**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

Dana Petrover (Batsheva bat Gittel Aidel Leba)

and Marvin Rosenberg (Meir Chaim ben Tzipporah Miriam)

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In memory of six friends and family,
strong pillars of the Montreal Jewish community,
who have left us in the past 7 years.
All were אוהבי עם ישראל, אוהבי ארץ ישראל, אוהבי תורת ישראל.

Joseph (Yosie) Deitcher

Avrum (Avy) Drazin

Rabbi Joseph Drazin

Leibel Frisch

Israel (Mutch) Yampolsky

Dr. Mark Wainberg

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Arba Parashiyot

What are the four special Torah readings? Why do we read them and who must hear them? Are women obligated to hear parashat zachor?

# Four Readings

What is the source for our reading of the *arba parashiyot*?

The mishna teaches that we read four special Torah portions, *arba parashiyot*, in the weeks leading up to Purim and Pesach: *Shekalim*, *Zachor*, *Para*, and *Ha-chodesh*.

Mishna *Megilla* 3:4

On Rosh Chodesh Adar, if it falls on Shabbat, we read *Parashat Shekalim*. If it falls during the week, we move [the reading] earlier…On the second [Shabbat, we read] *Zachor*. On the third, *Para aduma*. On the fourth, *Ha-chodesh ha-zeh lachem*…

We read ***Shekalim*** (*Shemot* 30:11-17) on the Shabbat before or coinciding with Rosh Chodesh Adar (in a leap year, Adar bet), ***Zachor*** (*Devarim* 25:17-19) on the Shabbat before Purim, **Para** (*Bemidbar* 19:1-22) on the Shabbat after Purim (unless Rosh Chodesh Nissan falls on Shabbat, in which case we wait a week and read Para on the shabbat before that), and **Ha-chodesh** (*Shemot* 12:1-20) on the Shabbat before or coinciding with Rosh Chodesh Nissan.

The Talmud explains that *Shekalim* is read in order to announce the collection during Adar of the half-shekel funds (which women could give voluntarily)[[1]](#footnote-1) that pay for the coming year's communal offerings, starting in Nissan.

*Megilla* 29b

…Since in Nissan they need to bring sacrifices from the new donations, we read earlier, on the first of Adar…

Atara Snowbell points out how reading *Parashat Shekalim* reinforces the idea of Jewish unity:[[2]](#footnote-2)

Atara Snowbell, "Parashat Shekalim," Yutorah.org

...On the first of Adar we are reminded that our connection with the Jewish people could come across through our common goals – through the *mahatzit hashekel*….It is up to us to acknowledge the role we seek as part of the Jewish nation, and ensure that the goals which unite us are the correct ones...

What is the significance of the other three readings? Rashi explains *Parashat Zachor* as connected thematically to Purim, and Para and Ha-chodesh as preparation for Pesach:

Rashi *Megilla* 29a

…*Parashat Zachor* should be read on the Shabbat adjacent to Purim, to juxtapose the blotting out of Amalek with the blotting out of Haman."*Para aduma*" - to alert Israel to purify themselves, so as to make their Pesach offerings in purity. "On the fourth, *Ha-chodesh ha-zeh lachem*" - for the portion of the Pesach offering is there.

Obligation

Of these special readings, *Shekalim* and *Ha-chodesh* are clearly rabbinic enactments.

*Birkei Yosef* OC 685

…*Parashat Shekalim* and *Ha-chodesh* are not on a Torah level.

Since the readings were enacted to take place at specific times, hearing them is considered a positive time-bound commandment from which women are exempt.

Rav David Auerbach, *Halichot Beitah* 9:10, and note 19

The portions of *Shekalim* and *Ha-chodesh* are only a rabbinic obligation, and women are exempt. Note: Because they are a time-bound commandment, to read them in the month of Adar.

When a special reading fulfills a Torah-level obligation, women may still be obligated, since the specific timing may be only a rabbinic element of the mitzva. For example, reading *Zachor* from a *sefer Torah* on any day of the year is a fulfillment of the Torah commandment to remember Amalek, which means that women may be obligated in hearing it. (More on this later.)

Some versions of Tosafot, including Tosafot Rosh, raise the possibility that the obligation to read *Para* is on a Torah level as well:

Tosafot Rosh *Berachot* 13a

For there is a reading that is on a Torah level, such as *Parashat Zachor* and *Parashat Para Aduma* and the like.

