

Mikrah Megillah: Vehicle for Prayer, a Medium for Praise, & a Form of *Talmud Torah*.

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In one of the last *teshuvot* of the first volume of the *Shut Noda BeYehuda* (O”H vol. 1 #41), Rabbi Yechezkiel Landau addresses a practical question revolving around the reading of the *megillah* on Purim night. The question posed to him was: If one has yet to recite *kiddush levana* and the deadline for its recitation is quickly approaching (the last night to recite *kiddush levana* is the 14th, the same night as Purim), can one interrupt the reading of *megillah* to say the *bracha* of *kiddush levana*? More pointedly, if in the middle of *mikrah megillah* the clouds disperse to reveal the moon, is it appropriate to stop reading the *megillah* and go outside to recite the blessing?

This article will flesh out the Noda BeYehuda’s comments and explanations to this query. In the process, many of the unique aspects of the mitzvah *mikrah megillah* will be highlighted and analyzed. It will focus on *mikrah megillah* as a vehicle for prayer, a medium for praise, and a form of *talmud Torah*.

The Noda BeYehuda begins his discussion by analyzing a dispute between the Baal haItur and the Tur over the permissibility of interrupting the reading of the *megillah* to hold a conversation. The Baal haItur (Hilchot Megillah 114a, cited in Tur O”H 692:2) maintains that since the *bracha* recited at the conclusion of reading the *megillah*, *harav et reiveinu*, is only a *minhag* (custom), one should not reprimand anyone for talking during the reading of the *megillah*. Since there is a difference between the nature of the first three *brachot*, *al mikrah megillah*, *she’assah nissim*, and *shehechianu*, and the concluding *bracha*, one should not view the three *brachot* in the beginning and one at the end as a unit or as completing the reading of the *megillah*. Rather, the last *bracha* is independent from the first *brachot*. While the first *brachot* specifically relate to the reading of the *megillah*, the concluding *bracha* is a general blessing of *shevach* and *hoda’ah*, praise and thanks, to Hashem for the miracle of Purim (see Ran, *Megillah* 12a in Rif, s.v. *baruch*). Therefore, while one

cannot talk for the duration of *pesukei dezimrah* because it is bracketed by two *brachot*, *baruch sheamar* and *yishtabach*, this is not the case by *mikrah megillah* and conversation is permitted.

Both the Tur and the Bet Yosef argue with the Baal haItur, but for different reasons. The Tur (O”H 692:2) argues that while the concluding bracha of “*harav et reiveinu*” is only a minhag, once the rabbis instituted it to be recited at the conclusion of *mikrah megillah*, it takes on the characteristics of a concluding bracha. Therefore, it is forbidden to talk during *megillah* reading so as to not disconnect the initial and concluding *brachot*, similar to *pesukei dezimrah*.⁴⁵

The Bet Yosef (O”H 692:2) takes a more practical approach in arguing with the Baal haItur. Whether talking during *megillah* reading is a *hefsek* (an interruption) or not, it is a problem to talk because one will be unable to hear the *megillah* in its entirety. Therefore, all conversation is forbidden.

A practical difference between the Tur and the Bet Yosef is specifically who is forbidden to speak during *mikrah megillah*. If the problem is a separation between the *brachot*, the Tur’s explanation, then both the reader and the listener must refrain from conversation. But if the issue is that the listener will miss some of the words of the *megillah*, then only the listener would be prohibited from talking and not the reader (see Mishnah Berurah 592:9).

Another difference relevant to the discussion below is if conversation would be permitted if one interrupts *mikrah megillah* but will not miss any of the reading of the *megillah*. For example, if the reader pauses for the listener to hold a conversation when the *megillah* is being read, since the listener does not miss any of the words of the *megillah*, according to the Bet Yosef conversation would be permitted, while according to the Tur it would still be forbidden.

