

Sefer and Iggeret: The Dual Nature of Megillat Esther

The Gemara in Talmud Bavli, *Megillah* 19a, states the following:

וא"ר חלבו אמר רב חמא בר גוריא אמר רב מגילה נקראת ספר ונקראת אגרת נקראת ספר שאם תפרה בחוטי פשתן פסולה ונקראת אגרת שאם הטיל בה שלשה חוטי גידין כשרה. *And R. Helbo said in the name of Rav Hama bar Gurya who said in the name of Rav, (the) Megillah [that is, Megillat Esther] is called sefer [book] (which implies that it must meet the requirements for a Torah scroll), and it is called iggeret [a letter], (which implies that it need not meet the requirements for a Torah scroll). It is called a book (to teach) that if it is sewn with linen threads it is invalid; yet it is called a letter (to teach) that if he stitched it with only three strands of sinew, it is valid (whereas a Torah scroll must be stitched along the entire connection of adjoining connections, except for a small area at the top and bottom).*

This passage can be more deeply understood if we examine it from both a philological/lexical perspective, and a halakhic/conceptual one, each of which reinforces and sharpen the insights that the other one gives.

I.

Esther 9:32 states:

ומאמר אסתר קים דברי הפרים האלה ונקתב בספר

And Esther's ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a sefer (book or scroll).

On the other hand, Esther 9:26 states:



Rabbi Dr. David Horwitz

Rosh Yeshiva, RIETS

על כן קראו לימים האלה פורים על שם הפור על כן על כל דברי האגרת הזאת ומה ראו על ככה ומה הגיע אליהם. *... In view, then, of all instructions in the said iggeret (letter) and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them.*

Moreover, Esther 9:29 states:

ותכתב אסתר המלכה בת אביחיל ומרדכי היהודי את כל תקרי לקים את אגרת הפרים הזאת השנית.

Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail and Mordecai the Jew wrote a second iggeret (letter) of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one.

Now the word **iggeret** does not exist in Classical Biblical Hebrew, and is termed a Late Biblical Hebrew word.¹ In the Hebrew of the Torah and subsequently of the earlier *sefarim* of *Nakh*, the term **sefer** is used in those cases where, in the Hebrew of the later *sefarim* and in the Rabbinic Hebrew of *Hazal*, **iggeret** would be used. In Classical Biblical Hebrew, **sefer** denoted *both* a book, that is, a formal literary composition on the one hand, and a letter or legal document on the other. Examples of this can be easily seen by comparing *pesukim* regarding royal/official letters in the earlier Biblical books of *Shmuel*

and *Melakhim* on the one hand; e.g., 2 Samuel 11:14, I Kings 21:8, and 2 Kings 10:1 (where the earlier form of **sefer** is used), and the late Biblical book of *Divrei Ha-Yamim*: 2 Chronicles 30:1 on the other (where the later form of **iggeret** is used). For example:

ויהי בבקר, ויכתב דוד ספר אל-יואב; וישלח, ביד אוריה. שמואל ב יא:יד

And it came to pass in the morning, that David wrote a letter (sefer) to Joab, and sent it by the hand of Uriah.

2 Shmuel 11:14

וישלח יחזקיהו על-כל-ישראל ויהודה, וגם-אגרות כתב על-אפרים ומנשה, לבוא לבית-ה', בירושלם--לעשות פסח, לה' א-לקי ישראל. דברי הימים ב ל:א

And Hezekiah sent to all Israel and Judah, and wrote letters also to Ephraim and Manasseh, that they should come to the house of the LORD at Jerusalem, to keep the passover unto the LORD, the God of Israel.

2 Chronicles 30:1

Moreover, various *Targumim* translate examples of the Biblical use of the word **sefer** with the meaning of letter with an Aramaic form of the word **iggeret**. An example of this is *Targum Neophiti* to Deuteronomy

24:2, the Biblical verse dealing with a bill of divorce. The Torah writes **sefer keritut** and *Targum Neophiti* (ad loc.) translates it as **iggra di-shivukin**. But the Aramaic translations of literary compositions such as a book are denoted in the *Targumim* with the term **sifra**. Similarly, in the Rabbinic Hebrew of Hazal, words denoting **letter** are invariably referred to with the term **iggeret**.

Besides the Mishnah in *Masekhet Gittin* (9:3), which also refers to a *get* as **iggeret shivukin**, another interesting example is the *Mekhilta* in *Parashat Yitro*, which records the opinion of R. Joshua that Yitro informed Moshe *by letter* that he was preparing to visit him, and writes, **katav lo be-iggeret**. On the other hand, the term in the Rabbinic Hebrew of Hazal for book is **sefer**.

