighborhood of Jerusalem.<sup>53</sup> Rabbi Kroizer was a well-known Jerusalem rabbi and *talmid hakham* who was on the staff of the *Talmudic Encyclopedia* at a very young age. He authored many books and was responsible for translating *me-Am Lo'ez* from Ladino to Hebrew. He wrote the *me-Am Lo'ez* commentary to the remainder of Deu-

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<sup>51</sup> *Yalkut me-Am Lo'ez, Devarim: volume 3* (Jerusalem: Wagshal, 1969), p. 1,037.

<sup>52</sup> *Yalkut me-Am Lo'ez, Devarim: volume 1* (Jerusalem: Wagshal, 1969), introduction, pp. 5-6.

<sup>53</sup> Kroizer's wife was the daughter of Yisrael Ber Odesser, famous for his discovery of the "Letter from Heaven," containing the now ubiquitous *na-nach* phrase. For an overview of the life and works of R. Shmuel Kroizer, see the article in Haaretz, May 5, 2010, <<http://www.haaretz.co.il/hasite/pages/ShArt.jhtml?itemNo=1168741&contrassID=1&subContrassID=18&sbSubContrassID=0>>.

teronomy, as well as most of the *me-Am Lo'ez* Tanakh commentary. Due to his great modesty he often used pseudonyms, and in the title page of *me-Am Lo'ez* he goes by Shmuel Yerushalmi. Thus, the earliest reference in writing to the custom of pointing to the Torah with the little finger is in fact in the book *me-Am Lo'ez*, but that particular section dates to 1969, making this a very recent source. Pointing with the little finger was popular enough by Kroizer's time that he called it "customary" (נהגו), however it was never considered significant enough to be mentioned as a legitimate custom in any halakhic work or book of Jewish customs before he wrote about it. The contemporary halakhic work *Piskei Teshuvot* claims that the custom of pointing to the Torah with the little finger has an ancient source, מקורו קדמון, apparently not realizing that R. Kroizer is the author of this part of *me-Am Lo'ez*.<sup>54</sup> However, Yehudah Chesner in his book *Siah Tefillah* correctly points out that this part of *me-Am Lo'ez* was written recently, and the custom has no ancient sources at all, ואין בזה שום מקור קדמון.<sup>55</sup> Since *me-Am Lo'ez* is a Sephardic work, many people assume that using the little finger to point is a Sephardic custom; however R. Kroizer is Ashkenazic and the sections that he wrote draw upon both Sephardic and Ashkenazic customs. In the same section he notes the differences between Sephardic and Ashkenazic congregations regarding when to do *hagbaha*, and the custom of the Ari to get close and see the actual letters.

Pointing with the little finger can be seen in many congregations today, but there is no clear reason for it.<sup>56</sup> Generally people explain that they do it because they have seen others doing so, even though they were never specifically taught to point to the Torah with their little finger.<sup>57</sup> In recent years a few explanations have

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<sup>54</sup> *Piskei Teshuvot* (Jerusalem: 2002) volume 2, 134:3, p. 104.

<sup>55</sup> *Siah Tefilla*, p. 248, n. 65.

<sup>56</sup> Correspondence with the son of R. Kroizer, friends and neighbors did not shed any light on the custom. It may be that R. Kroizer himself did not know of a reason for the custom, since contrary to other customs, he did not provide a reason for this one in *me-Am Lo'ez*.

<sup>57</sup> See Noam Neusner, "The Pinkie Paradox," Jerusalem Post Magazine, June 13, 2003.

