



The United Synagogue  
of Conservative Judaism

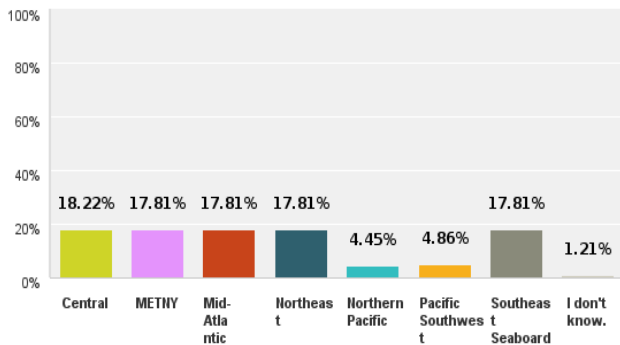
5-Minute-Survey™  
*Results*

# Torah Reading Customs

January, 2014  
248 kehillot participating

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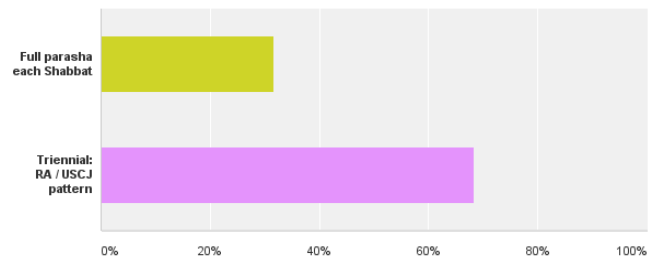
In November and December 2013, USCJ received a number of inquiries about what the “standard” Torah reading practices are in our kehillot. To answer those questions we decided to do a formal survey. The USCJ Five-Minute Survey on Torah Reading Customs ran for two weeks in January 2014.



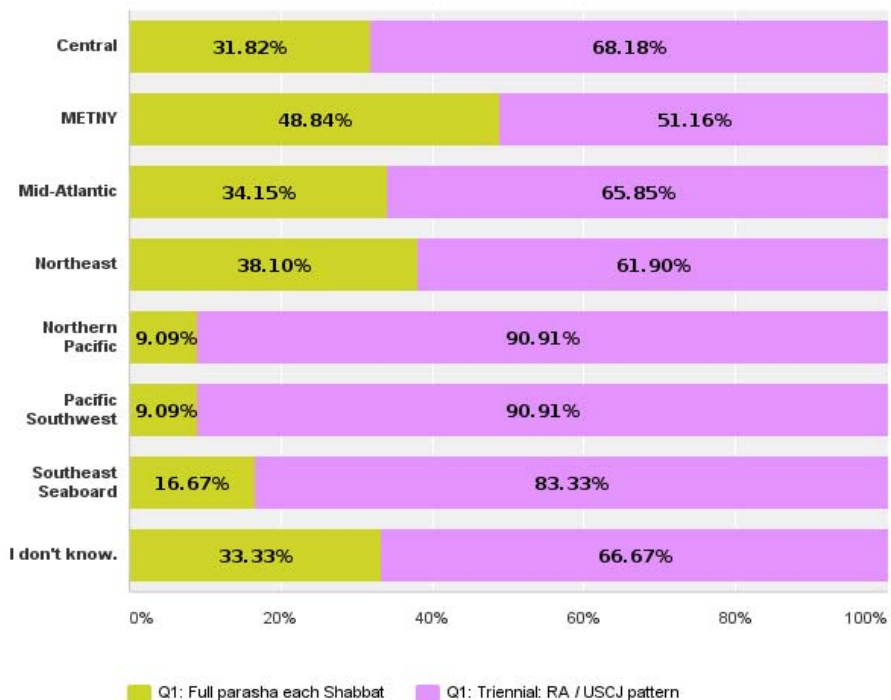
Requests to take the survey were sent through listserves and USCJ’s email system to rabbis, cantors, executive directors, and kehillah presidents. Requests to participate were also sent to the [ritual@uscj.net](mailto:ritual@uscj.net) listserv and through the district newsletters. Over 400 responses were received; after discarding those which came in without a phone number [as stated in the survey] and eliminating duplicates, responses from 248 kehillot were distributed very evenly across North America.