In light of all this, the language in the Book of Esther, a book that has many other features of Late Biblical Hebrew, is quite striking. Both terms — **sefer** and **iggeret** — are used. Thus, one may, from a lexical point of view, explain the Gemara's question as follows: Which paradigm is Megillat Esther following? Apparently, it cannot be that of Classical Biblical Hebrew, which does not distinguish between **sefer** as denoting a book and **sefer** as denoting a letter, missive, epistle, royal letter, edict, etc., for the Megillah also uses the word **iggeret**, which is the Late Biblical Hebrew term for these items. On the other hand, if it is exclusively following the Late Biblical Hebrew paradigms, why does it use the word **sefer** at all? **Sefer** is no longer used for such items. It is *only* used for a book or literary composition. So, granting the premise that the terms **sefer** and **iggeret** in Megillat Esther are self-referential, that is, they teach us the type of document that the Megillah must be, what type of document is it?

The Gemara's answer then, is quite sophisticated. It tells us that following the pattern of Late Biblical Hebrew, in which **sefer** and **iggeret** denote two distinct entities, the legal status of the Megillah lies *in between* the legal status of the two aforementioned terms. On the one hand, granting that a formal **sefer** must be stitched with animal sinews (*gidin*) and linen stitching (*pishtan*) is unacceptable, linen stitching is also unacceptable for the *Megillah*. On the other hand, since the term **iggeret** for the *Megillah* is also used, Hazal derive that one need not adopt all the rules that are necessarily entailed with the term **sefer**, and one need not stitch the entire connection of adjoining sections. Rather, three strands of animal sinews are sufficient.



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Megillah as an Iggeret

There are a number of laws and practices related to the Megillah's categorization as an iggeret:

- 1) The Gemara, *Megillah* 18b, states that if a Megillah scroll contains errors, it may still be used. Ramban, *Megillah* 17a, notes that although a sefer Torah containing even one error is invalid, a Megillah is valid even if it contains errors because it has the status of *iggeret*.
- 2) When a sefer Torah or other books of Nach are read, the parchment is read in a rolled position like a scroll. The Megillah however, is unrolled completely before it is read and it is folded because it is considered an *iggeret* (*Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim* 690:16).
- 3) When reading a sefer Torah, it is permissible to pause slightly between the verses. However, because the Megillah is considered an *iggeret*, the reader should not pause between the sentences (*Mishna Berurah* 690:52).
- 4) In a sefer Torah, a new section (*parsha*) sometimes starts on a new line (*petucha*) and sometimes starts on the same line with a space between the sections (*setumah*). Because a Megillah is an *iggeret*, all new sections are *setumot* and start on the same line (*Rama, Orach Chaim* 691:2 and *Mishna Berurah* 691:12).
- 5) The Gemara, *Megillah* 19a, states that if one reads from a scroll containing all of Ketuvim (including Megillat Esther), one does not fulfill the mitzvah. Rashi explains that such a scroll would not be considered an *iggeret*.

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II.

The preceding analysis still leaves some gaps in our full understanding of the halakhic parameters of what stitching is required by a **sefer** and what is sufficient to fulfill the requirements of an **iggeret**. Granting Rashi's explanation (*Megillah* 19a, ad loc.) that the point of mentioning **iggeret** is to teach that the Megillah used as a document with which one fulfills his obligation to read Megillat Esther need not have all the stringencies of a **sefer**, can we deduce what the *le-khat'hila* and *be-di-aved* requirements of a **sefer** are, and analogously, what the *le-khat'hila* and *be-di-aved* requirements of an **iggeret** are?

These issues were discussed by R. Chaim Aharon Torchin, *zt"l*, a *talmid* of the Brisker Rav, Maran Ha-Rav Yitzhak Ze'ev Soloveitchik, *zt"l*.² He argued that one should not take the Gemara to mean that the Megillah is a third entity, possessing neither the laws of a **sefer** nor the laws of an **iggeret**. [And certainly, the Gemara does not mean that one *be-di-aved* can fulfill his requirements with the *be-di-aved* definition of **sefer**, without any reference to **iggeret** at all.] Rather, the point of the Gemara must be that the Megillah halakhically contains elements of *both* **sefer** and **iggeret**. But if it is not a third distinct entity, how can that be?

Rav Torchin claimed that the Gemara posits that *be-di-aved*, it should be sufficient for a **sefer** *qua sefer* to possess only three stitching of sinews, for at the end of the day, the Megillah must (also) possess the characteristics of a **sefer**. The point of the Gemara can be understood that *le-khat'hila* every **sefer** needs animal stitching along the entire

connection of adjoining sections. The use of the term **iggeret** teaches us, then, that *vis-a-vis* Megillah, one *le-khat'hila* can adopt the *be-di-aved* law that three stitches are sufficient.

