



THE NATURE OF THE MITZVAH TO READ THE MEGILLAH

In his *Shulchan Aruch* (687:2), Rav Yosef Karo teaches a law that reveals the somewhat surprising preeminence of the mitzvah of reading the Megillah:

מבטלים תלמוד תורה לשמוע מקרא מגילה
קל וחומר לשאר מצות של תורה שכולם
נדחים מפני מקרא מגילה שאין לך דבר
שנדחה מקרא מגילה מפניו חוץ ממת מצוה.
The study of Torah is stopped for the purpose of fulfilling the mitzvah of reading Megillas Esther; all the more so, other commandments of the Torah are overridden by the reading of Megillas Esther — with the exception of the burial of the dead.

The Rema, Rav Moshe Isserles, qualifies this ruling and writes:

וכל זה לא מיירי אלא בדאיכא שהות לעשות
שתיהן אבל אם אי אפשר לעשות שתיהן
אין שום מצוה דאורייתא נדחה מפני מקרא
מגילה.



This ruling relates solely to an instance when there is sufficient time to perform both mitzvos. However, if it is impossible to perform both mitzvos, there is no Torah commandment that is pushed off to fulfill the Rabbinic commandment of reading the Megillah.

To summarize, the Rema rules that if there is sufficient time left in the day to perform both *kerias HaMegillah* and a Biblical commandment, the mitzvah of *kerias HaMegillah* should be done first and the Biblical commandment should be done second. However, if

there is not enough time in the day to perform both mitzvos, the Biblical commandment should be done and *kerias HaMegillah*, which is only a Rabbinic commandment, should be set aside.

Since these two rulings appear to lead to inconsistent conclusions, the position of the Rema deserves further scrutiny. The first ruling, that *kerias HaMegillah* should be done **first**, implies that the mitzvah of *kerias HaMegillah* is of higher rank than Torah commandments. However, the second ruling, that a Torah commandment should be the **one** mitzvah performed when there is insufficient time to do both, implies that Torah commandments are of a higher rank than *kerias HaMegillah*. These two implications conflict! Which mitzvah ranks higher: *kerias HaMegillah* or Torah

commandments? Why, when there is sufficient time to perform both the Torah commandment and *kerias HaMegillah*, does the mitzvah of Megillah take precedence, and when only one of the mitzvos can be performed, the Torah commandment take precedence?

Torah commandments are given priority throughout halacha; so the second ruling — that they should be performed over the Rabbinic commandment of *kerias HaMegillah* when only one can be done — requires no defense. The first ruling however, that *kerias HaMegillah* should be performed prior to a Torah commandment, requires explanation.

The key to understanding this inconsistency may lie in a famous *aggadeta* found in *Tractate Shabbos* (88a). Describing events shortly before the giving of the Torah at Sinai, the Torah writes, “. . .and Moshe brought the nation out from the camp to greet G-d and they stood in the underneath of the mountain” (Shemos 19:17). Rav Avdimi explains that G-d held Mount Sinai over the heads of the Jews and told them that if they did not accept the Torah, they would be buried under the mountain. The Gemara continues by noting that this explanation would seem to be a *moda’ah rabbah le’oraysa*, a great protest against the Jews needing to be accountable for the performance of mitzvos, since they only accepted the Torah out of fear and coercion. Rava addresses this challenge and responds that the Jews nevertheless accepted the Torah again in the days of Achashverosh. Rava teaches that in response to the experience of the events of Purim, the Jews renewed their acceptance of the Torah — this second time out of *ahava*, love.

Given the grandeur and magnificence of the revelation of G-d in the deliverance from Egypt — as opposed to the more concealed role that G-d plays in the Purim story — the Jewish People’s passionate acceptance of the Torah during Purim, in comparison to Sinai, calls for explanation.

Commenting on Megillas Esther (9:26), Rashi informs us that the holiday of Purim was adopted as a result of the lessons learned by the Jewish people when they analyzed the main characters of the Purim story. These realizations paved the way for *kiymu vikiblu Hayehudim*, the Jewish People’s renewed acceptance of the Torah from love. The Jews recognized that Achashverosh was a materialistic individual who believed that the greatest good in life was the acquisition of wealth and luxury. His sense of self was tied to riches and fortune, as described when Achashverosh hosts the party of the millennium. During this party, his wife becomes just one more showpiece to be exhibited to the public and admired. When the Jews observed how Achashverosh’s philistinism had corrupted his family values and led him to kill his wife, they saw firsthand the folly of a life centered on material goods, fame, and fortune. At the same time, Haman considered the attainment of power and position to be the good in life. His ego was invested in gaining respect as a powerful leader who must be honored and obeyed. Haman rose to the upper echelons of the government and wielded great influence and power. However, he achieved no contentment on account of just one man, Mordechai the Jew. Witnessing the power of just one man to destroy the state of mind of this tyrant, the Jews saw through the illusion

of human grandeur and power, discovering the inner emptiness of such a life.

