Women's Issues

Women and Megillah Reading

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Three factors enter into a Halachic decision. The first is the optimal or "pure" Halachah, that which is determined from the sources alone.

The second is the metziut, "reality," the situation on the ground.

To bridge any gap between the two comes the third element, hora'ah, literally "ruling." This employs many principles Halachah itself provides, such as the difference between ruling lechatchilah, "initially" and bedieved, "after the fact." Or, shaat hadchak, "pressing circumstances." Or, the obligation to keep quiet, in certain cases, when one knows one won't be listened to, or when the ruling is likely to be misunderstood or misused. Women's reading the Purim megillah for other women, an issue of some recent controversy,[1] will serve to illustrate some of the complexities of both Halachah and hora'ah.

Three Halachic approaches are found in the rishonim on the question of the obligation of women to read the megillah on Purim:

1) Men and women are equally obligated in kriat hamegillah and, therefore, either sex can read for the other.

2) Men are obligated to read the megillah but women are only obligated to hear it read; a lesser obligation. Therefore, a woman cannot read for men, following the Halachic principle that only one equally obligated by a mitzvah can perform that mitzvah for others and thereby discharge their obligation.[2]

3) Men and women are equally obligated to read the megillah but, nevertheless, a woman may not read for men.

These shitot (halachic positions) can be referred to as A, B and C.

Shitat A, that men and women are equal and interchangeable as regards the reading of the of the megillah, is that of Rashi,[3] Rambam[4] and many other
early authorities. It is based on the statement in Megillah (4a), "R. Yehoshua b. Levi said, women are obligated in kriat hamegillah, because they too were part of the same miracle." Similarly, in Erchin (3a), "All are qualified to read the megillah'[this comes] to include women."

Shitah B is based on the Tosefta Megillah (2:4), according to which women, in regard to the megillah reading, are not interchangeable with men: "All are obligated to read the megillah, kohanim, Levites and Israelites...[but] women are exempt and do not enable the many [=men] to fulfill their obligation."

While view A rejects or amends this Tosefta as contradicting the Gemara, B reconciles the two sources: the Gemara refers to the obligation of women to hear the reading of the megillah, while the Tosefta exempts them from reading the megillah. Since men have the mitzvah of reading but women do not, men cannot fulfill their mitzvah of reading by having a woman read it to them.

This is the opinion of the Gaonic work Halachot Gedolot as found in our editions:

Women, slaves and minors are exempt from reading the megillah but are obligated to hear it (chayavim b'mashma). Why? Because they were all endangered by[Haman's plan] "to destroy, kill and wipe out [the Jewish people]" (Esther 3:13); since they were all endangered, they are all obligated to hear it.

This opinion of Halachot Gedolot is cited by the Tosafot in Erchin (3a) and by Raviah, Mordechai and many other rishonim. C, on the other hand, while accepting the view of A that men and women are equally obligated to read the megillah, nevertheless follows B in prohibiting women from reading it for men. It interprets the Tosefta as prohibiting such reading on extraneous grounds. According to Sefer Mitzvot Gadol,

Even though women are obligated in the reading of the megillah, they do not discharge males from their obligation....Megillah is different in that it is like the reading of the Torah; therefore, she doesn't discharge a man from his obligation.

Just as women can, in principle, be called up to the reading of the Torah in a men's minyan but this was forbidden in practice, so, too, they may not read the megillah for men.
A slightly different explanation is brought by Sefer haKolbo and Orchot Chayim in the name of an earlier rishon: "The author of Aseret haDibrot[13] wrote that when reading [the megillah] women do not enable men to fulfill their obligation; the reason is kol b'ishah ervah,"[14] i.e., while technically permissible, it is immodest for women to read the megillah for men.

It is important for our discussion to note that Halachot Gedolot, even though identified above as position B, is apparently seen by a number of rishonim as subscribing rather to opinion C. The Tur writes in his name, "Even though women are obligated in mikra megillah, they do not enable males to fulfill their obligation."[15] This is the same language as used by Sefer Mitzvot Gadol, i.e., women are equally obligated, but nevertheless may not read for men.

