YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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[**The Obligation of Women in *Megilla* Reading**](https://www.etzion.org.il/en/obligation-women-megilla-reading)

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### "They Too were in the miracle"

A fundamental principle concerning obligation in *mitzvot* states: "Regarding all time-bound positive commandments, men are obligated and women are exempt" (Mishna, *Kiddushin* 1:7). Reading the *megilla* is a time-bound positive commandment*,* as the obligation to fulfill it is limited to the day of Purim. This rule notwithstanding, the Gemara establishes that women are obligated in this mitzva (*Megilla* 4a): “And Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Women are obligated in *megilla* reading, as they too were in the miracle.”

The Mishna in Megilla (2:4) states: "All are fit to read the megilla, with the exception of a deaf-mute, an imbecile, and a minor." The Gemara concludes from this Mishna that over and beyond their obligation to hear the megilla reading, women are also fit to read it, and thereby they fulfill their obligation (Arakhin 2b-3a):

"All are fit to read the megilla" – What does this come to add? It comes to add women, and as Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Women are obligated in megilla reading, as they too were in the miracle.

Indeed, women participated in the miracle in a twofold manner. Haman's decree and the threat of annihilation hovered above all the Jews, "from young to old, children and women," and therefore women, too, are obligated to express gratitude for their rescue. Beyond that, the megilla is named after Queen Esther, and she was undoubtedly a full partner in the miracle of Purim.

At the same time, there are some time-bound positive commandmentsin which women are not obligated, even though these commandments are connected to miracles in which women had a part. For example, women are not obligated in the mitzva of *sukka*, despite the fact that they too left Egypt and dwelt together with the men in the *sukkot* of the clouds of glory in the wilderness.[[1]](#footnote-1) Rav Moshe Soloveitchik explained that women are obligated in the mitzvaof *megilla* reading, because the purpose of the miracle is *pirsumei nisa*, "publicizing the miracle" in which they had a part. For the same reason women are obligated to light Chanuka candles (*Shabbat* 23a) and to drink four cups of wine at the Pesach *seder* (*Pesachim* 108b).

### TO Read or to hear?

In contrast to the position of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi, the Tosefta in *Megilla* (2:7) establishes that women are exempt from the mitzvaof *megilla* reading.[[2]](#footnote-2)

All are obligated in *megilla* reading: Priests, Levites, Israelites, proselytes, emancipated slaves, unfit priests, descendants of the Givonites, mamzers… All are obligated and all are fit to read on behalf of the congregation…

Women, slaves and minors are exempt and are not fit to read on behalf of the congregation.

It may be argued that we are dealing here with a halakhic controversy, and that the law was decided in favor of the view of Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that women are in fact obligated in *megilla* reading, because they too were partners in the miracle. Thus writes the Ritva (*Megilla* 4a):

As for what is taught in the Tosefta: "Women, slaves, and minors are exempt from *megilla* reading" – this is a faulty version and it lacks logic, for they too were in the miracle.

The *Yerushalmi* (*Megilla* 2:5), on the other hand, proposes a different solution. It would appear from the *Yerushalmi* that women too are obligated in *megilla* reading, as they too were under the threat of annihilation. However, the *megilla* should be read to them by a man:

Bar Kapara said: The *megilla* must be read to women and to minors, as they too were in danger [of being destroyed]. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi acted in that manner; he gathered hisdaughters and the other members of his household, and read the *megilla* to them.

According to the *Yerushalmi*, it may be suggested that women are indeed exempt from reading the *megilla*, but they are obligated to hear it being read. The Tosefta relatesto the **reading** of the *megilla*, and therefore it establishes that women are exempt; whereas Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi relates to the **hearing** of the *megilla*, and therefore he rules that they too are obligated. This is the explicit ruling of the *Halakhot Gedolot* (no. 19):

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said: Women are obligate **to hear** the *megilla*, as they too were in the miracle…

Women, slaves and minors are exempt from *megilla* reading, but they are obligated to hear it. Why so? Because they were all in danger of being destroyed, killed and annihilated. Since they were all in danger, they are all obligated to hear the *megilla.*

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would bring all the members of his household and read the book of Esther to them. Rabbi Yona the father of Rabbi Muna would have in mind to read it before the women in his house, for they were all in danger, and all are obligated to **hear** the *megilla*, including women, slaves and minors.