On the flip side, the Jews observed Mordechai stand up for his ideals, refusing to bow down to Haman. The *Midrash Aggadas Esther* (3:2) explains that initially the Jews were quite upset with Mordechai, fearing correctly that Mordechai’s disrespect would lead Haman to seek retribution against all of them. Mordechai, the *talmid chacham* and Torah leader, showed the people that the essential principles of Torah cannot be compromised, and are indeed indispensable if life is to have any value. When the Jews saw that Mordechai achieved success and his enemies fell by the wayside, they understood that when Jews stand steadfast and committed to core values and to a Torah life, G-d’s providence assists them and good defeats evil.

In another example, Esther’s courage and shrewdness in discrediting Haman and securing the support of Achashverosh also impacted the Jewish people. Esther astutely does not immediately accuse Haman. By inviting Haman and concealing her motivation, Esther plants seeds of doubt in Achashverosh’s mind, causing him to question Haman’s intentions and loyalty to the king. He begins to worry that perhaps something is going on between Haman and Esther, and starts to wonder if Haman has ulterior motives in arming the populace and seeking the destruction of the man who had saved Achashverosh’s life. When Esther finally exposes Haman, Achashverosh is relieved to learn that Esther is loyal to him, and he is ready to act quickly to execute Haman. Esther’s use of tremendous cunning to bring about Haman’s downfall showed that a person living a life guided by

Torah is quite capable of acting and succeeding in the general culture.

Overt miracles like those that G-d performed when He took the Jews out of Egypt promote *yiras Hashem*, fear of G-d, a sense that we are indebted to Him and have no choice but to keep His mitzvos. *Ahavas Hashem*, love of G-d, comes from appreciating the beauty of Torah and how following its ideals leads to the most fulfilling life. It is only when G-d is in the background — His name not even mentioned in the text — that the superiority of the Torah way of life can become manifest to the people and excite and inspire them to undergo a *kabala me'ahava*, an acceptance of Torah from love.

The notion that the theme of Purim is *kabalas HaTorah meahava* enables us to resolve our question as to why *kerias HaMegillah* is given precedence in the order of performance, even to a Biblical commandment. A mitzvah can be broken into two components: the *chiyuv hamitzvah* — the obligation of the mitzvah — and the *kiyum hamitzvah* — the fulfillment of the mitzvah. In many situations, the obligation and the fulfillment are one and the same. However, sometimes there is a divergence between the two. To illustrate this, if a student receives detention on a Tuesday and spends 15 minutes at a desk in the classroom, the obligation is to do detention, and the fulfillment was doing the detention. However, if a student receives detention on a Friday and serves detention by helping prepare the cholent for kiddush, the obligation is to serve detention, but the fulfillment also includes honoring Shabbos. A similar situation exists regarding the mitzvah of *kerias HaMegillah*. The obligation — the *chiyuv hamitzvah* — is a Rabbinic

obligation of *kerias HaMegillah*. However, the fulfillment — the *kiyum hamitzvah* — is a fulfillment of a Biblical commandment and a primary objective of the entire Torah:

ואהבת את ה' אלקיך בכל לבבך ובכל נפשך
ובכל מאדך.

You shall love your G-d with all your heart and all your soul and all your might.

The rulings of the Rema can now be understood. When we confront a situation in which we can fulfill only one of two mitzvos and one of the obligations will have to go unmet, prioritization is determined by the level of the **obligation** of the *mitzvah*. A Biblical obligation outranks a Rabbinic obligation and the mitzvah of *kerias HaMegillah* is set aside. However, when there is sufficient time for both obligations to be met and the issue is which mitzvah to do first, prioritization is determined by the level of the **fulfillment** of the mitzvah. Since the mitzvah of *kerias HaMegillah*

is a fulfillment of *ahavas Hashem* at the highest level, it is performed before other mitzvos, even those that are Biblical obligations.

In summary, when it comes to determining the order of performance, the *chashivus* — (significance) of the *kiyum hamitzvah* is the determinant, and when only one of two mitzvos can be performed, the relative *madrega* (level) of the *chiyuv hamitzvah* is the determinant.

The notion that individual obligations and tasks participate in a larger framework of greater importance is instructive for those who are involved in the education of our youth. While our individual subjects and classes are of significance and merit attention and respect, we should not lose sight of how they fit into the overarching goal of developing our students into young men and women committed to the love and service of G-d through an allegiance to Torah and mitzvos.



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