The Noda BeYehuda asks an additional question on the Baal haItur who maintained that conversation was permitted during *mikrah megillah*. The Talmud (Brachot 14a) cites a question that was posed to Rabbi Cheya: “When reciting *hallel* and reading *megillah*, is one permitted to interrupt the performance of the *mitzvot* with talking? Should one make a *kal vachomer*, an a priori, from *kriyat shema*? Since one is allowed to interrupt *kriyat shema* [at certain points and in certain situations] and *kriyat shema* is a Torah law, *kal vachomer*, *hallel* and *megillah*, which are rabbinic in nature, certainly one can interrupt? Or, does one say that the fulfillment of *pirsumei nisa*, publicizing the miracle of Purim, is greater [than even the Torah law of *kriyat shema* in respect to interrupting the mitzvah] and one cannot interrupt *megillah* under any circumstances?” Rabbi Cheya responded: “One can interrupt, and there is nothing to discuss further.”

While the Baal haItur read this passage as allowing one to carry on conversations during the reading of the *megillah* without any objections, as per Rabbi Cheya’s statement: “One can interrupt, and there is nothing to discuss further,”⁴⁶ the Noda BeYehuda questions this

⁴⁵ See also *Hararei Kedem*, vol. 1, # 196.

⁴⁶ See the Ran (Brachot 14a, cited in Noda BeYehuda, *ibid.*) who explains the Baal haItur based on Rabbi Cheya’s added words, “and there is nothing to discuss further.” By adding this to his answer it was as if he was dismissing the entire comparative question. The permission to talk during the reading of *megillah* and the recitation of *hallel* is completely different from *kriyat shema*, namely, one is permitted to carry on conversations for any reason at anytime with out any reservations

interpretation. The question in the Talmud revolved around whether *megillah* and *hallel* were stricter than *kriyat shema*, not whether they were different or more lenient. When Rebbi Cheya concluded that one is permitted to interrupt *megillah* and *hallel*, he was not giving *carte blanche* permission to carry on any conversation. Rather, the permission to interrupt *megillah* and *hallel* should be modeled after *kriyat shema*'s strict standard of only being allowed to interrupt with conversation in-between paragraphs or only be permitted to respond to someone and not initiate any conversation.⁴⁷

The Noda BeYehuda concludes based on the Shulchan Aruch's ruling (O" H 692:2) that it is forbidden to interrupt the reading of the *megillah* with conversation, following the Tur and not the Baal haItur. However, he asks to what extent does the Tur's rationale in forbidding conversation go? Is it similar to *kriyat shema*, as the Talmud in Brachot originally asked, or not? If *megillah* is comparable to *kriyat shema*, are all the permitted interruptions, such as responding to *kaddish*, *kedushah*, *barachu*, *modim dirabanan*, and to respond to one's friend out of respect (see Shulchan Aruch 66:3), also applicable to *mikrah megillah*?⁴⁸

Specifically related to the case of *kiddush levana*, the Magen Avraham (66:5) rules that if one hears thunder while reciting *kriyat shema*, one is permitted to interrupt his recitation and make the appropriate *bracha* on hearing thunder. He explains that if one is permitted to respond to his fellow man (*bassar va'dam*) out of respect, *kal vachomer* one is permitted to respond out of respect for *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and make a *bracha* upon hearing thunder in the middle of reciting *kriyat shema*. The Noda BeYehuda then expands the Magen Avraham's comment to even include the permission of interrupting the reciting of *kriyat shema* for *kiddush levana*, since *kiddush levana* is in the same genre of *birchat hashevach*, blessings of thanks, as the blessing over thunder. Based on that, the Noda BeYehuda deduces that one may also interrupt *mikrah megillah* for *kiddush levana*.

In his conclusion,⁴⁹ the Noda BeYehuda rules that one is permitted to interrupt *kriyat shema* and *mikrah megillah* for the recitation of *kiddush levana* on the condition that one fears the moon will no longer be visible by the conclusion of the reading the *megillah* or the recitation of *shema*. However, the Noda BeYehuda adds two caveats to this ruling. First, one should try to reach the end of the paragraph before interrupting *shema* and *megillah*, but if this is impossible one can rely on the Magen Avraham and recite *kiddush levana*.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ See also *Mishkanot Yaakov* #164 and *Hararei Kedem*, vol. 1, # 196.

