

Breaking the Rules Legally

Reading the Scroll of Esther as a

by Reena Zeidman

La lecture annuelle du Livre d'Esther par les femmes juives suscite un débat animé sur la littérature juive consacrée.

It is becoming one of the ways in which Jewish women who care about their tradition, can express themselves.

The Jewish holiday of Purim,¹ celebrated in early March, is characterized by joy, sending gifts, giving money to the poor,

and reading the Book of Esther, known as the *Megillah* (Scroll of Esther). This festive holiday is also accompanied by much soul searching by Jewish feminists. Why are only men reading this scroll when the *Talmud* states explicitly that women have a special place in this holiday?

The Book of Esther describes a female savior who annuls a royal edict that threatens the life of the Jews in ancient Persia. The king, Ahashverosh, a somewhat gullible, if not foolhardy leader, is tossed back and forth between various lobbyists who support or reject the pronouncement. In the end, his Jewish queen, Esther, is able to convince him not to undertake this act. She is guided by her savvy uncle, Mordechai, who also is part of the royal court. Originally opposed to risking her life by challenging the king's decision, Esther was able to overcome her fears of the king's potential reprisals (nothing less than death) and convince the king to reverse the edict. The Jews remember her and her plight by fasting in her name the day before *Purim*, and engaging in other activities that replicate this moment in history.

The Jewish legal literature is occupied by all aspects of the yearly reading of the scroll, but one debate stands out because it relates to women:

women are obligated to hear the reading of the *Megillah*. This obligatory command (*mitzvah*) is an exception in the legal life of the Jewish woman according to the traditional sources, because many commandments release women from their observance because they are considered "time-bound"—that is, the commandments are performed at a certain time in the day or year, which would burden women and potentially force them into transgression.² An example of this is evening prayer, which is defined by a fixed time. These concerns are naturally more pertinent to women with children (the latter, as we know, define their own time) but despite that, the laws were devised as a general principle for all women.

Women have been arranging readings of the *Megillah* for women for many years. In fact, it is becoming one of the pointed ways in which Jewish feminists, or women who care about their tradition in its fullest sense, can express themselves.

Jewish law has dealt with the controversial subject of women reading the *Megillah* for over two thousand years (see Berkovits; Biale; Bloch; and Weiss). One of the earliest documents which raises the issue of women's association with the holiday is recorded in the *Talmud* (edited in the sixth century):

All are obligated regarding the reading of the *Megillah*. All are religiously qualified to read the [Megillah]. What [does all] include? It is meant to include women, in accord with the view of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi; for Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: Women are obliged to read the *Megillah* scroll because they too had a part in that miracle. (Arakhin 2b-3a)

The *Talmud*'s statement "because

they too had a part in that miracle" is its way of defining women's integral role in saving the Jewish people. After all, women were privy to all miracles—the crossing of the Red Sea, the manna from heaven—and yet the phrase "they too ..." does not accompany those miracles. Clearly, the *Talmud* specifies the unique nature of women in this epic moment in light of their special role.³

This talmudic comment is remarked upon by a medieval commentator, Rashi, who grants women optimal participation: "Women are obligated and are religiously 'fit' to read the scroll and can legally read on behalf of men." The rest of the debate in the literature for the next 1,500 years centres upon three issues:

1) Does reading imply "reading" or simply "listening"? That is, is the obligation to read the text independent from the obligation to hear it.

2) Is a quorum of ten men needed for the reading, a *minyan*, which is needed typically for all other types of readings of this nature? Alternatively, are we only required to gather people (any people) to proclaim publicly the miracle?

3) If we agree in the affirmative to the later type of quorum can women be considered part of the *minyan*?

All of these questions have responses that support or reject these claims. The consequences either endorse, or prohibit women's *Megillah* readings. Each decision has its strong and weak aspects, and many are based on a comparison to similar aspects of Jewish life such as women's obligation in grace after the meal. This is not the place to explore all of the debates, but we must recognize that there exists more than one opinion that supports women reading on behalf of both genders. In addition, there is a general principle that is often introduced in situations such as these: "race after the more lenient interpretation." One

Feminist Act

can always see a more difficult, complicated path, but one is obligated, according to some, to take the more lenient path.

Chanting a part of the scroll, drew me directly to a poignant aspect of Jewish history—public, synagogue life.