Tosafot Sens (the version of Tosafot in our printed Talmud), however, does not cite reading *Para* as a Torah-level obligation.

Tosafot *Berachot* 13a, s.v. *be-lashon ha-kodesh ne’emra*

In the portions that we are obligated to read on a Torah level, such as *Zachor*.

Although Shulchan Aruch seems to view *Para* as on a Torah level, Magen Avraham remarks that he can think of no reason nor hint why it shouldn't be rabbinic.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 685:7

There are those who say that we are obligated to read *Parashat Zachor* and *Parashat Para Aduma* on a Torah level …

Magen Avraham 685

For it [*Para*] is not on a Torah level, for there is really no reason from the Torah for its reading, and I also do not know where there is any hint [to it].

If *Para* is on a Torah level, then women should make an effort to hear it. Since the reading is likely rabbinic in nature, though, a woman who misses it need not be overly concerned.

Rav David Auerbach, *Halichot Beitah* 9:9

*Parshat Para*. There are those who say it is on a Torah level, and according to this one can say that women are also obligated to hear this portion. And there are those who say that this mitzva is only rabbinic, and according to this, women are exempt.

# Zachor

The Torah tells us to blot out Amalek, but also commands us both to remember and not to forget their cruel attack on *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness:

*Devarim* 25:17-19

Remember that which Amalek did to you on the way as you went out of Egypt. That he happened upon you on the way, and cut off the stragglers behind you when you were faint and tired, and he did not fear God. And it will be when the Lord your God gives you rest from all of your enemies around, in the land that the Lord your God gives to you as an inheritance to take possession of, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from beneath the heavens. Do not forget.

Why does the Torah command both remembering and not forgetting? According to Sifri, not forgetting is a matter for the mind, but remembering entails speech:

*Sifri Devarim Ki Tetzei* 296

"Remember"- with the mouth. "Do not forget"- with the heart

At first glance, it may seem contradictory to remember and verbalize that which we seek to erase. Rambam explains that the requirement to remember Amalek ensures that we not neglect our duty to obliterate them:

Rambam *Melachim* 5:5

It is a positive commandment to destroy the memory of Amalek, as it is said "blot out the memory of Amalek" and it is a positive commandment always to remember his bad deeds and his lying in ambush, in order to arouse loathing towards him, as it is said "remember that which Amalek did to you". From Oral Tradition we learn "Remember"- with the mouth. "Do not forget"- with the heart, for it is prohibited to forget to have loathing and hatred of him.

Why do we have an eternal commandment to remember Amalek and blot out their name? Shoshana Schechter suggests that their values are diametrically opposed to those of the Torah.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Shoshana Schechter, "Purim- Fulfilling Jewish Destiny." YU Torah-To-Go, Purim 5779

While Mordechai and Esther demonstrate the characteristics that create Jewish leadership, Amalek, represented here by Haman, demonstrates the antithesis of those values....They believed events are circumstantial, with no Divine providence, thereby allowing them to attack the Jews and, unlike the other nations, disregard the Divine events that transpired in Egypt....They did not fear G-d... [Amalek] is also the antithesis of righteousness and concern for others.... The nation attacked the Jews when they were most vulnerable.......Finally...[w]hile Jewish tradition and Torah are passed down from generation to generation, Amalek must be forgotten.

Perhaps one way to wage war against Amalek is by championing these Jewish values.

We saw above the Mishna's account of reading *Parashat Zachor* as one of the four *parashiyot*, as well as Tosafot's view that the obligation to read *Parashat Zachor* is on a Torah level. Sefer Ha-chinuch pieces these teachings together.

Sefer Ha-chinuch 603

That we are commanded to remember what Amalek did to Israel…Among the roots of the mitzva: To place in our hearts that anyone who afflicts Israel is hated before God, and his fall and the evil that will befall him will be in accordance with his evil and the accumulated harm he does, as you find with Amalek…Among the laws of the mitzva: That which our sages said, that the obligation of remembering is with the heart and the mouth… We do not know of a set time in the year or in the day for this remembrance with heart and mouth …For this, it is enough for us to remember the matter once a year or every two or three years. For in all the places of Israel they read the *sefer Torah* over the course of one or two or three years at the least, and thus they discharge this mitzva. Perhaps we can say that the custom of Israel of *Parashat Zachor*, to read it on a special Shabbat every year, is authoritative and it is because of this mitzva that they established it thus…