But now one can raise an analogous question regarding **iggeret**. Is it that **iggeret** *le-khat'hila* does *not* need a complete *tefirah* (of linen) at all, and three stiches of linen suffice, or does **iggeret** actually need a complete connection of linen stitches? If the second alternative is correct, the Gemara should have concluded that one indeed has to stitch the entire connection, but three of the stitches must be of animal sinews, and the remainder can be of linen. This way, one fulfills aspects of both **sefer** and **iggeret**! Why wasn't this the conclusion of the Gemara? R. Torchin responds to his own query by suggesting that based upon his previous point, the Gemara assumes a *qal va-homer*. If three stiches of animal sinews are sufficient *be-di-aved* to create a halakhic **sefer**, certainly three stiches would be sufficient *be-di-aved* to create a halakhic **iggeret**. But one can still assume that *le-khat'hila*, an **iggeret** needs complete stitching (of linen) as well. The point of the Gemara by using both terms is to teach us that *vis-a-vis* Megillah, here one may *be-di-aved* employ the *be-di-aved* definition of both terms.

But is there a *le-khat'hila* method of sewing the Megillah that would entail both aspects of **sefer** and of **iggeret**? Rav Torchin proceeds to analyze the Rambam, *Hilkhot Megillah* 2:11. Following the *Biur Ha-Gra* (*Orah Haim*, #691), he understands the Rambam as saying that *halakhah lema'aseh* one must *le-khat'hila* sew the *entire* connection

of adjoining sections. But since the Gemara has taught us that even *le-khat'hila* one does not need to sew the entire connecting sections with animal sinews (since use of the term **iggeret** alongside that of **sefer** in the Megillah teaches us that in *Hilkhot Tefirat HaMegillah*, one *le-khat'hila* may adopt the *be-di-aved* definition of **sefer**), perforce, the *le-khat'hila* method of sewing the remainder of the adjoining sections must be with linen! Moreover, he cites *Hagahot Maimuniyyot* in the name of *Rabbenu Simhah* (*Hilkhot Megillah Perek Bet, Ot Samakh*, a view that is cited in the *Ramoh* to *Orah Haim* 691:6), that it is preferable to sew the remainder of the adjoining sections (besides the three stiches of animal sinews) with linen than to leave that area without being sewn at all. How are we to understand that? Rav Torchin states that this is not just “good advice” but is a consequence of the understanding of the *din le-khat'hila* and *din be-di-aved* that he has been analyzing. Although the entire point of the Gemara *vis-a-vis iggeret* and **sefer** is to establish that one need not adopt the *le-khat'hila* definition of **sefer**, there is still a *le-khat'hila* notion that one *should* adopt the *le-khat'hila* definition of **iggeret** (with the additional stipulation that three stiches must be “**sefer** stiches,” made up of animal sinews, and not “**iggeret** stiches” made up of linen, for in the Megillah one must fulfill aspects of **sefer** as well as aspects of **iggeret**). Finally, R. Torchin admits

that although the classical *meforshim* of a relevant passage in the *Yerushalmi* of *Massekhet Megillah*,³ the *Qorban Ha-Edah*, and the *Penei Moshe*, assume that **iggeret** even *le-khat'hila* does *not* need complete stitching at all (neither of animal sinews or of linen), the words of Rashi to *Megillah* 19a with which we began our discussion, in which he writes that the laws of **iggeret** are *not as strict* as those of **sefer**, can indeed fit with his *hiddush* (i.e., Rashi can agree that *le-khat'hila*, **iggeret** *qua iggeret* would need complete stitching, just not that of animal sinews, but of linen).

The Torah is “vaster than the sea.” Each perspective with which we learn Torah adds to our appreciation its manifold aspects. My we all grow in both our knowledge of and love of the Divine gift that is *Toras Hashem Temimah*.

Notes

1 For the following paragraphs, I am indebted to Avi Hurvitz, *A Concise Lexicon of Late Biblical Hebrew* (Leiden and Boston, 2014), *s.v. Iggeret*, pp. 25-27.

2 Rav Torchin, *zt”l*, was Rosh Yeshiva of the *Yeshiva la-Metzuyyanim* in Jerusalem. This analysis that I cite from can be found in his *sefer* titled *Qunteres Be-Inyan Megillah va-Hanukah* (Jerusalem, 1970, repr. 1992), *Megillah, Siman* 25, #33, pp. 113-14.

3 Talmud *Yerushalmi Megillah* 2:2, p. 73a (p. 759 in the edition published by Yaakov Sussmann).



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