been offered for this custom. One popular explanation is that pointing to the Torah with the littlest finger demonstrates the classic teaching that only a humble person can acquire Torah greatness.<sup>58</sup> Other approaches are somewhat more obscure. The ten fingers can be seen as representing the Ten Commandments, and if we begin counting the fingers with our hands palms down, the little finger on the right hand corresponds to the First Commandment, making it an appropriate finger to point to the Torah.<sup>59</sup> However, this way of counting fingers is in opposition to the way people commonly count using fingers and to the method of R. Palaggi noted earlier, where counting begins with the thumb.<sup>60</sup> Rabbenu Bahya in his commentary to the Torah (Lev. 8:23) mentions an idea current among scientists of his time that each finger assists one of the five senses. For example, the index finger is commonly used to clean out nostrils, so it serves the sense of smell; the ring finger is used to clean out the eyes, so it serves the sense of sight. The little finger is used for cleaning out the ear, thus serving the sense of hearing. Based on this, it has been suggested that pointing with the little finger recalls the Israelites saying *na'aseh v-nishma* at the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai.<sup>61</sup> The connection between cleaning out ears and pointing to the Torah seems tenuous. In general these explana-

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<sup>58</sup> Nissim Dayan, *Na'eh Zivam* (Bnei Brak: 2002), p. 43. The exact same text also appears in Dayan's book *Shavatenu Kabel* (Bnei Brak: 2009), p. 184.

<sup>59</sup> *Sefer Kara Ravaz*, p. 275.

<sup>60</sup> On the various places to begin counting via fingers, see Oliver Lindemann, Ahmad Alipour and Martin H. Fischer, "Finger Counting Habits in Middle Eastern and Western Individuals," *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, May 2011, vol. 42:4, pp. 566–578.

<sup>61</sup> *Sefer Kara Ravaz*, p. 275. The connection between the little finger and ear cleaning is found in many cultures. The Anglo-Saxons called the little finger the ear finger; it is also known as the auricular finger, *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005), p.509. It is interesting to note that in medieval times, a raised little finger indicated that an actor in a play was eavesdropping on another character; see Charles Reginald Dodwell, *Anglo-Saxon Gestures and the Roman Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 23.

tions do not seem particularly satisfying, but the prevalence of the custom demands some sort of explanation.<sup>62</sup>

There may be another reason for the choice of using the little finger to point to the Torah. Finger pointing sometimes has negative connotations in Tanakh. For example, “If you remove from your midst perversion, finger pointing and evil speech” (Is. 58:9), is explained by Radak as referring to the way of belligerent people to point one finger at each other. In Proverbs 6:13 finger pointing is listed as one of the actions of a lawless man. Among both ancient and modern peoples, in both Islamic and European cultures, many consider pointing at someone with the index finger offensive.<sup>63</sup> There are some positive references to finger pointing in rabbinic literature, such as Ta’anit (31a) noted above,<sup>64</sup> but negative connota-

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<sup>62</sup> Rabbi Yehuda Schwartz explains that actually people are making the *kemiza* sign with their hand, folding down the middle three fingers, as the priests did when preparing the meal offering: “And so, we can say that the pinky is not pointing at all. Rather it is the result of forming that *komez* with our fingers as the Torah is being returned, in effect, as we seek to 'take with us' that little portion we can, a *komez* so to speak, to carry us through until the next reading” (personal correspondence). See his letter in the Jerusalem Post Magazine, June 20, 2003. Other “cute” explanations are given for the custom, such as the idea that since all the other body parts have mitzvot to do but not the little finger, it was decided to leave this for the little finger to perform.

<sup>63</sup> When I was serving in the IDF and was responsible for training a group of new *olim* from Ethiopia, we were specifically instructed not to point to them as it was considered a very offensive gesture in Ethiopia. Regarding the negative associations of pointing among ancient cultures in Biblical times, see Aron Magen, *Beit Abaron: Klalei ha-Shas, volume 10* (Brooklyn, NY: Deutsch Publishing, 1975), p. 712. Regarding the pointing taboo in the modern era, see Larry A. Samovar, *Communication Between Cultures* (Boston, MA: Wadsworth, 2007), p. 257; Mai Moua, *Culturally Intelligent Leadership: Leading Through Intercultural Interactions* (New York: Business Expert Press, 2010), p. 123; Lillian Glass, *Say it Right* (New York: Putnam's Sons, 1991), p. 164; J.K. Yates, *Global Engineering and Construction* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2007) p.32; Craig Steven Cravens, *Culture and Customs of the Czech Republic and Slovakia* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>64</sup> See also Chanoch Zundel Grossberg, *Zer ha-Torah* (Jerusalem: 1979), p. 12, n. 8.