In contrast, Rashi clearly rules that women are obligated in *megilla* reading, and that they can also read the *megilla* for men and discharge their obligation for them (*Arakhin* 3a, s.v. *le-atuyei*):

“To include women” – that they are obligated in *megilla* reading and that they are fit to read it and to read it for men and discharge their obligation for them.

### Can Women read the *Megilla* on behalf of men and discharge their obligation for them?

How could the *Halakhot Gedolot* rule that women are obligated only to hear the *megilla*? Surely the Gemara in *Arakhin* explicitly lists women among those who are "fit **to read** the *megilla*"!

It is possible that the *Halakhot Gedolot* maintains that the various sources are in disagreement, and he decided in accordance with the Tosefta and the *Yerushalmi*, that women are obligated only to hear the *megilla*. The *Tosafot* (*Arakhin* 3a, s.v. *le-atuyei*), however, write that there is no disagreement, and that a woman can read the *megilla* only on behalf of other women, but not for men:

Therefore we must explain that a woman can only discharge the obligation of women, but not of men. And when it says: "All are obligated in *megilla* reading" – to include women, [it means] that they can discharge the obligation of other women.

If a woman cannot read the *megilla* for a man, it would appear that this attests to gap between the level of a woman's obligation in the mitzva of *megilla* and the level of a man's obligation in it. The general rule is: "Whoever is not obligated in a matter cannot act on behalf of the congregation" (Mishna, *Rosh ha-Shana* 3:8). A man can read the *megilla* and discharge the obligation of another man who is listening to his reading, since the two of them are obligated in the same mitzva, and the rule is that "hearing is like speaking." Women, however, are not obligated like men to read the *megilla*; rather, they are obligated to hear it being read, and therefore they cannot discharge the obligation of men with their reading.

However, a woman can read the *megilla* and thereby discharge her own obligation, for it stands to reason that *Chazal* did not obligate a woman to discharge her obligation exclusively with the reading of a man. And since she can discharge her own obligation, other women can also fulfill their obligation with her reading, since they are all obligated in the same mitzva – hearing the reading of the *megilla*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

### Two aspects of the mitzva of *megilla*

We have thus concluded that according to the *Halakhot Gedolot*, women are obligated to hear the *megilla*, whereas men are obligated to read it. What brought *Chazal* to make this distinction between the respective obligations of men and women regarding this mitzva? Surely in the case of other time-bound positive commandments, regarding which women are obligated because they too were in the miracle, e.g., lighting Chanuka candles and drinking four cups of wine at the Pesach *seder*, the obligation of women is identical to the obligation of men!

The *Acharonim* discussed this question at length and advanced various answers. Common to all of them is the idea that there are two aspects to the mitzvaof *megilla* reading. Women are obligated in only one of them, because they too were in the miracle, but they are exempt from the second one, which is directed exclusively at men. Rav Avrohom Bornsztain, the Sochotchover Rebbe, suggested that the mitzva of *megilla* consists of two obligations: Publicizing the miracle and remembering the wiping out of Amalek (*Responsa Avnei Nezer*, no. 511). Women are obligated to publicize the miracle, as they too were in the miracle, and similar to other *mitzvot* the purpose of which is publicizing the miracle. On the other hand, women are exempt from remembering the wiping out of Amalek, as the *Sefer ha-Chinukh* writes (mitzva603): "This mitzvaapplies in all places and at all times to men, for it is incumbent on them to wage war and take revenge against the enemy, and not upon women." The Sochotchover explains that the obligation to publicize the miracle can be fulfilled through hearing the *megilla*, and therefore women are obligated to hear it. Remembering the wiping out of Amalek, however, must be done with the mouth, and therefore men are obligated to read it.

In *Responsa Marcheshet* (no. 22), Rav Chanoch Henoch Eiges, a rav in pre-Holocaust Vilna, suggested another way to understand the difference between men and women regarding the mitzvaof *megilla*. The Gemara in *Megilla* (14a) explains that we do not recite *Hallel* on Purim because "reading it is like [reciting] *Hallel*." Since women are exempt from reciting *Hallel*, they are not obligated in this aspect of the mitzva of *megilla*, and they are obligated exclusively in publicizing the miracle. Therefore, women cannot read the *megilla* on behalf of men, because they are not obligated in the *Hallel* aspect of the reading.