⁴⁸ See also Bet Yosef, *ibid.*, who quotes a dispute in the *rishonim* as to whether it is allowed to interrupt *kriyat shema* for *dvarim she'bikedusha* or not. Some *rishonim* (Rosh, Tosfot) argue that since one is engaged in praising Hashem, *kriyat shema*, it is inappropriate to interrupt *shema* with another form of praise.

⁴⁹ For two reasons, the Noda BeYehuda initially rejects the expansion of the Magen Avraham to include allowing reciting *kiddush levana* while in the middle of *kriyat shema*. First, there are those achronim who argue on the original ruling of the Magen Avraham (see e.g. Bechor Shur, Brachot 13a, cited in Noda BeYehuda). They argue that the list of prayers that one may interrupt *kriyat shema* for provided by the *rishonim* was specific and did not include the blessing on thunder. Second, the mitzvah of *kiddush levana* is different than the *bracha* on thunder for a technical reason, that the blessing on thunder must be said immediately after hearing thunder, while the duration of the *bracha* on the new moon can be recited the entire time the moon is visible.

⁵⁰ See also *Teshuva MeAhava*, vol. 2, 222, and *Mishnah Berurah*, 66:19, who cites a similar ruling in the name of the Chaye Adam

Second, specific to *megillah*, one is only permitted to interrupt *mikra megillah* if they will not lose out on reading *megillah* in public with the congregation. One is only allowed to interrupt reading *megillah* if the communal reading will be delayed until they return.⁵¹ The Noda BeYehuda explains that to miss out on the congregational reading of the *megillah*, one will be lacking in the fulfillment of the mitzvah of *pirsumei nisa*. Even though the mitzvah of *kiddush levana* is *tadir* (more frequent) and should have precedent, when *tadir* and the fulfillment of *pirsumei nisa* are in conflict, *pirsumei nisa* trumps *tadir*. Therefore, while in theory one potentially could leave *megillah* reading to say the bracha of *kiddush levana*, it is only permitted if they will not miss the communal reading and lose the fulfillment of *pirsumei nisa*.⁵²

To summarize, there is a dispute among the rishonim (between the Baal haTur and the Tur and Bet Yosef) whether one is permitted to interrupt the reading of *megillah* with conversation. A second issue is whether according to the Tur *mikra megillah* should be treated similarly to *kriyat shema* in respect to being allowed to interrupt its recitation in certain instances. That will then impact how far one can extend the permissibility of interruption during *mikra megillah*, and whether one can even leave to recite the bracha of *kiddush levana* or the bracha upon hearing thunder.

While much of this discussion seems theoretical, many of the unique aspects of *mikrah megillah* are touched upon. First, the Talmud in Brachot takes it for granted that the reading of the *megillah* is analogous to prayer in general, *kriyat shema*, and more specifically *hallel*. The Shulchan Aruch (589:5) rules that if there is no *minyan* to read the *megillah* and all the men present know how to read it, one man cannot read for the group. Rather, every individual must read for himself. The Magen Avraham points out that this phenomenon of requiring a *minyan* is strikingly similar to the necessity of a *minyan* for prayer, in contradistinction to the mitzvah of *shofar*, where one can fulfill the mitzvah for others even in absence of a *minyan*.⁵³

Rabbi Soloveitchik (*Hararei Kedem*, vol. 1, # 192) explains that the necessity of a *minyan* for *mikrah megillah* is based on the Talmud (Megillah 14a) that one of the reasons why we do not recite *hallel* on Purim is because “*kriyata zu hilula*,” “the reading [of the *megillah*] is a form of praise.” Therefore, the reading of the *megillah* takes on the halachic characteristics of prayer, specifically those of *hallel*, in respect to fulfilling the mitzvah in its complete form.