The Toronto women's *Megillah* reading of 1996, "Esther's Daughters," was fraught initially with a certain amount of trepidation because of the lack of consensus conveyed above. Ultimately, women's overwhelming frustration with attending male-led, noisy, readings⁴ overcame any resistance to the women's *Megillah*. The idea stuck, readers were sought and found. Without waiting for a verdict, women have recognized that the authorities are not going to speak up so readily, and we, as a group must accept the less widely disseminated opinions and push the hands of the decision-makers.

A meeting was arranged, parts were allotted, and the women were sent packing to learn their section. The obstacles in chanting were overcome, and the women read beautifully, clearly, and without any problems. Dancing, eating, and socializing followed the reading. Although this was not the first women's reading of the scroll in this city, it is certainly the first public reading. And I suggest that for that reason alone, it is an important event to mark. Galvanizing the courage to present oneself to the public requires much effort in our times of extremism.

Speaking for myself, chanting a part of the scroll, drew me directly to a poignant aspect of Jewish history—public, synagogue life. The rather simple tune, or really chant, signified by notes above each word in the Scroll, somehow creates a lifeline back to those who read thousands (or even

50) years ago. Antiquity has not yielded any information on women chanting the Scroll of Esther or any other part of the Bible publicly, but we are aware, through the medium of archaeology, that women did possess substantial roles in the life of the synagogue. There are many inscriptions and other material evidence to substantiate these claims. Women acted as heads of synagogues, leaders, elders, "mothers," and priestesses in the Roman period. One inscription which exposes this aspect of ancient Jewish life was found in a diasporic synagogue in Smyrna, Ionia: "Rufina, a Jewess, head of the synagogue" (Brootin 5). Public life was once accorded to women in ways that we can be envious of. I propose that we must celebrate this aspect of our history and claim these stone inscriptions for our own.

The thirteenth-century philosopher and lawyer, Maimonides, considered the Book of Esther a special, unique text. He wrote that when the messianic age dawns, the latter books of the Bible, the Prophets, and the Writings (Psalms, Proverbs, and so on) will no longer survive. But the Book of Esther will endure and be considered one of the five books of Moses (Maimonides 2:18).⁵ Why Esther? He substantiates his claims by employing a verse from the Book of Esther: "These days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants" (Esther 9:28). But Maimonides could have had other reasons for preserving the Book of Esther. He might have recognized that the Scroll's moral is comparable to a carnival, or topsy-turvy world. To draw on the anthropologist Victor Turner, the "time out of time" quality of a carnival allows for things typically discouraged in everyday life.⁶ So too Esther. She was a woman that

should have not been any serious competition for the wicked Haman. She was alone, orphaned, brought into the Persian palace for her beauty,⁷ a woman who wanted little to do with intrigue and risk-taking. However, she defied her provincial background and broke the traditional model of a royal. Ex-Queen Vashti, her predecessor, could not overcome the stereotype and was banished (or killed according to most commentators) for refusing to display herself in front of the King and his drunken banquet-mates. Perhaps Maimonides recognized in Esther, a person, and hence a world, who could transgress boundaries of time and space in a graceful manner. Consequently, her book and her narrative stands as testimony to this victory when all other worldly concerns are obliterated.

Women reading the *Megillah* must recognize that they are acting against this impressive backdrop. They blur the lines of gender distinction by acting like their heroine. They can defy all stereotypes and prejudices if they muster courage like Esther. For this, we must strive.

This article is written in honour of the author's one year old daughter, Sabina, who, Reena hopes will join reading in the future.

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¹The Jewish festival commemorat-

ing the rescue of the Jews by Esther.

²For an expanded explanation of "time-bound" commandments and a balanced approach to the complicated issue, see Berman.

³This view is held by some *talmudic* commentators. *Tosafot to Megillah 4a* cites two positions—one recognizes that Esther saved the Jews, and the other interprets this phrase to mean that the decree had dire consequences for both sexes.

⁴The loud, distracting reading was already identified as a serious problem by the twentieth-century legal commentator, Israel Meir ha-Kohen (known after his book title, *Mishnah Berurah*). He recommended that women arrange for recitations of the Scroll in private homes because the obligation to "hear" the scroll would be transgressed in such a *din* (Laws of *Megillah*, vol. 6, p. 305).

⁵The commentator on the *talmud* known as "Korban Eda" explains that the prophetic books will be not needed because the admonishments will no longer be relevant.

⁶One reference to carnival as "severed from ordinary historical time ... [as] the denizen of a place that is no place, and a time that is not time ..." appears in Turner (74).

⁷Esther is chosen as Queen in a beauty

contest. The second chapter of the Book of Esther describes, with all the opulence that characterizes palatial life, the preparations which included six months of bathing in softening oils.

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