tions are found as well, such as the midrash mentioned by *Divrei Mordekhai* that it was considered an unpardonable offense to point to the likeness of a king. The reason for this is that “pointing with the finger is often held to be of magical efficacy, the power streaming, as it were, from operator to victim ... hence it is indecorous to point with a finger towards, e.g., the heavenly bodies or other worshipful objects or at friends or superiors.”<sup>65</sup> Even in modern times, in many cultures pointing with the finger to what were considered supernaturally powerful objects, such as the sun,<sup>66</sup> moon, stars,<sup>67</sup> rainbows<sup>68</sup> and tombstones,<sup>69</sup> is considered inappropriate and a source of misfortune. This is extended to pointing to anything considered of value, such as ships in fishing cultures.<sup>70</sup> The index finger was considered a particularly offensive finger to use for pointing.<sup>71</sup> Because of this some people bend their index finger down a bit so that they are not actually pointing at the Torah. It may be that once the custom of pointing to the Torah became prevalent, it was considered inappropriate to use the index finger for pointing because of negative cultural connotations, leading to the use of the little finger as an alternative with no offensive connotations.<sup>72</sup> The fact that the

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<sup>65</sup> James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1913), vol. 6, p. 496.

<sup>66</sup> Frank A. Kmietowicz, *Slavic Mythical Beliefs*, (1982) p. 174.

<sup>67</sup> J.G. Frazer, “Some Popular Superstitions of the Ancients,” *Folklore* (1890) vol. 1, p. 151-152.

<sup>68</sup> Francisco R. Demetrio, *Encyclopedia of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs, vol. 2* (Cagayan de Oro City, Philippines: Xavier University, 1991), p. 19.

<sup>69</sup> Wayland Debs, *Popular Beliefs and Superstitions: A Compendium of American Folklore*, vol. 1 (G.K. Hall, 1981) p. 1,241.

<sup>70</sup> Morag Cameron, “Highland Fisher-folk and Their Superstitions,” *Folklore* (1903) vol. 14, p. 303, not to point to boats going out to sea. John Rhys, “Manx Folklore and Superstitions,” *Folklore* (1892) vol. 3, p. 84, superstition of fishermen not to point to anything with a finger.

<sup>71</sup> Charlotte S. Burne, “Presidential Address,” *Folklore* (1911) vol. 22, p. 27, the index finger is considered poisonous.

<sup>72</sup> See *Sefer Kara Ravaz*, p. 275, where he explains that it is not standard to point with the thumb. Dr. Roman Katsman of Bar-Ilan University confirmed that the gesture of pointing with the little finger is “positively a non-offensive one.” There have been some reports of a German custom of

little finger, affectionately known as the pinky,<sup>73</sup> is considered cute is probably a factor in the popularity of this custom.

The original custom to bow to the Torah during *hagbaha*, codified in the *Shulḥan Arukh*, has in many congregations been usurped by finger pointing. Finger pointing during *hagbaha* first appears in sources from the 1800s, where the index finger was used to point. Today the little finger is used by many people, a custom attested to in writing for the first time less than fifty years ago. The reasons for using specifically the little finger remain unclear. ❧

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using the little finger to point in general; see Geraldine Michael and Frank N. Wills, Jr., “The Development of Gestures in Three Subcultural Groups,” *The Journal of Social Psychology* (1969) vol. 79, issue 1, p. 39. This is repeated in many books about gestures but in fact appears to be very uncommon and unrelated to the development of the custom to point to the Torah with the little finger.

<sup>73</sup> The term “pinky” for little finger derives from the Scottish use of the word “pink” to mean “small”; this is also the derivation of “pink eye,” meaning a small or contracted eye. See John Jamieson, *An Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language* (Edinburgh: Abernathy and Walker, 1818), under “pinkie.”