Background

As you may know there is currently a Bnai Keshet task force that is meeting to review our practices around who can be called to the Torah or come up for an aliyah.

Our practices in this regard have been evolving since the congregation began and have been reviewed at least three times that I am aware of. In general the goal of such reviews is to explore how best to express our congregation’s openness to interfaith families balanced with the central role that Torah plays as a signifier of Jewish identity.

At present it is the norm for family members of other faiths to be included for aliyot when there is a lifecycle event.

The current task force’s exploration is centered around a slightly different question:

What is the best way to embrace people who aren’t Jewish and welcome them into Jewish life and encourage maximal Jewish practice including conversion?

The task force is considering how focusing on who can or can’t have an aliyah might increase the holiness of this ritual or detract from it?

Likewise how having a more open invitation that did not exclude non-Jews might increase the holiness of this ritual or detract from it?

This is a big issue and we are going to take our time thinking it through. It is an issue that not only deserves congregational input but which we believe will benefit from the broadest possible level on participation and study.
We have several discussions planned. In February Rabbi Ariann will be leading another devar Torah to study the values associated with this decision. In March there will be a congregational discussion to hear more reactions to the values and elicit broad feedback. After that the task force will still have to consider what are the right steps next steps.

**Today I want to give us some background for exploring these questions, particularly related to the prayer we say for being called to the Torah.**

The practice of saying a blessing before and after the Torah reading is thought to be very old and there is evidence of it dating to 200 CE.

Like many blessings the form was not originally fixed.

Lawrence Hoffman shares a couple of earlier versions that are interesting:

_Asher bachar batorah hazon v’kidsha v’ratsah v’osecha_ - “Who chose this Torah, sanctified it, and took pleasure in those who do it”

Or

_Laasok bedivrey Torah_ - “who commanded us to occupy ourselves with words of Torah”

which is still said as the blessing for Torah study though not for an aliyah.

There has historically been an implicit assumption that this blessing could only be said by Jew. There is in fact almost no halacha that states this that I have been able to find, which doesn’t mean that the rabbis were open to non-Jews saying this blessing but rather that they couldn’t even imagine it as a question.

Further, the language of the traditional blessing, which we don’t typically say at Bnai Keshet:

_Asher bachar banu mi kol ha’amim_ - who has chosen us from all the peoples

Is explicit in assuming membership in the Jewish people. The reader is declaring themself part of _us_ the chosen people and not one of the other peoples.
Of course Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan explicitly rejected the theology of choseness and this is one of the distinctive features of Reconstructionist Judaism. Still when he crafted the alternative prayer that we typically say at Bnai Keshet: 
*Asher kervanu le’avodato* – who has drawn us to your service
It is likely that he imagined that *us* to be exclusively Jewish even if not chosen.

One of the questions for us to think about in this process is **whether or not we still see the *us* as exclusively Jewish?**

My own thinking on this question has been deeply impacted by the teaching of **Rabbi Arthur Green** who argues we now live in a time in which the universal messages of Judaism can be more meaningfully understood and practiced if every time we read the word *Yisrael* – we translate it as anyone who struggles with God, holiness and meaning of any faith tradition.

Another way that one might construct a halachic argument that this blessing should only be said by someone who is Jewish is that it can only be said when there are 10 adult Jews present. With the assumption being the person reciting the blessing counts as one of those 10.

On the other hand there are some interesting sources that one might use to say the blessing of an *aliyah* was always meant to be maximally inclusive of the whole community, even if it was beyond the framers imagination, that our community would one day include non-Jews.

Originally the blessing was always said by the same person who read the Torah. Over time it became the practice to almost always separate the blessing and the reading out of a desire not embarrass those who couldn’t read Torah. This made it much easier for average Jews to participate in this honor.
Also, the word *aliyah* does not come as I had always assumed from the Hebrew word *oleh* to go up. This is a common assumption that it represents if not a physical ascent to the bimah, a spiritual ascent.

According to the Talmud scholar Judith Hauptman the term *aliyah* when applied to Torah, comes from the word *olin* which means to count. It means that the person saying the blessing counts as one of the 7 blessers/readers of the Torah.

Interestingly, she says that the Talmud also understands this blesser as standing for everybody present in the congregation including women and children; all were counted as having participated in the mitzvah of the *aliyah*. Even those who were at the time not counted in a minyan and not allowed to read Torah for the community.

From this perspective we can construct or reconstruct an understanding that the whoever says the *aliyah* blessing is doing so on behalf of *everyone* present.

We experimented with a similar sentiment this Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when we invited one designated individual to do an aliyah to honor a much broader group of individuals who just stood up. Asking a broader group to stand up was a way of saying they *olin*, that the whole group should be counted in this honor as well.

Now– lets take a close look at the blessing itself. What does it say and what does each line mean?

398-399 (*My People’s Prayer Book*)

Line 1:
*Barchu et adonay hamvorach* – Bless Adonay the blessed one!

**This is a command. It is intended to engage & include the congregation.** It requires a response which they offer:

*Baruch adonay hamvorach le’olam vaed* – Blessed is Adonay the blessed one, now and forever!

What does this mean? Why is it repeated by the person doing the aliyah?
One reason is related to the Talmudic teaching that all present are meant to be counted/included in the blessing. The call demands a response. The response is meant to indicate – Yes count me in. It is repeated by the blesser as if to say – I am not just saying this blessing so that all of the rest of the community will be counted but also for myself.

The next line begins with a traditional prayer formula *Baruch atah adonay eloheynu melech ha’olam* – Blessed are you Adonay our God sovereign of all worlds/time.

In our prayerbook it continues – *asher kervanu le’avodato* who has drawn us to your service.

It is worth stopping here to look at page 397 to note that our prayer book includes the option of *asher bachar banu mi kol ha’amim* as an alternative.

It also offers a mix and match set of options for constructing this prayer that imply even greater opportunity for the reader to say a blessing that reflects their theology.

This includes even more radical language that is focused on us as blesser rather than God as the blessed – Let us bless the source of life – language that is more gender neutral and leaves out metaphors of kingship.

In many communities even further variations are offered. Replacing *melech* king with *ruach* – spirit. Or stating the whole prayer using Hebrew that presumes a feminine rather than masculine gendered God: *Brucha at yah schechina chey ha’olamim*

It is worth noting that regardless of who is saying the prayer we are living in a moment of experimentation in which at least the framers of our siddur were encouraging greater variety in the form of this prayer.
But let's look at the next lines:

Ve natan lanue et torato and has given us your (his) Torah.

Followed by

Baruch atah adonay noten hatorah - Blessed are you Adonay who gives the Torah.

WHAT IS GOING ON HERE WITH THESE TWO LINES?

(Discussion)

The prayer simultaneously acknowledges Torah as something ancient and inherited and something that is still being given and revealed to us.

We see here an understanding that the meaning of the Torah is inevitably shaped by its readers. Past & Present!

Rabbi Elliot Dorff points to a number of Talmudic and midrashic sources that claim that the prophecy continued through the process of reading and studying Torah. That the sages were prophetic. That Rabbi Akiva revealed Torah not revealed to Moses.

He says, “The text remains the same, but each time we read it we see new things in it. That might happen because of our personal growth, our new experiences that bring fresh understanding of the text” or the suggestions of those we study or the process of studying, etc.

This dual message of past and present revelation is repeated in the blessing we say after reading the Torah.

The last line says: who has given us the Torah of truth and planted eternal life within us

What does this suggest?

God’s Torah is replaced with Torah of truth. The blessing claims a connection between this Torah and eternal life is planted within us.