### How Much Is Read?

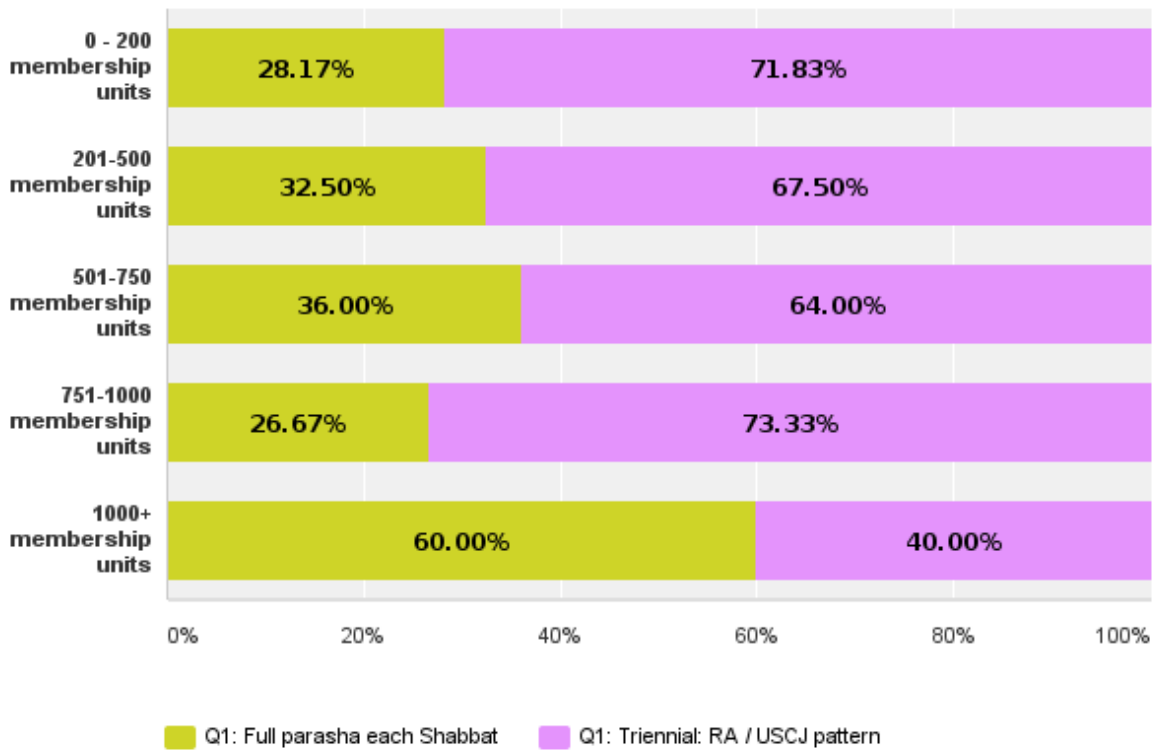
There had never been a USCJ survey dedicated solely to finding out about Torah reading customs. USCJ did have some data culled from other surveys which led us to believe that some 80% of our kehillot used a triennial reading of some kind. What we found, instead, was **approximately 33% of kehillot reporting read the full parasha; some 66% use a triennial reading cycle** of some kind. Of that 66% which read triennial, nearly all (save for 3) use the RA triennial cycle pattern.<sup>1</sup>



The majority of kehillot across the continent read a triennial cycle. The percentage of kehillot in central and northeast areas which read a full parasha is greater than in the far west and southeast areas, but even in the central and northeast, the majority of kehillot read triennial. (The congregations which answered “I don’t know” for district are from Israel and Brazil.)