Proof that such an opinion is indeed attributed to Halachot Gedolot can be found in Tosfot haRosho to Sukkah (38a):[16]

...Or else [the reason why women cannot say birkat hamazon for men is that] it is dishonorable (zila beho milta) for men to have women enable them to fulfill their obligation, just like megillah where women are obligated [but] Halachot Gedolot said that women do not enable the many to fulfill their obligation.

Were the view ascribed here to Halachot Gedolot that of B, that the mitzvah of megillah for women is less than and different from that of men, there would be no cause to compare it with zila beho milta in birkat hamazon; in fact, just the opposite, since Tosfot haRosh is arguing that women's inability to say birkat hamazon for men is not proof that her obligation is less than theirs!

As a rule, Tosfot haRosh restates and occasionally amplifies the views of the regular Tosafot,[17] who in Sukkah (38a) write in similar fashion:

...Or else [women cannot say birkat hamazon for men] because it is dishonorable for the many (zila beho milta), for it is [like] megillah in which women are obligated [but] Halachot Gedolot explained that women do not enable the many to fulfill their obligation in megillah.

Tosfot haRosh, then, is proof that the phrase "women do not enable the many" in the Tosafot in Sukkah refers to women reading for men, and that the view attributed to Halachot Gedolot by this Tosafot is C and not B.[18] Further indication of this is found in Sefer haAgudah in Sukkah: "Ri explained that women do not enable men to fulfill their obligation of megillah, even though they and men are equally obligated (chayavot ka'anashim)," i.e., opinion C.
"Ri" is the preeminent Tosafist R. Isaac of Dampierre, and there is no doubt that Sefer haAgudah in Sukkah is summarizing the discussion of the Tosafot on the spot in Sukkah.

Why is this important for our question of women reading the megillah for other women? Because the 18th century authority R. Netaniel Weil, in his commentary on the Rosh called Korban Netanel, mistakenly assumed that the opinion attributed to Halachot Gedolot by the Tosafot in Sukkah is B, that women are less obligated than are men. He proceeded to interpret the Tosafot as ruling that a woman may read the megillah only for herself but not for a group of other women:

That which the Tosafot in Sukkah 38a wrote, "...Or else [women cannot say birkat hamazon for men] because it is dishonorable for the many, for it is [like] megillah in which women are obligated [but] Halachot Gedolot explained that women do not enable the many to fulfill their obligation in megillah," that is to say that a woman may not enable many women to fulfill their obligation, because it is dishonorable for them [to have the megillah read to them by a women]. But as far as reading for men, even without this reason they cannot do so, not even one woman for one man, because they are not obligated [to read].[19]

His view is cited by the Mishnah Berurah,[20] the normally authoritative commentary on the Shulchan Aruch Orach Chayim. In this case, however, neither the Korban Netanel nor the Mishnah Berurah knew of the Tosfot haRosh on Sukkah, which was not yet in print.[21] Had they seen it, they would not have written as they did.

It can thus be stated categorically that there is no opinion in the Talmud or rishonim that prohibits a woman from reading the megillah for herself or for any number of other women.[22] Moreover, as opposed to many innovations in women's prayer groups which, even if not explicitly forbidden, are at the least not anticipated by any authority, women's megillah readings are a clearly implied Halachic option.

Nonetheless, there are a number of possible reasons why women should attend the regular megillah readings by men in the synagogue, all things being equal. These include: the preference (hidur) of having as many participants as possible in one large public reading rather than fragmented into smaller ones;[23] the initial obligation to read the megillah in the presence of ten men[24] or ten women,[25] which is often possible only at the synagogue.
reading; questions as to the proper blessing to be recited;[26] and the general desirability of performing a mitzvah sooner rather than later.[27]

All things are often not equal, however:

1) It is often impossible to hear properly from the ezrat nashim. The inaudibility of even one word from the megillah reading means that the listener has not fulfilled her obligation.[28]

2) Women, and particularly mothers, are often unable to come to the synagogue at the specified times.

