

The Dissonance of a Non-Jew Opening the Aron Kodesh/the Holy Ark

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שאלה

May the honor of פתיחת ארון הקודש/opening the Holy Ark during services be offered to a non-Jew?

תשובה

Welcoming Those Who are Not Jewish to our Services

It is a pleasure to welcome non-Jews as valued and welcome guests at our services. These guests may include friends or family of Jews who already attend regularly or are visiting to celebrate a significant lifecycle moment, prospective converts who are exploring a potential connection with our faith, students taking a comparative religion class, or even people from the community who are just curious about what Jewish worship may be like.

We are all eager to make our visitors feel welcome, to acknowledge their presence and support, and under certain circumstances even to take some extra time during the service to explain what is happening and why. It is equally incumbent upon us to draw distinctions between the appropriate participation of Jews and the appropriate participation of non-Jews in our services. For, in essence, a person who is not Jewish is a visitor at our services, not one of the obligated minyan of Jewish worshippers. The consideration of the question of offering someone who is not Jewish the honor of פתיחת ארון הקודש / ceremonially opening the holy ark must involve the examination of ritual, liturgical, and theological aspects of the act.

Opening the Aron Kodesh / The Holy Ark in Its Liturgical Setting

Our colleague, Rabbi David Booth, has reviewed the available halakhic literature on the subject of פתיחת הארון and has credibly established the absence of any explicitly stated prohibition against a non-Jew opening the ark, even during the course of Jewish communal prayer. The question simply did not occur to Jewish communities in previous generations. The closest example in the literature, which Rabbi Booth cites, is a teshuvah of R. Menashe Klein (Meshaneh Halakhot 11:119) regarding Jewish children opening the ark. Even in that case, Klein is opposed in principle.

As an approach to Jewish practice, some would say that in the absence of any previous prohibition, all is permitted, while others would say that in the absence of previous permission, all is prohibited. We feel that each new situation must be assessed on its own merits and implications.

Rabbi Booth has also established that opening the ark does not involve any technical concern of *hiyyuv*. There is no halakhic obligation incumbent on an individual Jew fulfilled by opening the ark. There is,

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

however, an obligation on the congregation to provide a halakhically correct Torah reading. Rambam establishes this communal obligation:

משה רבינו תיקן להם לישראל שיהו קורין בתורה ברבים בשבת ובשני ובחמישי בשחרית כדי שלא יהו שלשה ימים בלא שמיעת תורה. (משנה תורה, הלכות תפילה יב, א)

Moses our teacher fixed for those of Israel that they would read from the Torah publicly on Shabbat, and on Monday and on Thursday during morning services so that there would not be three days without hearing the Torah. (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Prayer, 12:1)

This has consistently been reflected in the universal practice of Jewish communities in every era and every location as a standard of reading from a kosher scroll at the designated time in the presence of a quorum, a minyan of 10 Jews accepted as “countable” by the congregation. In the absence of that minyan, the holy ark is not opened and the Torah scroll is not removed.

Considerations of liturgy and symbolism are as essential an element of halakhic discourse as the requisite review of the relevant halakhic literature on obligation and prohibition. Our communities regard opening the ark as a significant honor, one which enables the reading of the Torah, and which is perceived by the congregation as a public act on behalf of the congregation. A non-Jewish volunteer or member of the synagogue staff might open the ark at another time as part of their duties, and be appreciated for doing so with care, but carrying out the same action as part of the liturgy carries a very different valence.

This liturgy of the Torah service guides the Jewish community of worshippers through the affirmation of three key theological concepts: that we identify with the Israelites who followed the aron/ark bearing the words of the Sinai revelation through the wilderness; that the Torah represents the word of God; and that the Torah is a unique divine gift to Israel.

A closing parentheses of verses are recited as the aron kodesh / holy ark is closed after the reading from the scroll/s:

“Precious teaching do I give you: Never forsake My Torah.

It is a tree of life for those who grasp it, and all who uphold it are blessed.

Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.

Help us to return to You, Adonai, and we shall return. Renew our lives as in days of old.”

(Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals, 1998, page 154)

These verses (from Mishlei/Proverbs [4:2 and 3:18] and Eicha/Lamentations [5:21]) constitute a liturgical conversation in which God exhorts Israel to embrace this gift of Torah for all time. The congregation responds with a plea to God for return and renewal.

Each act of opening the ark, preparatory to removing the scroll/s and preparatory to returning the scroll/s, is imbued with symbolic meaning that affirms the eternal connection between the Jewish community of worshippers, the Torah and the brit/covenant forged in God’s bestowing and Israel’s accepting the gift of Torah.

Theological Considerations

The liturgy of removing and returning the Torah scroll/s to the ark celebrates and affirms the covenant of Torah. A person who is not Jewish is not included in that covenant, and might have a wide range of potential relationships to it. A non-Jew attending the service might be a respectful or supportive outsider to that covenant, or might hold religious views which are antithetical to Jewish belief. For example, a visitor might belong to any number of Christian denominations which hold that their faith reflects a new covenant which supersedes the Jewish covenant. One who identifies with this theological principle, offered the honor of פתיחת ארון הקודש / ceremonially opening the Holy Ark, would be doing so in a spirit actively antithetical to the intent of the ritual. Indeed, such an offer could be interpreted as coopting that person into an act that contradicts his or her own religious commitments and faith. In any case, one who is not Jewish is, by definition, not a part of the Jewish covenant, and it is inappropriate for him or her to represent the Jewish community in our Torah service's re-enactment of our acceptance of the Torah.

Keruv/Outreach

Rabbi Booth invokes the Biblical examples of the "Mixed Multitude" who were present at Sinai, and of Jethro, who was an important teacher and guide, and suggests that allowing non-Jews to open the ark would be an inducement for non-Jews to draw closer to the Torah, and perhaps would facilitate interest in conversion. In either case, the comparison is inappropriate. Jethro was not part of those who accepted the covenant. As for the mixed multitude, there is some question as to who they were and if they became part of the covenanted people or not, and some see them as a negative element altogether.

The concept of Keruv is indeed an important one in our communities. However, the essence of the concept of conversion is that becoming Jewish brings on rights and benefits, as well as responsibilities. If we do not reserve some level of ritual participation for those who have actively chosen to join Klal Israel, it diminishes the significance of that choice.

Conclusion

The act of opening and closing the aron kodesh / the holy ark during the course of Jewish communal worship must be reserved for Jews. Inviting a non-Jew to perform this ritual act is inappropriate because it drains the words of affirmation of Torah and covenant of their meaning.

For members of many other faith groups, the act of opening and/or closing the ark would be theologically untenable.

Some congregations may seek ways to recognize or honor non-Jews who are present a service, whether they be regular attendees, or family or friends visiting to celebrate a simḥah. There are many potential ways of honoring them that do not pose a challenge to the premise of the service being held. Such honored guests can be invited to read a poem, a psalm, or deliver personal greetings and blessings. The fundamental meaning of the act of *p'tichat aron hakodesh* / opening the holy ark during the service precludes the involvement of non-Jews.

פסק

It is not accepted practice for non-Jews to be offered the honor of פתיחת ארון הקודש / ceremonially opening the Holy Ark during services.