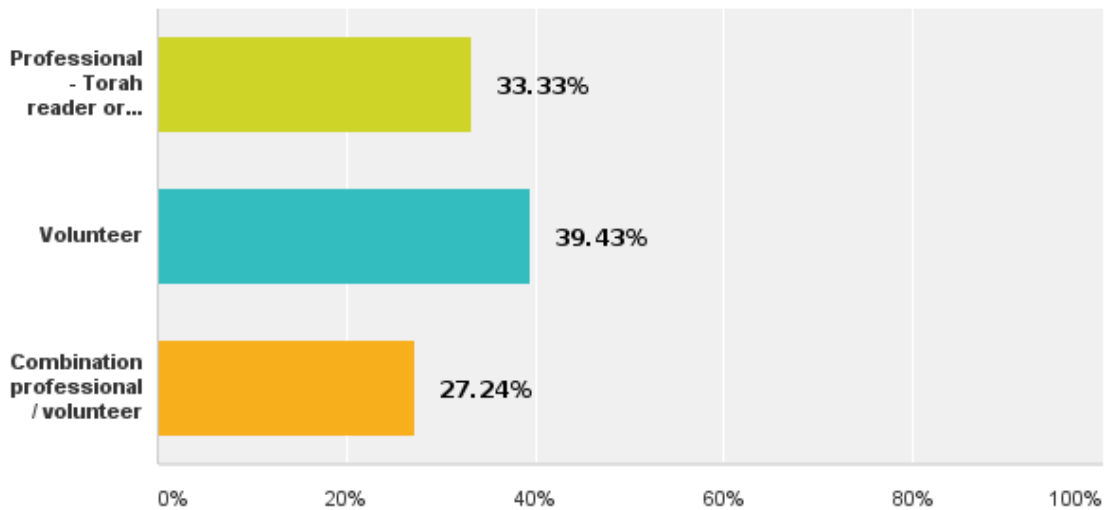


The only exception to the majority reads triennial is in the 1000+ member cohort.



### Who Reads the Torah?

No matter how much Torah is read each week, the task must be done by individuals. We asked if the usual Torah reading was done by a paid professional, by volunteers or a combination.

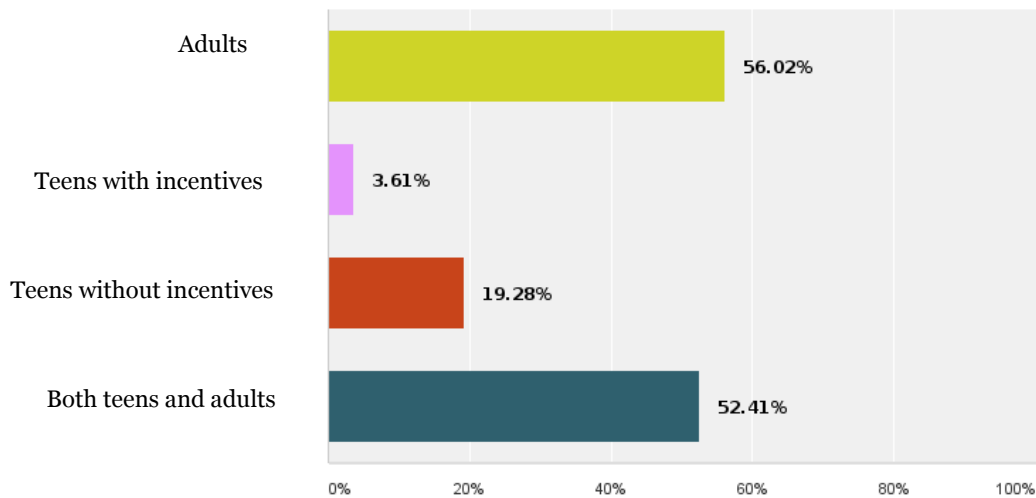


We expected that those kehillot which read the full parasha each week would be more likely to have a professional Torah reader. To our surprise, the ratio of professional/volunteer/combination applies to both the full parasha and triennial cohorts.



