

On Women reading Parshat Zachor

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Question: Can women read *parshat zachor* (Deut. 25:17-19)?

Answer: In our analysis we must first distinguish between several components clearly interrelated to one another.

- (a) Is a woman obligated to *mehiat Amalek* – the erasure of the memory of Amalek?
- (b) Is she obligated to *zechirat Amalek*, memorializing the battle against Amalek?
- (c) And if so, is her obligation of biblical or rabbinic authority?

In answer to question (a), the Rambam, *Hilchot Melachim* 5:5, states clearly that it is a *mitzvat aseh*, a positive commandment, to destroy the memory of Amalek, basing himself on the verse in Deut. 25:19, "thou shalt blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under the heaven."

The Rambam then adds that it is a *mitzvah* always to remember his evil deeds and how he ambushed [the Children of Israel], again basing himself on verse 17 *ibid.*, "Remember what Amalek did unto thee"..., also stating that one may not forget his enmity and hatred, no doubt echoing the end of verse 19, "thou shalt not forget". (See also *Sefer ha-Mitzvot la-Rambam* no.189.) Rambam does not make any distinction in this regard between men and women. We should, however, point out that the *mitzvah* to destroy Amalek is not relevant today, and will not be until the coming of the Messiah, (*Hagahot Maimoniyot ad loc.*).

However, *Sefer ha-Hinuch* no.603, writes:

This *mitzvah* applies in all places and at all times... [but] the revenge against the enemy is not for women. (See B. Kiddushin 2b; It is the way of men to do battle and it is not the way of women to do battle...)

According to this women are not obligated by the *mitzvah* of remembering Amalek, since they are not "warlike" (בנות מלחמה). So writes R. Yehudah Najar, in his *Limudei ha-Shem*, Livorno 1787, p.144, and a number of *Aharonim* followed accepted this view. And so too writes R. Schneur Zalman Ashkenazi, in his *Torat Hessed*, (Warsaw 1889) *Orah Hayyim* 37:

Women are in no way obligated to hear *Parshat Zachor* in a *sefer Torah*. And we have never seen or heard of anyone who obligated women to come to the synagogue on *Shabbat Zachor* to hear the reading of *Parshat Zachor*... And the custom of Israel is Law (מנהג ישראל תורה). And even though there is a rumour that a certain great authority would obligate women to come,... his is a solitary opinion, and one cannot learn from him to annul the established customs of Israel.

Ashkenazi was here following the view of the *Hinuch*, that women are not obligated to these *mitzvot*.

However, the *Minhat Hinuch* (on the *Hinuch* ad loc.), raises a serious question against the *Hinuch*'s reasoning, since the war against Amalek is a *milchemet mitzvah*, in which even a groom straight from his *huppah*, and a bride from her *huppah*, are obligated to participate. Clearly then the Amalek-related *mitzvot* devolve upon a woman too. And doubtless this was the position of that "certain great authority" who obligated women to come to the synagogue to hear *Parshat Zachor*, and we know that he was R. Nathan Adler, the great teacher of the *Hatam Sofer*. Consequently, *Maharil* Diskin, in *Kuntres Aharon* sect.102, writes:

Since this is not a time-related *mitzvah* – though the reading was instituted close to Purim in order to link Amalek with Haman – women should be obligated. We have seen that R. Nathan Adler was of this view, (see *Shut Binyan Tziyon ha-Hadashot* sect.8), and this was the view of the Gaon of Kutna, R. Yisrael Yehoshua Trunk, in his *Yeshuat Molcho* sect.50; and so too R. Hayyim Eliezer Shapiro, Muncasz, in his *Minhat Yitzhak* vol.1, sect.1, and *Divrei Hayyim ve-Shalom* 838.

Thus, we see that there were many authorities who rejected the positions of the *Hinuch* and Ashkenazi, and obligated women to hear *Parshat Zachor*. And since the Rambam made no distinction between men and women in the Amalek-related *mitzvot*, and the *Minhat Hinuch* demonstrated conclusively that since *milchemet Amalek* is a *milchemet mitzvah*, women were obligated to take part in it. All these various elements lead conclusively to women's obligation being *equal* to that of men to hear *Parshat Zachor*. Hence, they should also be able to read the *Parshah* for men as well as women.

The Rambam *ibid.* also wrote that we have heard that this "remembering" must be verbally articulated – זכור בפה.