According to Sefer Ha-chinuch, we could fulfill the Torah-level mitzva of remembering Amalek at any time. Our sages enacted that we fulfill the mitzva through the annual reading of *Parashat Zachor* (via the mechanism of [*shomei'a ke-oneh*](https://www.deracheha.org/discharging-anothers-obligations), hearing is like verbalizing).[[5]](#footnote-5)

Tosafot (above), however, present reading *Zachor* from a Torah scroll as a Torah-level obligation. Rosh even suggests that reading it in front of a *minyan* is part of the Torah-level obligation:

Rosh *Berachot* 7:20

…that this applies to a case where ten [are required] on a Torah level, like reading *Parashat Zachor*, which is on a Torah level…

Why should the Torah require that *Parashat Zachor* be read in the presence of a minyan? Perhaps because the mitzva to destroy Amalek, of which the reading reminds us, is fulfilled by the *tzibbur*, community.

*Keren Ora Berachot* 3a

There are those who say that the fundamental mitzva is to read it publicly. According to this view, one must understand how this remembrance, whose mitzva is communal, differs from other remembrances. One must say that since the intention of the remembrance is to avenge God's vengeance upon these sinners, this is a matter incumbent upon the community.

Following Rosh's approach to the mitzva, Shulchan Aruch rules that those obligated in remembering Amalek must hear *Parashat Zachor* read before a *minyan*:

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 685:7

There are those who say that there is a Torah-level obligation to read *Parashat Zachor* and *Parashat Para Aduma*. Therefore, members of small communities that do not have a minyan must come to a place that has a minyan on these *Shabbatot* in order to hear these *parashiyot*, which are on a Torah level. Rema: And if it is impossible for them to come, they should still take care to read them with their [proper] tunes and accents…

When no minyan is available, Rema suggests that the mitzva can be fulfilled by reading *Parashat Zachor* on one's own. *Kaf Ha-chayyim* interprets Rema to mean that if a *sefer Torah* is available, there is a preference to read from it, even in the absence of a minyan, while reading from a *chumash* can suffice as necessary:

*Kaf Ha-chayyim* 685:35

He [Rema] means that, if they have [a *sefer Torah*], they should read them from a *sefer Torah* but without a *beracha* since there is no minyan, and if they don't have a *sefer Torah*, they should read them from a printed *chumash*.

According to some opinions, hearing the Torah reading on Purim (or perhaps even on *Ki Tetzei*) with intention to fulfill the obligation of remembering Amalek can also count as fulfilling the mitzva.[[6]](#footnote-6)

# Women Hearing Zachor

Are women obligated in the mitzva to remember Amalek? Sefer Ha-chinuch says no, because of its connection to the mitzva to destroy Amalek. That mitzva entails waging war, from which he maintains that women are exempt:

*Sefer Ha-chinuch* 603

This mitzva is practiced in every place and in every time, among men, because it is for them to make war and take revenge on the enemy, and not for women.

If women are exempt from the mitzva of remembering Amalek altogether, then women are presumably exempt from fulfilling it through *Parashat Zachor* as well.

It's worth noting, however, that Rambam's *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, the model for *Sefer Ha-chinuch*, does not specify that women are exempt from *Zachor*. Perhaps Rambam views *Zachor* as distinct from the mitzva to blot out Amalek, so that participation in war should make no difference.

Minchat Chinuch marshals Rambam’s silence to challenge Sefer Ha-chinuch's conclusion that women are exempt from the mitzva of *Zachor*. He adds that the Torah-level mitzva can be fulfilled at any time of year, so it is not time-bound and women's exemption from positive time-bound commandments would not apply. Furthermore, the mitzva also entails the prohibition of forgetting, and women are generally obligated in prohibitions. Lastly, he points out that women **do** wage war when the war is obligatory, a *milchemet mitzva* – and that the mitzva to remember is in any case not necessarily dependent on the military annihilation of Amalek.