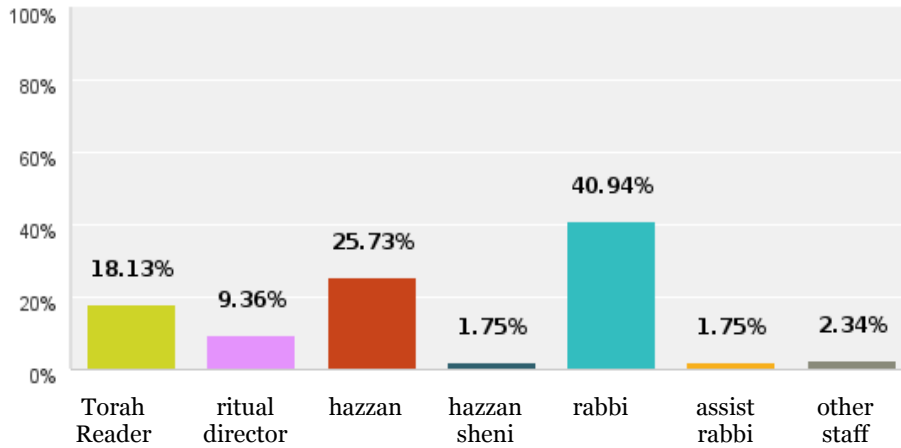
**Who are the volunteer readers?**

We asked about four possible groups of volunteer Torah readers: adults, teens reading with incentives (such as scholarship credits), teens reading without further incentives or a combination of adult and teen readers. The 40% of kehillot have volunteer readers report their readers are:



In the majority of kehillot, the Torah reading was done by adults, but in a virtual tie with joint effort of teens and adults. Teens read without incentives at a significantly higher than those reading with incentives.

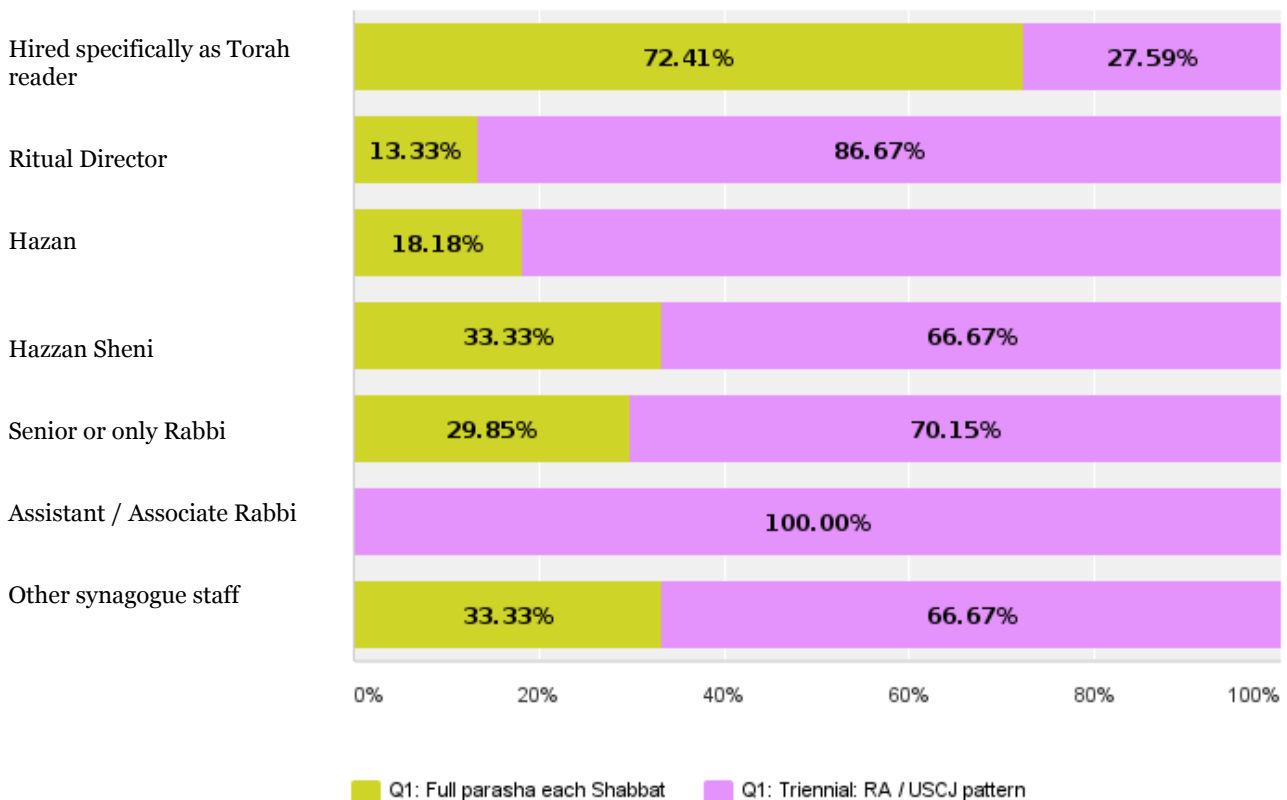
## Who are the professional readers?