For these and other reasons there has emerged a widespread practice to have a second megillah reading for women, and in such circumstances it is entirely proper for a woman or women to read the megillah. Even women who have already heard the megillah read and have thus discharged their own obligation can read for other women in the second reading. [29] In fact, when the alternative is to have a teenage boy read the megillah for a group of learned women, it may be close to being zila beho miltah[30] for the women not to read the megillah themselves.

Notes

1. In February, 1997 the Queens, NY Vaad Harabbonim included women's megillah readings in a list of prohibited activities. Shortly afterwards, a women's megillah reading scheduled at Yeshiva University's Stern College for Women was cancelled by the administration.

2. Mishnah in Rosh haShanah 29a; Rambam, Hilchot Shofar 2:2; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 589:1.

3. BT Erchin 3a, s.v. l'atuyei nashim.


5. Sefer haMeorot, Riaz in Shaltei haGiborim, Ritva, Meiri and Nimukei Yosef, all on BT Megillah 4a; Or Zarua, pt. 2, no. 368. This is also, apparently, the opinion of Rashba (ed. Dimitrovski) to Megillah 4a, who rejects the Tosefta. These rishonim together with Rashi state explicitly that women can read for men. Others imply as much by quoting R. Yehoshua b. Levi or mentioning women's obligation to read the megillah, without qualification: see
Rambam in previous note and also Rif and Raban to Megillah 4a; Shibolei haLeket 198; Ohel Moed, Dinet Megillah, 1 (vol. 2, p. 108).


7. S. v. l'atuyei nashim.

8. Chap. 569.

9. To Megillah 4a, remez 778.

10. Sefer halitur (Aseret haDibrot), Hilchot Megillah s. v. mi koreh; Sefer haEshkol (ed. Auerbach), part 2, p. 30; Sefer haNiyar; Rosh, Sefer haAgudah and Ran (on the Rif) to Megillah 4a; Rabbeinu Yerucham 10:2. Sefer haEshkol and Raviah write that the author of Halachot Gedolot had a different version of Megillah 4a: instead of "women are obligated in kriot (reading) megillah," his text of the Talmud read "women are obligated in mashma (hearing) megillah." This is also stated by the Mordechai, who follows Raviah (the emendation printed in the Mordechai, \*\*\* is unwarranted).

This leads to a difficult and, to my mind, unresolved question concerning the blessing to be recited before a megillah reading by, or on behalf of, women. According to Rashi, Rambam et al. the blessing is certainly "al mikra megillah," ("on the reading of the megillah"), the same as a man's. Raviah and Mordechai, on the other hand, following the view of Halachot Gedolot, write that it is "al mashma megillah" ("on the hearing of the megillah"). The Rama in Orach Chayim 689:2 accepts a variation of this and writes, "There are those who say that if a woman reads for herself she makes the blessing \*lishmoa megillah\* (\*to hear the megillah\*), since she is not obligated to read."

Ashkenazic practice is indeed for women to make the blessing "lishmoa megillah" (Rama and others) or "lishmoa mikra megillah" (Chaye Adam and Mishnah Brurah; cf. R. Chananel to Megillah 4a).

On what basis do we prefer the blessing according to Raviah to the one according to Rashi and Rambam? Were it not for the established minhag, we might well rule that women should make no blessing at all, because of the safek of which version to use. The difficulty is independent of the question of whether or not women should read the megillah for themselves and applies
equally to the blessings made when a man reads the megillah a second time for

11. Smag, Hilchot Megillah. This comparison to reading the Torah is also found
in Sefer haEshkol and in R. Avraham Min haHar on BT Megillah 19b.

