

A Novel Look at Megillah Reading - Night and Day

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I. Introduction - the source for Megillah reading

As the 13th day of Adar darkens, marking the end of *Taanit Esther* (in most years) and the imminent onset of Purim, costumed men, women, and children gather excitedly for the annual nighttime reading of *Megillat Esther*. Amid the joyous energy filling the sanctuary, the *Baal Koreh* begins to chant the three-fold *brachot* and the story begins...

But what is the source for this celebrated mitzvah of קריאת המגילה? And what is the source for the practice of performing this mitzvah at night and then repeating the identical action the very next morning?

The source for this mitzvah is *perek 9, pasuk 28* in *Megillat Esther*. The Pasuk states: וְהִזְמִינִם יְדוֹר וְדוֹר - “And these days shall be remembered and celebrated in every generation.” *Chazal* understand that the way in which “these days” are נִזְכָּרִים - “remembered” - is through the reading of *Megillat Esther*.¹

The source for the practice to read the Megillah twice - once at night and then again during the day is more obscure². In *Masechet Megillah*³, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi teaches:

חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה בלילה ולשנותה ביום

שנאמר “אלוקי אקרא יומם ולא תענה, לילה ולא דומיה לי”⁴

A person is obligated to read the megillah at night and repeat it during the day as it says in the *pasuk*, “G-d, I call out to You during the day but there is no response, and at night I am not silent.”

Later, the Gemara quotes Ulla who expresses an almost identical idea.

חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה בלילה ולשנותה ביום

שנאמר “למען יזמרך כבוד ולא ידום ה' אלוקי לעולם אודך.”⁵

A person is obligated to read the Megillah at night and repeat it during the day as it says in the *pasuk*, “In order that I sing of Your honor and not be silent, Hashem - forever will I praise You.” (Rashi explains that the first half of the *pasuk* - “In

1 מסכת מגילה דף ב: ודף כ. 1

2 While the Mitzvah to read the Megillah during the day is from the Pasuk we quoted above - וְהִזְמִינִם יְדוֹר וְדוֹר, the source for the Mitzvah to read the Megillah at night as well, is not as clear. In fact, there are those who suggest that the level of obligation to read the Megillah at night is different than during the day. Some believe that the obligation at night is מדרבנן whereas the obligation by day is מדברי קבלה (based on pesukim in נ"ך).

3 דף ד. 3

4 תהילים כב: ג 4

5 תהילים ל: יג 5

order that I sing of Your honor” - refers to the daytime and the next phrase, “and not be silent” - refers to the nighttime.)

II. Questions raised because of the double mitzvah of Megillah reading

Let’s carefully examine the mitzvah to read the Megillah night and day and raise some questions in order to understand more fully the nature of this requirement.

1) Repeating the same mitzvah night and day is a very unusual practice - something which is almost never done for holiday-related mitzvot!⁶ Mitzvot associated with holidays are either done exclusively at night - such as eating matzah and other seder-related mitzvot, or they are done exclusively during the daytime - such as shofar and lulav. There is almost never a mitzvah done at night and then repeated the next morning. What then is the significance of the two-fold Megillah reading?

2) The *Baalei Tosfot* raise a fascinating question that emerges from this unusual doubling of the mitzvah of קריאת המגילה. Immediately before we read the Megillah at night, we recite three brachot, ושהיינו, ועל מקרא מגילה, שעשה ניסים, ושהיינו. What about prior to reading the Megillah in the morning? In addition to the first two brachot, do we recite the bracha of ושהיינו as well, or do we omit ושהיינו since this is not the first time we are reading the Megillah? *Tosfot* conclude that we should recite the ושהיינו⁷ since “עיקר פרסומי ניסא הוי בקריאה דיממא” - “the primary requirement of publicizing the miracle is fulfilled by reading the Megillah during the day.”

While the *Baalei Tosfot* offer several proofs for this assertion⁸, they do not explain the rationale for the idea. Why and in what way is “publicizing the miracle” more fully accomplished by reading the Megillah during the day?

3) While Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Ulla agree to the basic law to read the Megillah twice, they offer different sources for the halacha.⁹ Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi quotes the Pasuk, “G-d, I call out to You during the day but there is no response, and at night I am not silent.” Ulla quotes the Pasuk, “In order that I sing of Your honor and not be silent, Hashem - forever will I praise You.” Do the different sources reflect a deeper difference of opinion between Ulla and Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi? If they do, what is this deeper difference?