*Minchat Chinuch* 603

…*Parashat Zachor* with ten [men] and with a *sefer Torah* is rabbinic, but from the Torah it is enough that each individual mention verbally, and this is clear. Sefer Ha-chinuch exempts women from this mitzva and it seems a bit as if he exempts them from the prohibition [not to forget] as well. This is not clear in Rambam, and one needs a proof to exempt women from a positive commandment that is not time bound, especially when there is also an accompanying prohibition. That which he wrote – that "it is upon them [men] to make war and not upon women" – actually, for an obligatory war everyone goes out, even a bride from her wedding canopy as is explained in the mishna. Also, who has access to the secrets of God [to know with certainty] if the rationale is to promote the vengeance? For it is possible that it is a decree of the Torah for whatever reason that we remember hating him for some reason that we don’t know, and it is possible even when our *Moshi'ach* comes, who will cut off Amalek entirely such that there will be nothing left of them, that in any case the remembering will always be a positive commandment as well as not to forget. Therefore, it requires further investigation that he exempts women from this positive commandment…

Even according to Minchat Chinuch, though, women might be obligated only in the Torah-level mitzva of remembering Amalek, and not in hearing *Parashat Zachor* read from the Torah. Kaf Ha-chayyim articulates this position, and writes that a woman need not hear *Zachor* in synagogue, though it is meritorious to do so:

*Kaf Ha-chayyim* 685:30

Women are not obligated to hear *Parashat Zachor*…But they [women] are obligated in the fundamental mitzva to remember the act of Amalek, for it is not a time-bound mitzva and women are obligated. That which we read it before Purim is only a rabbinic enactment as mentioned previously, and also if they [women] come to hear it [*Parashat Zachor*] they receive a reward…

Others, including Rav Ya'akov Ettlinger in his responsa *Binyan Tziyon*, maintain that women are in fact obligated in *Zachor* and in hearing it read from the Torah:

Responsa *Binyan Tziyon* II:8

I received a tradition from Admor Rav Avraham Bing z"l, head of the Beit Din of Wurtzberg, in the name of his pious rabbi, Rav Natan Adler, that women are obligated, and that he was particular that even his housemaid needed to hear *Parashat Zachor* and so I practiced according to him. His reason, in my humble opinion, is because it is not a positive time-bound commandment for there is no specific requirement regarding what time it is read…Just that one read it once a year, and therefore it is like other positive commandments that are not time-bound in which women are obligated….Why shouldn't the mitzva of remembering Amalek apply to women? Even though they are not active participants in war, it is possible that remembering the hatred [among women] will prove useful for blotting out [Amalek], as the acts of Esther prove…

As Rav Ettlinger notes, Esther's actions led the way for military victory over the forces gathered by Haman the Amalekite – even though she never picked up a weapon. Widespread custom follows this view, and women make a great effort to hear *Zachor* read as part of the Torah reading.

Missing the Minyan

What if a woman cannot make it to the reading of *Zachor*? She should follow the opinions allowing simply for reciting the verses from a *chumash* and taking them to heart and, if she can, plan to listen to the Purim reading with intent to fulfill *Zachor*.

Even better, a synagogue can arrange to have a special additional Torah reading of *Parashat Zachor*, after *mussaf* or before *mincha*, for whoever could not make it to the first. Ideally, as ever, a minyan would be present to fulfill the obligation optimally.

Some halachic authorities object to having a special reading of *Zachor* just for women, especially since there are other ways to discharge the obligation.

Rav David Auerbach, *Halichot Beitah* 9:8

There are those who wrote that… she [a woman] can read for herself from a *Sefer Torah* without a congregation, but in practice, one should be stringent not to read from a *sefer Torah* for a woman or even for ten women…

Others object based on reservations about taking out a *sefer Torah* outside of the regularly-scheduled Torah reading, since reading either with or without a *beracha* would raise serious halachic concerns.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Many others, among them Rav Ovadya Yosef, reject these arguments, and do support the idea of enabling women to hear *Parashat Zachor* through a special reading, as has become common custom, but without a *beracha*.

*Chazon Ovadya Keri'at Arba Parashiyot* 3

It is permissible to take out a *sefer Torah* especially for the women (at a time afterward [after the reading during prayer]) to read *Parashat Zachor* for them without a *beracha*.

Similarly, Rav Yitzchak Weiss, acknowledges the custom.

Responsa *Minchat Yitzchak* 9:68

In practice they follow the opinion of the majority of halachic authorities that women are obligated to hear this *parasha* through a Torah reading, and the custom has spread thus in most congregations, that women come to synagogue to hear the reading of *Parashat Zachor*. And in any case to read only for women, a number of great later authorities think one should be stringent not to read only for women, even for ten women, as is written in *Mikra'ei Kodesh*. Indeed, just as his honor wrote, in Ashkenaz the custom is to read only for women, but certainly one should not recite a *beracha* since some authorities think they are exempt…

How important is it to get to synagogue for Zachor?