To the above we may now add the following consideration, namely that while the regular reading of the Torah is only of rabbinic status (by the ordination of Moses, *mi-Takkanot Mosheh*, B. Baba Kama 82a, Rambam, *Hilchot Tefillah* 12:1), *Parshat Zachor* is of biblical status (*Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayyim* 146:1, based on *Tosafot* to *Berachot* 13a, etc.). And, hence, the *Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayyim* 685:7, wrote that since *Parshat Zachor* is *mi-deOraita*, it has to be heard in a *minyán*:

Therefore the villagers who have no *minyán* have to come to a place where there is a *minyán* on [that Shabbat] in order to hear the *parshiot de-Oraita*.

This means that the obligation is upon each and everyone individually to carry out this *mitzvah*, and, therefore, if there is no *minyán* one cannot fulfil the *mitzvah*, which is not the case for other regular readings.

Consequently, the *Minhat Eliezer*, (vol.2, sect.1) is of the opinion that each member of the congregation must recite it verbally with the *sheliah tzibbur*.

This view was not accepted by the *Pri Hadash* (sect. 67:1, *Netziv* in *Shut Meshiv Davar Orah Hayyim* 47) since there is a principle of *shomeah ke-oneh*, one who hears it is as though he has verbally replied, (*B. Sotah* 38b, *Y. Megillah* 2 ad init.). Isserlein, (in *Leket Yosher* 153) insists that the congregation listen to the reader's reading and not read from the printed *Humash* with the reader, for he has to listen – as it were, read himself – only from a Torah scroll (see *Megillah* 18a).

From all the above we may conclude that a woman may be called up for *Parshat Zachor* – indeed, the Sefardim permit a minor to be called up, (see *Orah Hayyim* 284:4) – and she may also read the *parshah* for the whole congregation, since her obligation is no less than that of a man, meaning that men can carry out the *mitzvah* by hearing her reading.

See further R. Zvi Pesach Frank, *Mikraei Kodesh: Purim*, 2nd edition, Jerusalem 1976, pp.69-70, and the notes of his grandson R. Yosef Cohen, no.1 *ibid.*, who writes that according to the *Bah*, (*Bayit Hadash*), the obligation is to *hear* and not to *say*, hence one can fulfill the obligation even by hearing from one who is not obligated, while the *Maharshal* is of the opinion that each individual has to *say* the *parshah*, but he can fulfill the obligation by hearing – as though they were saying (*shomea ki-oneh*), from one who is obligated. Either way, in my opinion, a woman can receive the *aliah* and read for the congregation.

Can Women Read Parshat Shekalim?

A similar question can be raised concerning *Parshat Shekalim*. It is generally accepted that this reading was instituted by the Rabbis, and is therefore a *mitzvah de-Rabbanan*. The author of *Hoshen Shlomoh*, R. Shlomoh ha-Cohen, to Y. Shekalim 2b, and in his *Binyan Shlomoh*, Vilna 1889, sect.54, asks the question as to whether this reading was instituted after the destruction of the Second Temple – for he is of the opinion that during Temple times this reading was not instituted – in order, as it were, to take the place of the actual *giving* of the "half-shekel", *mahtzit ha-shekel*, or was it a *memorial* of the announcement that used to take place in Temple Times to remind people to bring their half-shekels, (see M. Shekalim 1:1). If the former, only those who were obligated to give the half-shekel during Temple times should be obligated to hear/read this *Parshah*. (See *Hagahot Harerei Kodesh* by R. Yosef Cohen, to *Mikraei Kodesh* by R. Zvi Pesach Frank, his grandfather, vol. on *Purim*, 2nd ed., Jerusalem 1976, p.70.)

The obligation to bring the half-shekel to the Temple devolved only upon men (Exodus 30:13), and actually only from the age of 20 onwards, although if they started to give earlier they remained obliged to do so (M. Shekalim 1:3). However, women were not obligated to this *mitzvah* (Shekalim *ibid.*). It would, then, appear that women are not obligated to reading/hearing *Parshat Shekalim* if it is in remembrance of the actual *giving*. But if it is in remembrance of the *announcing* of *Shekalim*, then women too can be the announcers, and hence should be able to read this portion. This is the conclusion in *Harerei Kodesh* *ibid.* p.70, in accordance with the views of the *Maharshal* and the *Taz*, and so too *Rashi*, *Meiri* and other *Rishonim*, namely that the *mitzvah* of *parshat Shekalim* served as an *announcement*. (See however, *ibid.* p.76 note 3, that the *Levush*, followed by the *Mishnah Berurah*, is of the opinion that it is in remembrance of the giving.) As to getting this *aliah*, even if it is in memory of the *giving*, the congregation will hear the male reader's rendering, and can carry out the rabbinic obligation through hearing that reading.

To conclude, since this is a matter of uncertainty, I would recommend that the reading be done by a man, but the *aliah* could be that of a woman. (And compare *Rema*, *Shulhan Aruch Orah Hayyim* 282:4, *Mishnah Berurah* *ibid* note 23.)