6 In fact, it is practically non-existent. The only possible exceptions are the mitzvah of *seudat Yom Tov* - which applies night and day, and the minhag of *hakafot* - performed night and day. Regarding mitzvot unrelated to holidays the one mitzvah that does follow this model is *kriat shema* where the mitzvah applies at night and then the next morning.

7 The Rambam disagrees and writes: וביום אינו חוזר ומברך שהיינו - during the day one does not say the bracha of *shehecheyanu* again. Rambam Hilchot Megillah V’Chanukah Perek 1, Halacha 3.

8 Among the proofs is that based on a דרשה (homiletic method of interpretation) Megillah reading is linked to the mitzvah of having a purim feast. Since the main mitzvah is to have a meal during the day, in the same way, the main mitzvah of Megillah is to read it by day. Also, in the first pasuk quoted as the source for reading the Megillah twice, the daytime is mentioned first, indicating its priority.

9 Both *Amoraim* also agree that the source for this idea is not found explicitly or even implicitly in Megillat Esther, but is found in Sefer Tehillim through homiletic interpretation.

4) The statements of both Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Ulla that convey the rule to read the Megillah twice use an unusual word. Both *Amoraim* use the word "לשנותה" which the gemara ultimately interprets to mean "repeat." Why is the obligation to read the Megillah during the day referred to as "repetition?" Isn't the daytime reading its own independent activity? Looking at a comparable mitzvah such as *Kriat Shema* which we also read night and day, we wouldn't view the daytime recital as a repetition of the nighttime one. Rather, there is a mitzvah to recite the *Shema* at night and to recite the *Shema* during the day.¹⁰ Perhaps a more apt way to express this dual reading of the Megillah could have been חייב אדם לקרות את המגילה פעמיים - בלילה וביום - A person is obligated to read the Megillah twice - at night and during the day.

III. Two views of the Megillah

We can find the answer to these questions by looking closely at the different *pesukim* cited as the source for reading the Megillah twice. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi quotes, "G-d, I call out to You during the day but there is no response, and at night I am not silent." Ulla quotes the *pasuk*, "In order that I sing of Your honor and not be silent; Hashem - forever will I praise You." The person expressing his feelings in the first *pasuk* is in a starkly different emotional and physical state than the person praying in the second *pasuk*. In the first *pasuk*, the person is broken-spirited, vulnerable and desperate. He calls out to Hashem but senses no response and so he continues to call out - "at night I am not silent." In his time of crisis he petitions Hashem to listen and respond. In contrast, the person in the second *pasuk* is triumphant and joyous. In his time of celebration, he turns to Hashem to thank Him and praise Him for His help - "forever will I praise You."

We can suggest that these two *pesukim* reflect two aspects of *Megillat Esther*. The two aspects of *Megillat Esther* are embodied by the two halves of the story. The first half of the story is ominous and frightening. Haman, promoted to second-in-command, despises Mordechai and the Jewish nation. He devises a plot to murder the Jewish People en masse. As we read this part of the story, we are filled with dread and feelings of vulnerability. The second half of the story, however, takes a dramatic turn. Abundant with jubilant irony, this half tells of Esther's bravery and the unraveling of Haman's plan which leads to Mordechai's surge to power. Both halves of the story can lead us to connect with Hashem, but in different ways. The first half reminds us of our fragile human condition and our never-ending dependence on Hashem. The second half inspires us to joyously thank and praise Hashem for His abundant kindness to us.

And so, the two *pesukim* quoted above reflect these two aspects of the Megillah. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Ulla disagree as to what constitutes the main part of the story. Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi sees the first half as the defining half of the Megillah, and as such, it is primarily a story of a barely averted tragedy. According to this, the purpose of Megilla reading is to bring us closer to Hashem out of a sense of vulnerability. We read the Megillah day and night, as delineated by the *pasuk*, to continuously remind ourselves that life can change

¹⁰ Even though the Rambam counts the recital of *Shema* night and day as one Mitzvah, the Rambam does not formulate the daytime obligation as a repetition of the nighttime recital. In the heading to *Hilchot Kriat Shema*, the Rambam writes: מצות עשה אחת והיא לקרות קריאת שמע פעמים ביום. In Perek 1, Halacha 1, he writes: - פעמיים בכל יום קוראין קריאת שמע בערב ובבקר - Every day we recite the Shema twice - in the evening and in the morning.

instantaneously. This inspires us to turn to Hashem for help. Thus Megillah reading is a prayer of *בקשה אל ה'* - petition to Hashem.