As a general rule, rabbis – senior or only rabbi, typically - are the usual professionals reading Torah for congregations. Hazzanim, those hired specifically to read Torah and ritual directors follow the rabbis as the professionals who read Torah.

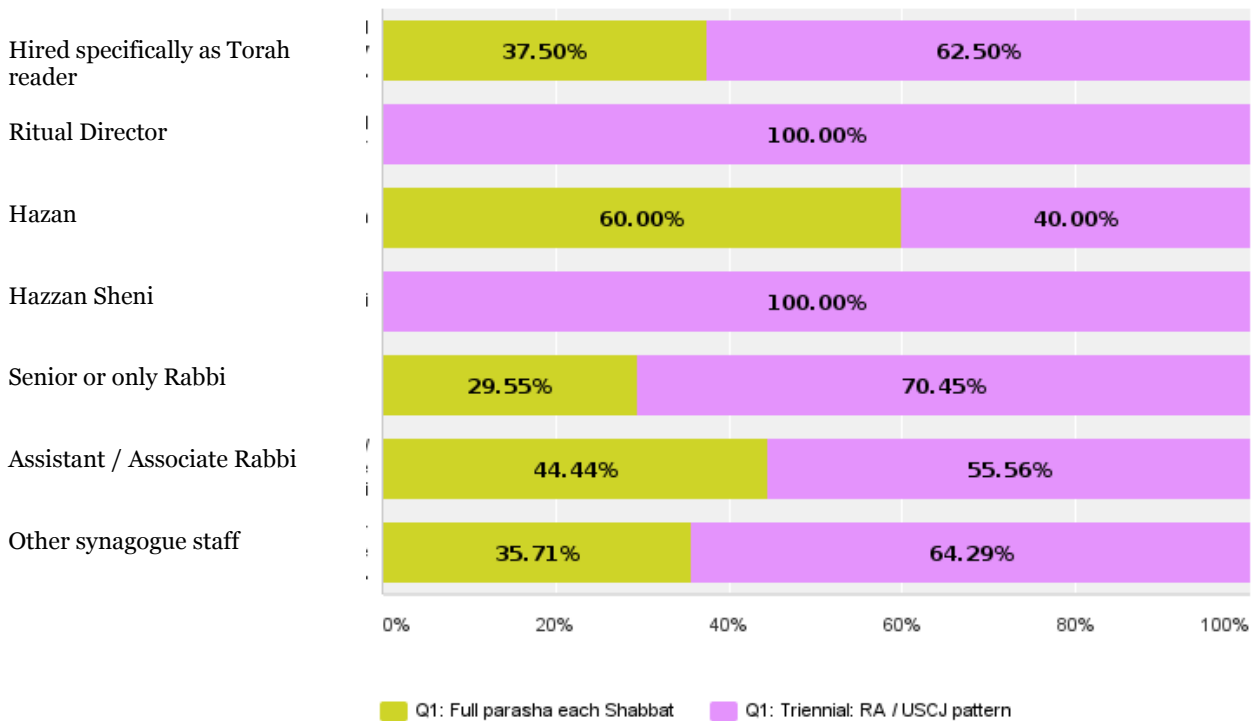
Among kehillot which have paid Torah readers, there was a significant difference between those which read the full parasha and those which read triennial. When the full parasha is read, it was significantly more likely that the person reading was hired specifically to fill that role. The **primary** professionals reading Torah are

### Primary Paid Torah Reader



## Secondary Paid Torah Reader

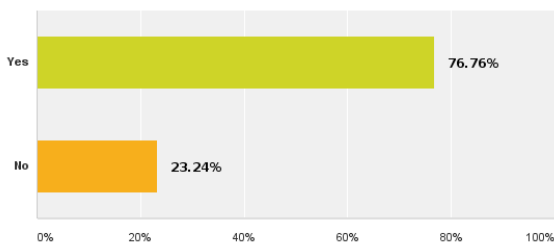
Most kehillot have a second person who helps the primary paid Torah reader. Since 72% of kehillot which read the full parasha have a staff member who is specifically hired as a Torah reader, there is little question that impacts who the secondary reader is.