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in the name of his father, Rav Moshe Soloveitchik, suggested another explanation of the nature of a woman's obligation in the mitzva of *megilla.*  According to him, the mitzva of *megilla* is comprised of two different obligations: an individual obligation to read the *megilla*, and a general obligation to publicize the miracle. Women are obligated in the second aspect, publicizing the miracle. But they are not individually bound by an obligation to read the *megilla*. For this reason they cannot the discharge the obligation of men with their reading.

Perhaps he means to say that there is a general obligation to publicize miracles. The time to fulfill it is on Chanuka (with the lighting of candles), on Purim (with the reading of the *megilla*), and on Pesach (with the drinking of the four cups). Women are obligated in this mitzva, and thus their obligation is to hear the *megilla*. Alongside this mitzva, men alone are obligated in the mitzva of reading the *megilla* as an obligation of the day of Purim, similar to what the Rambam writes: "Moshe instituted [the practice that] on each festival, the Jews should read [a passage] appropriate to it" (*Hilkhot Tefilla* 13:8). The book of Esther is part of Holy Scripture, and with its reading we fulfill the obligation to read on Purim a passage appropriate to it. Thus, if a woman reads the *megilla* on behalf of men, she does not discharge their obligation to read a Scriptural passage appropriate to the day.

There is a common denominator to all of the explanations brought above: All pertain more to the reading that takes place during the day than to the reading that takes place at night. In *Responsa Marcheshet* it is explicitly noted that the mitzva to remember the wiping out of Amalek is fulfilled with the day-time reading and not at night; the mitzva of *Hallel* also applies only during the day; and so too the reading of a passage appropriate to the day is fulfilled on all the other special days during the day. According to these explanations, then, a woman cannot read the *megilla* for a man on the day of Purim, but she can discharge his obligation regarding the night-time reading.

Another explanation of the difference between a man's obligation regarding the mitzvaof *megilla* and a woman's obligation is brought by the *Turei Even* (*Megilla* 4a). According to him, a man's obligation to read the *megilla* was told to Mordechai and Esther by way of the holy spirit, and thus it has a standing akin to a Torah obligation. In contrast, a woman's obligation is only a rabbinic enactment, because they too were in the miracle. Since women thus have a lower level of obligation, they cannot discharge the obligation of men with their reading. The *Turei Even* explicitly writes that the night-time reading of the *megilla* is not part of the essential law, and that it too is only a rabbinic enactment. Therefore, according to him, a woman can read the *megilla* for a man on the night of Purim.

### The Dignity of the congregation

As we noted above, the Ritva maintains that, fundamentally, the level of a woman's obligation in the mitzva of *megilla* is identical to that of a man, and therefore a woman can discharge a man's obligation with her reading. Before concluding, however, the Ritva adds a reservation:

Since we rule in accordance with Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi that [women] are obligated, they can even discharge the obligation of others, only that this does not accord with the dignity of the congregation.

According to the Ritva, even though fundamentally a woman can read the *megilla* and discharge the obligation of men with her reading, it is not fitting to do so, since this "does not accord with the dignity of the congregation." In his wake, the *Mishna Berura* rules (689:7):

It is not like lighting Chanuka candles, for *megilla* reading is different, for it is like public Torah reading, from which a woman is disqualified because of the dignity of the congregation. And therefore she cannot read the *megilla* even for an individual [man], because *Chazal* did not distinguish.[[4]](#footnote-4)

### The Halakha in practice

As for the Halakha, the *Shulchan Arukh* and the Rema rule that a woman should not read the *megilla* to discharge the obligation of men with her reading (*Orach Chayyim* 689: 1-2):

All are obligated to read the *megilla*: men, women, proselytes, and emancipated slaves. And we train minors to read it.

Both one who reads the *megilla* and one who hears it from the reader discharges his obligation, provided that he heard it being read by someone who is obligated to read it. Therefore, if the reader was a deaf-mute, or a minor, or an imbecile, the person who heard it from him has not fulfilled his obligation. Some authorities say that women cannot discharge the obligation of men.