Ulla, on the other hand, sees the second half of the Megillah as the main part of the story. The Megillah is essentially about the great victory of the Jewish people and the protection we receive from Hashem. We read the Megillah day and night, as outlined in the *pasuk*, in order to show our constant and everflowing gratitude to Hashem and to celebrate our redemption from the clutches of Haman. Thus Megillah reading is a prayer of *שבח לה'* - praise to Hashem.

IV. Two Types of Megillah Reading

Let's take this a step further. We can suggest that the correct view of Megillah reading can only be discerned when taking the statements of both Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi and Ulla into consideration. The Megillah reading is both a prayer in a time of crisis and a prayer in response to redemption. It is both *בקשה* - petition, and *שבח* - praise. However, there is a difference between the reading of the Megillah at night and the reading during the day. When we read the Megillah at night, we cannot help but focus on the first half of the Megillah. At night, we read the story as if for the first time and the impending doom of the opening chapters is terrifying. The terror is hard to shed even when the crisis is averted. And so at night, as we read the Megillah, we feel weak and vulnerable and as a result we turn to Hashem in desperation. Our sentiments at this time correspond to the dark of night and to its symbolism. Darkness symbolizes exile, fear and the need for faith in Hashem. Thus, at night, the Megillah takes on the character of *בקשה* - petition.

During the day however, we feel very differently. Now, the beginning of the story does not seem so frightening since the conclusion of the story is still fresh in our minds from the previous night. Events that we experienced the night before as impending doom, we now see as merely setting the stage for the ironic upheaval about to take place. As a result, the concluding chapters are the defining chapters of the morning reading. As we read the Megillah, we are inspired to praise Hashem with joy and celebration. Our spirits are further buoyed by the daylight around us and the redemptive symbolism of the daytime mirrors our emotional state. During the day, the Megillah takes on the character of *שבח* - praise.

V. Conclusion

We can now explain why the *Amoraim* use the word "*לשנותה*" - meaning "to repeat" - the Megillah. The daytime reading is specifically meant to be a repetition; it needs to be the second reading. Since we are reading the Megillah for the second time we know the end, and as a result, the feel of the narrative is very different than the first time we read it. The entire story takes on a positive and even celebratory feel. In order to fully experience the daytime Megillah reading as a prayer of *שבח* - praise to Hashem, it needs to be the second reading.

With this we can also understand why *Tosfot* believe that the main mitzvah of publicizing the miracle occurs during the day. Only during the daytime does the Megillah story take on its full character as a story of triumph, Divine intervention, and a celebration of Jewish survival. As a

result of this, the *bracha* of שהחיינו is warranted since we experience the megilla during the day in a new way.

Based on this, we can now understand an oddity of Megillah reading. It always struck me as perplexing that when Purim begins and we excitedly read the Megillah for the first time, we are all fasting because of תענית אסתר, feeling weak, light-headed, and not quite in a mood for celebration. It seems that because of a technicality - not eating before *Maariv* - we are forced to read the Megillah in a frame of mind not really suited to the mitzvah! Based on our explanation above, we can suggest that indeed the Megillah reading at night is not a wholly celebratory reading. When we read the Megillah at night we petition Hashem and turn to Him to protect us in our time of need. The nighttime reading is more closely connected with תענית אסתר than with Purim itself. Just as Esther and the Jews fasted and davened to Hashem at their moment of crisis, we do the same. Fasting at this time is therefore perfectly appropriate for the message of the nighttime reading.

By engaging in these two types of Megillah reading we learn to connect to Hashem both out of a sense of our great need for Him and out of a sense of gratitude to Him. In our own lives, we know well the veracity of the Purim message, that life can turn on a dime; at times, from celebration to sadness, and at times from despair to delight. Our days and our years are woven together by moments of vulnerability and moments of confidence. The Purim message, as embodied by the dual Megillah reading is to channel both of these emotional states into our service of Hashem - “Crying out to Him” and “Singing of His honor” throughout our lives.