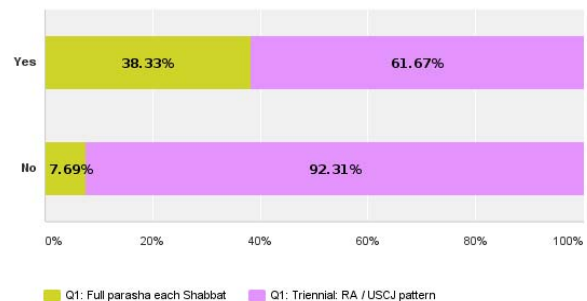
## Participation in the Torah Service

One long-standing tradition in the Torah reading is reserving the first Aliyah for a Kohen and the second for a Levi. The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards addressed the issue.<sup>2</sup> We asked if kehillot maintained that custom on a typical Shabbat. Nearly 77% of kehillot maintain that custom. The Law Committee addressed the issue of bat-kohen and bat-levi in 1989.<sup>3</sup>

*On a typical Shabbat, without special events, we maintain the custom of calling a Kohen to the first Aliyah, a Levi to the second.*

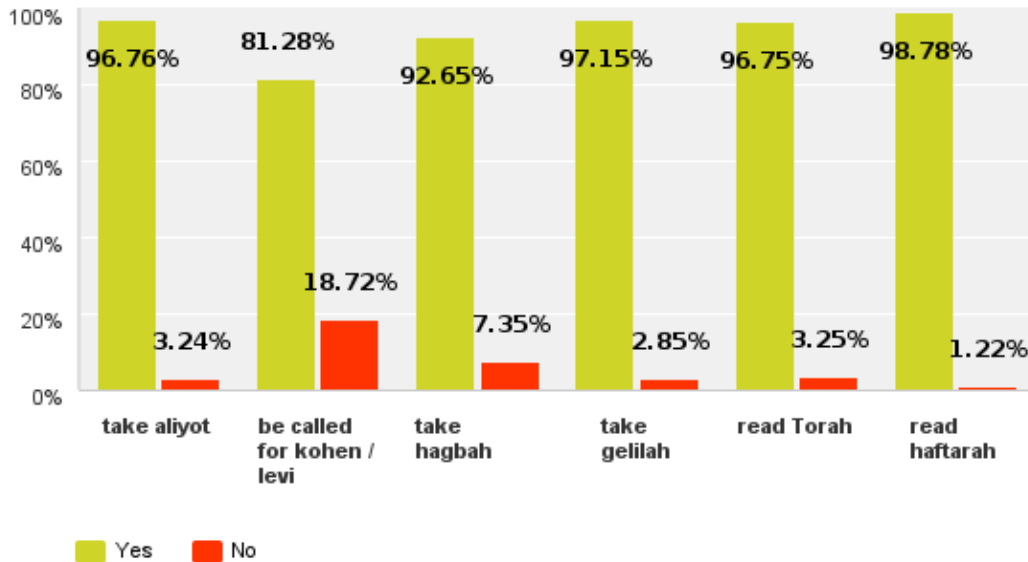


This question, in particular, highlights the difference between kehillot which read the full parasha and those which read triennial. By far, kehillot which read triennial are less likely to maintain the custom.