As we've learned, many halachic authorities maintain that women are obligated in the mitzva of remembering Amalek. The best way to do that is to hear it read at synagogue. We list other solutions for when that can't work, though, and women may rely on them.

That being said, there is another reason to make an effort to hear Parashat Zachor read at synagogue: zechira ba-lev, the remembering of the heart. The message of eradicating Amalek isn't comfortable, and it's one we might be tempted to forget if left to our own devices. It's not easy to rally ourselves to hate. The idea that we are part of an eternal, national mission to eradicate evil is most compelling coming from an ancient scroll and heard alongside other members of our people.

One additional question is whether a woman could read *Parashat Zachor* if a synagogue holds a special additional reading of it for women without a minyan present. Rav David Auerbach (above) raises the possibility of a woman reading for herself from a *Sefer Torah*. Now, were even one man to be present in order to discharge his obligation, a woman could not read for the group, since her obligation is in doubt and his is certain. [[8]](#footnote-8)

Otherwise, though, since questions of women reading the Torah as part of fulfilling a public mitzva of reading do not really apply here, it would seem that a woman could read *Parashat Zachor* for other women when there is a reading for women who cannot make the regular Torah reading, if this would be acceptable in her community.

1. Mishna *Shekalim* 1:5

Even though they said we do not seize property [in order to ensure payment of the half *shekel*] from women…If they donated the half *shekel*, we accept it from them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Available here: <https://www.yutorah.org/lectures/lecture.cfm/742071/mrs-atara-snowbell/parashat-shekalim/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Magen Avraham himself, though, might pave the way to understanding why *Para* could be on a Torah level. He notes that the Torah, likely with reference to the sin of the Golden Calf, commands us to remember how we provoked God's anger in the wilderness, and suggests that we don't put this into practice because it is to our disgrace.

Malbim suggests that the reading of *Para* is meant to serve as that act of commemoration, in a way that does not disgrace us.

Magen Avraham 60:2

"Remember that which you angered the Lord your God in the wilderness"...There must be a reason why they enacted reading *Parashat Amalek*, something they did not enact for other remembrances… One can say that for the giving of the Torah we have the festival of Shavuot, and also Shabbat, and they did not enact [formal commemorations of] the incident of Miriam and the incident of the calf because they are to the disgrace of Israel.

Malbim *Artzot Ha-chayyim*, *Eretz Yehuda* 1:4

It seems that by dint of its being impossible to read [as an independent commemorative reading] the incident of the calf, which is to the disgrace of Israel, as is written in *Megilla* (25) they enacted for it *Parashat Para*, for all of its actions were in contrast to the incident of the calf. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Available here: http://download.yutorah.org/2013/1053/Purim\_To\_Go\_-\_5772\_Mrs\_Schechter.pdf?\_ga=2.92980381.1849547739.1583124098-1970385094.1582719076 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Peri Chadash explains that *shomei'a ke-oneh* can work for a mitzva of *zechira*.

Peri Chadash OC 67

One should not insist that regarding the Exodus from Egypt, about which it is written "remembering" and which is oral, as is proven in the second chapter of *Megilla* (18a), that he cannot discharge others' obligations. For this is not so, for we rule in *Sukka* (38b) that one who hears is like one who reads (*shomei’a ke-korei*). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Magen Avraham* 685

When he hears on Purim [the Torah reading] of "and Amalek came" he also remembers the deed of Amalek and discharges his obligation. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Responsa *Meshiv Davar* 1:16

According to the approach of the Talmud Yeushalmi in *Berachot*, chapter “Three Who Ate,” that the *beracha* over the Torah is a Torah obligation that applies when we read the Torah in public… One should be concerned about the opinion of the Yerushalmi and not read the Torah in public without a *beracha*… And to read from a *sefer Torah* on a day when there is no Torah reading is certainly forbidden, for how should we act? If we read without a *beracha*, we need to be concerned about the opinion of the Yerushalmi that there is a Torah obligation to make a *beracha* over a public reading. If we read with a *beracha* on a day when the Sages did not enact it, it is a *beracha le-vatala*. This is also the case regarding taking out a *sefer Torah* and reading it even on a day when there is a Torah reading, but not at the time of the reading, e.g., after the service or in the evening, there is also a prohibition. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See more details here: deracheha.org/discharging-anothers-obligations [↑](#footnote-ref-8)