



How to Hold the Sefer Torah During an Aliya

לעילוי נשמת
 יואל אפרים בן אברהם עוזיאל זלצמן ז"ל

Question: During *aliyot*, I keep my hand on the “disc” part of the *etz chaim*. Someone keeps telling me that I must hold it by the “handle” and may touch the disc only incidentally. Who is correct?

Answer: The *gemara* (Megilla 32a) states that one loses his *mitzva* if he holds a *sefer Torah* “naked.” *Chazal* even instituted that a Torah scroll makes one’s hands *tameh* so that one should not touch it with his hands (Shabbat 14a). This can be a matter of honor (Levush, Orach Chayim 147:1) or protection for the Torah scroll (Rambam’s commentary to Yadayim 4:6). This creates tension with the *halacha* (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 139:11; Mishna Berura ad loc. 35) that one should hold the *sefer Torah* during the *aliya*. One answer is that it depends if his hands are considered freshly washed (see Beit Yosef and Bach, OC 147), although most assume that even washed hands may not touch it (Rama, OC 147:1).

Most *poskim* (see Mishna Berura 147:2) assume that the prohibition of touching applies only to the *klaf*, not the *etz chaim*. Logic indeed dictates that this special treatment is a function of the innate *kedusha* of a Torah scroll, not the *etz chaim*, which is only a *tashmish kedusha* (Taz, OC 147:1). Nevertheless,

some assume that as a connected extension of the *sefer Torah*, one should not touch the *etz chaim* with bare hands (Bach ibid.). The Magen Avraham (intro. to *siman* 147) sees in the Rambam’s ruling that the *etz chaim* makes the hands *tameh*, an indication that in matters of touching, an *etz chaim* is like the *klaf*. Others contend that one cannot extrapolate from the formal *halachot* of *tuma*, which equate connected parts of an object, to the *halacha* of not touching, which logically applies only to the *klaf* (see Eliya Rabba 147:1). The Maharit (Shut I:136) says that when the Torah is uncovered one should not touch the *etz chaim* without a separation, because of concern that he will touch the *klaf*.

Your question implies that you follow the great majority who hold the *etz chaim* without separation. (Note that the Mishna Berura agrees with the Noda B’yehuda (I, OC 136) that one who wants to be *machmir* must be discreet to avoid a problem of *yohara* (“holier than thou”).) So, if we accept the opinion that only the *klaf* is a problem, your friend seems wrong.

One can argue for your friend’s *chumra* with the following *chakira*. Why do we not accept the stringency? If it is because they decided the Taz is fundamentally right, then the **whole** *etz chaim* is a *tashmish kedusha* and can be held directly. However, if the

reason is that it is too difficult to expect a fabric between one’s hand and the *etz chaim*, then arguably it is feasible to ask the *oleh* to not get his hand closer to the *sefer Torah* than necessary (see Maharit above). From a technical perspective, when you hold the top of the disc, nothing separates your hands and the *klaf* (for your friend’s system, the disc does) and depending on the thickness of the roll on that week, the distance could be millimeters. This being said, to create a halachic distinction between parts of the same object, logic is not enough; you need an explicit or at least arguable source. Since we found no source that the disc is different, we reject your friend’s *chumra* on halachic grounds.

However, we must note that the great majority of *olim* to the Torah hold the handle of the *etz chaim*, not the disc. (Perhaps this is natural because the handle was made for hands, whereas the disc was made to protect the *klaf* from sliding.) So why would you want to be in the small minority in a manner that fares less well with the spirit of the law? If you are convinced that your practice is an actual family *minhag*, one can justify it. The Magen Avraham (139:13; see Mishna Berura 139:35) brings a little-known practice – holding the rolled *klaf* on both sides of the Torah, separated with fabric. This may imply that “the closer to the *klaf* the better,” provided you do not violate a *halacha*. Theoretically, your *minhag* could be based on that approach, in which case it makes sense to preserve it. ■

Having a dispute?



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