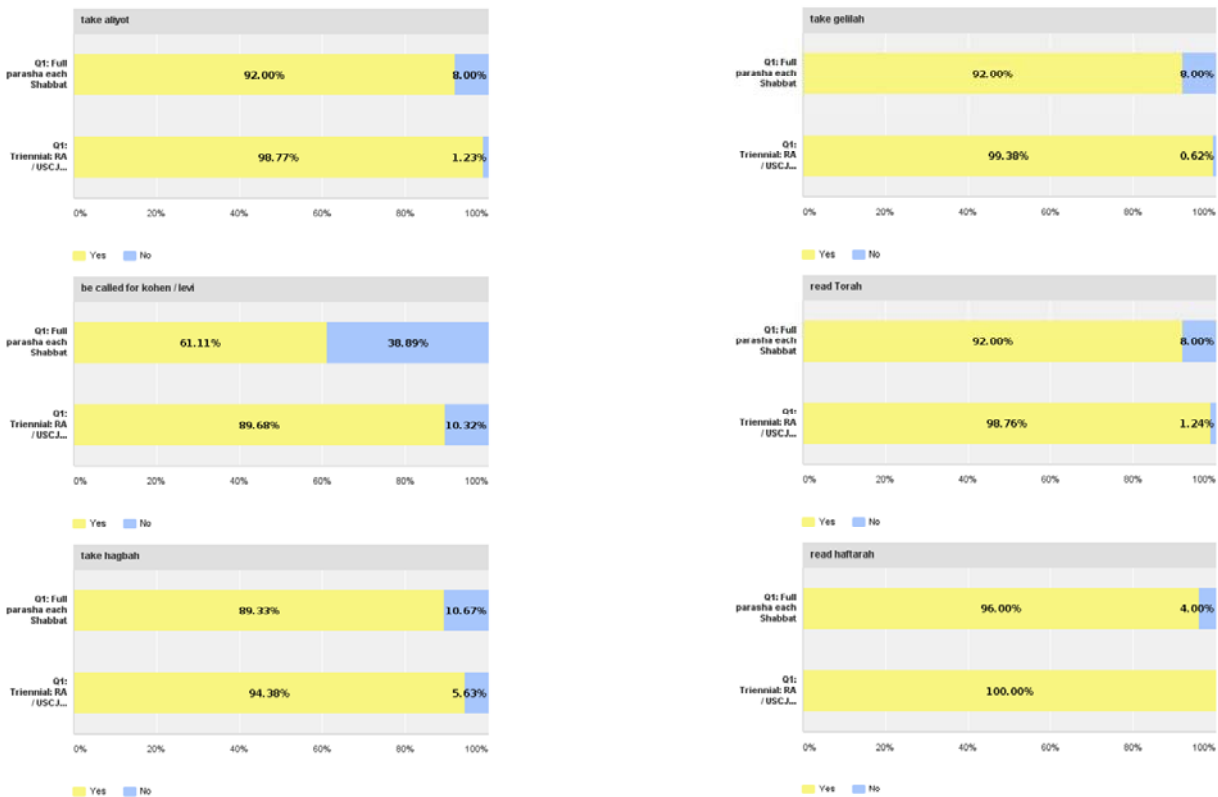


## Women's Participation in Torah Service

There is near unanimity in the participation of women in the Torah service. The answers to the question, "In our congregation's Torah service, women may [check all that apply]:"



We then compared women's roles in the Torah service between congregations which read the full parasha and those that do not. The one category with a significant difference is if a bat-Kohen or bat-Levi can be called for one of those reserved aliyot.



It is quite clear that, across the board, the role women play in Conservative kehillot Torah services is nearly identical to men. The most likely reason many kehillot do not have women serving as hagba'ah has more to do with the weight of the Torah scroll than a philosophical or halakhic reason.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup>The teshuvah describing the triennial cycle can be found at:

[http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/eisenberg\\_triennial.pdf](http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/eisenberg_triennial.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>The teshuvot on calling rishon/sheni instead of calling kohen/levi may be found at:

[http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/rabinowitz\\_rishon.pdf](http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/rabinowitz_rishon.pdf)

[http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19912000/mandl\\_nonkohen.pdf](http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19912000/mandl_nonkohen.pdf)

<sup>3</sup>The teshuvot on calling bat-kohen / bat-levi may be found at:

[http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/roth\\_daughtersaliyot.pdf](http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/roth_daughtersaliyot.pdf)

[http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/bergman\\_daughtersaliyot.pdf](http://rabbinicalassembly.org/sites/default/files/public/halakhah/teshuvot/19861990/bergman_daughtersaliyot.pdf)

USCJ does surveys. Contact your KRM for information.