Similarly, the Talmud (Megillah 4a) in searching for a source as to why we read the *megillah* at night and in the day quotes the opinion of Ulah Birah who cites the verse in Tehillim (30:13) “So that my glory may sing praise to You, and not be silent; Hashem, my God, I will give thanks unto You forever.” Rashi (ibid. s.v. *yizamercha*) explains that Ulah interpreted the verse as, ‘I will

⁵¹ The Noda BeYehuda rules that stopping the reading of the *megillah* is only permitted if 50% of the entire congregation has not yet recited *kiddush levana*, otherwise it is a *tircha ditziburah*.

⁵² The source for this ruling is the Gemara Shabbat 23b, where the Gemara rules that *pirsumei nisa* of Chanuka candles takes precedence over *tadir* of *kiddush* on Shabbat. Tosfot (ibid. s.v. *hadar*) explains that this is only true if only one mitzvah, either the *tadir* or the *pirsumei nisa* mitzvah, can be performed. If both can be performed and it is a question of correct procedure and order, this is a dispute in Tosfot ibid. See also Taz O”H 582:2 and Gra ibid. who argue about if there is in fact a dispute in Tosfot.

⁵³ See however ibid., where Magen Avraham cites dissenting opinions that the preference of *berov am hadrat melech* takes precedence and that one should read for the group. See also Mishna Berurah 589:15 who cites the majority of *achronim* siding with the ruling of the Shulchan Aruch.

praise Hashem' through reading the *megillah* at night and 'not be silent' during the day. Rashi continues that the *megillah* functions as a platform to praise Hashem just as singing praises do.

Rashi, in his extrapolation of Ulah Birah's explanation, adds another element relating that this form of prayer and praise should be done in public. As the Noda BeYehuda explained, a central aspect of reading the *megillah* is its public reading as a forum to praise Hashem publicly by publicizing the miracle, to the extent that the Talmud (Megillah 3a, see Tosfot s.v. *mevatlin*) teaches that *kohanim* and *levim* should delay performing their service in order to hear *megillah* in a public gathering and perform *pirsumei nisa*.

Lastly, one aspect of *mikrah megillah* not discussed by the Noda BeYehuda, yet relevant to this discussion, is the reading of the *megillah* as a function of *talmud Torah*. The Talmud (ibid.) instructs individuals to interrupt their study of Torah in order to hear *megillah*. Some *achronim* ask why the Talmud instructs one to disengage from Torah study and go read the *megillah*, when in fact reading the *megillah* is in fact a form of learning Torah!⁵⁴ While there are numerous answers given,⁵⁵ the fact remains that at its most basic level reading the *megillah* is a form of learning Torah.

There is an interesting discussion amongst the *achronim* as to how one should proceed when learning Torah and they hear thunder or see lighting; is it appropriate to stop learning to make a *bracha*? While many assume one should interrupt their learning to make a *bracha*, arguing it can be no worse than *kriyat shema*, Rabbi Ovadia Bartenua seems to disagree. The Mishna in Avot (3:7) states: "R. Shimon said if one is walking on the way and is learning [Torah] and stops his learning and declares 'What a beautiful tree' ... the Torah regards such a person as liable for the death penalty." Bartenua adds that even if his observations and comments would lead him to bless God for his wonderful creations, to interrupt the study of Torah is still forbidden by the rabbis.

This discussion is relevant to the Noda BeYehuda's original question of the permissibility of interrupting *mikrah megillah* for *kiddush levana* or any *birchat hashevach*. Perhaps, *megillah* is stricter than *kriyat shema*, since by reading it in public one is actually fulfilling a mitzvah of *talmud Torah b'rabbim*, the study of Torah in a public setting. Therefore, while we permit one to recite a *birchat hashevach*, the blessing on thunder, while they are praying, since it is all words of praise, one might argue that it would be inappropriate to insert a blessing of praise in its incorrect framework, namely the study of Torah.

While these are some of the technical halachic aspects of *mikrah megillah*, this discussion highlights some of the different themes and concepts related to the reading of the *megillah* as a form of prayer, praise and *talmud Torah*.

⁵⁴ See e.g., notes of the Rashash and Maratz Chajes, Megillah 3a.

⁵⁵ See e.g., *Moadim U'zmanim*, vol. 2, pp. 140-141.