12. BT Megillah 23a.

13. Not found in our editions of Sefer hahaltur.

14. Sefer haKolbo, chap. 45, and Orchot Chayim, Hilchot Megillah par. 2; the
interpretation is also mentioned in Sefer haEshkol. On whether a woman's
reading the Torah with cantillation constitutes kol b'ishah, see my Resp. Bnei

If women may not read the megillah for men only because of extraneous
reasons, then a man read to by a woman has bedieved fulfilled his obligation,
and this is indeed the opinion of R. Avraham Min haHar cited in note 11 above.
Also, see Rabbi D. Auerbach, Halichot Beitaḥ, p. 339 par. 12, regarding kol
b'ishah. However, Sefer haEshkol both quotes Halachot Gedolot that women
are obligated only to hear the megillah and at the same time gives thereasons of
similarity to Torah readings and kol b'ishah. According to this, the similarity to
Torah readings and kol b'ishah are not extraneous but are the reasons
why chaza"l freed women of the obligation to read the megillah in the first
place, to prevent them from reading for men("l'hachi tiknu shelo totzi
anashim"), and thus a man read to by a woman has not fulfilled his obligation
evên bedieved. This resolves the conceptual difficulty in distinguishing
between the obligations of men and women in spite of their all having been
"part of the same miracle"; cf. Aruch haShulchan, Orach Chayim 689, par. 5
andSefer Bnei Tzion (Lichtman), vol. 4, 271:2 (3), pp. 120b-121a.


16. S. v. b'emet amru.

17. There is thus no contradiction between Tosafot haRosh's restatement here
of Tosaft's version of Halachot Gedolot and his quoting a different version in
his own Psakim, cited in note 10 above; and see Bnei Banim, I, p. 93.

18. That Tosaft in Erchin 3a cite Halachot Gedolot as B is no proof that they
do so in Sukkah. Tosaft in different tractates are often by different authors.
19. *Korban Netanel* on *Megillah*, chap. 1, par. 3.

20. *Orach Chayim* 689, in *Shaar haTziyun* 15. The *Aruch haShulchan*, *ad loc.*, however, ignores the *Korban Netanel*, and in 271, par. 5 understands the *Tosafot* in *Sukkah* as referring to women reading for men. On the relative authority of the *Mishnah Berurah* and *Aruch haShulchan*, see *Bnei Banim*, I, p. 22, note and II, no. 5.

21. *Korban Netanel* was printed in 1766, *Mishnah Berurah* in 1883, and *Tosafot haRosh* to *Sukkah* in 1903.

22. There is a possible extra-Talmudic opinion to this effect attributed to the *Midrash Neelam* or *Zohar Chadash* on the book of Ruth. *Magen Avraham* on *Orach Chayim* 689, Par. 6, paraphrases it as "a woman should not read [the megillah even] for herself, but hear it from men." However, *Biur haGra* quotes the language of the *Zohar Chadash* differently, and writes: "...that which is written in *Erchin*, *All are qualified etc. to include women,* means to enable [other] women to fulfill their obligation, and such is also written in the *Zohar Chadash*, Ruth 78b: *Women are obligated in mikra megillah, but do not read to others [=men], but are required to hear it from the one who makes the blessings.*" The language of the *Zohar Chadash* is unclear, and the connecting phrase used by the Gra "and such is also written" (*v'chen katuv*) indicates that he brings the *Zohar Chadash* in support of his preceding statement that "*to include women* means to enable [other] women to fulfill their obligation" and not in contradiction.

23. "*B'rov am hadrat melech*" (Proverbs 14:28), "with many people [comes] splendor for the king [G-d]." Technically this may not apply to women, however; see *Halichot Beithah, Petach haBayit*, chap. 25. Also, "*b'rov am hadrat melech*" applies equally to other prayers and blessings, and in communities which ignore it the year round in favor of small *minyanim* etc., it should not be selectively applied to women on Purim.


25. Consensus of *achronim*, see *Halichot Beithah*, chap. 24, par. 17 and note 27.

26. See note 10 above.
27. "Z'rizim makdimim l'mitzvot" (BT Pesachim 4a), "the industrious perform the mitzvot early."

28. Unless the listener said the missed words out loud herself.

29. Consensus of achronim on women's areivut, see Halichot Beitah, Petach haBayit, chap. 17.

30. See Bnei Banim, II, no. 10, p. 36-38 on the meaning of kevod hatzibur.