Rema: Some say that if a woman reads the *megilla* for herself, she recites the blessing: "… to hear the *megilla*" [and not “to read the *megilla*”], as she is not obligated in its reading.

According to the Rema, the foundation of a man's obligation is different than that of a woman, and therefore a woman cannot discharge the obligation of a man regarding the *megilla.* From the *Shulchan Arukh*, it would appear that fundamentally women can indeed read the *megilla* on behalf of men, but it is not fitting to do so – apparently because of the dignity of the congregation. Thus, according to the *Shulchan Arukh*, if there is no man available who knows how to read the *megilla*, a woman can read it for the entire congregation.

As for women who gather for a communal *megilla* reading, according to the vast majority of *Posekim*, a woman can read the *megilla* and discharge the obligation of the other women with her reading. A Sefardi woman who reads the *megilla* should recite the same blessing that is recited by a man: *al mikra megilla*, "on reading the *megilla*," whereas an Ashkenazi woman should ideally recite the blessing that accords with the Rema's ruling: *al mishma megilla*, "on hearing the *megilla*."

Ideally, the *megilla* should be read in a *minyan*, i.e., in a quorum of ten, as the *Shulchan Arukh* rules (*Orach Chayyim*  690:18): "One must search for ten people; if it is impossible to read with ten, one can read it in private." So too the blessing, *Ha-rav et riveinu*, which is recited after the *megilla* reading, is recited only in a *minyan*. The *Posekim* disagree as to whether woman count toward this *minyan*. The Ritva writes that even women are counted toward this *minyan*. The Rema, however, writes that the matter is in doubt. When a woman reads the *megilla* for other women, one can certainly rely on the Ritva's view, and regard a reading for ten women as a reading in a *minyan* – both regarding the preference to read the *megilla* in a *minyan*, and regarding the blessing, *Ha-rav et riveinu.*[[5]](#footnote-5)

The *megilla* attests to the fact that Esther and Mordechai together enacted Purim for future generations. Nevertheless this enactment is named exclusively after Esther: "And the commandment of Esther confirmed these matters of Purim; and it was written in the book" (*Esther* 9:32). By virtue of Esther's risking her life in order to save the Jewish people, Esther merited that the promulgation of Purim be attributed to her. And by virtue of her courage and righteousness, Esther merited also to obligate the women of all future generations in the reading of the *megilla* that is named after her, as they too were in the miracle.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. However, regarding the *sukkot* of the clouds of glory women were partners in the miracle in a passive manner, whereas regarding the miracle of Purim they played an active role in the miracle. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The *Tosafot* had a reading of the Tosefta that does not relate to women. But even according to their reading, it can be inferred that women are exempt from *megilla* reading (see *Tosafot*, *Megilla* 4a, s.v. *nashim*). The reading of the Tosefta available to the Rosh is the same as the reading before us (see Rosh, *Megilla*, chap. 1, no. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The *Magen Avraham* (689:6) brings in the name of *Midrash ha-Ne'elam Ruth*, that a woman should not read the *megilla* for herself, but rather she should hear it from a man. But the Halakha is that a woman can discharge her obligation with her own reading. This is similar to the case of *shofar:* According to the Rambam, the mitzva of *shofar* involves hearing the blast (*Hilkhot Shofar* 1:1), but nevertheless a man who blows the *shofar* fulfills his own obligations and discharges the obligation of others. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The *Sha'ar ha-Tziyun* (689, 15) cites a stringent ruling, according to which a woman cannot read the *megilla* for a group of women, because of their dignity. But the simple understanding is that the problem of dignity does not apply at all to a woman who is reading the *megilla* for other women. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The *Posekim* write that reading the *megilla* not at its time can be done only in the context of a *minyan* (see *Megilla* 5a; *Mishna Berura* 690:61). When the fifteenth of Adar falls on a Shabbat, and the *megilla* is read even in cities that were surrounded by a wall on Friday, the fourteenth of Adar, some say that this is also reading the *megilla* not at its time. Nevertheless, even in such years, a woman can read for a group of ten women, for we can combine the views that say that such a reading is reading the *megilla* at its time, with the views that say that women are counted toward this *minyan.* [↑](#footnote-ref-5)