

Can a woman fulfil a man's obligation to read the megillah?

The starting point is that one person can only fulfil another's personal obligation if they are at least equally obligated in the mitzvah.

The Talmud declares that men and women have an equal obligation to read the megillah just as they have equal obligations to celebrate Shabbat, to participate in the Seder and to light Chanukah lights.

'Rabbi Yehoshua Ben Levi stated that women are obligated in the reading of the megillah because they were also involved in the miracle.' (Megilla 4a)

On this basis Rashi and Rambam rule that men can fulfil their obligation through the reading of women.

'All are kosher to read the megillah. Whom does the word "all" include? It includes women.' (Erechin 2b/3a, quoting Mishnah Megillah 2:4)

'The word "all" comes to include women, who are obligated in the reading of the Megillah and who are kosher to read for men and to discharge their obligation.' (Rashi on Erechin 3a)

'All are obliged to read it: men, women, converts and freed slaves. . . . One who reads and one who hears the reading have both fulfilled their obligation, provided that they hear it being read by someone who falls under the obligation. Therefore, someone who hears the megillah read by a child or by someone who is mentally deficient (lacks the mental capacity to be obligated in mitzvot) has not fulfilled his or her obligations.' (Rambam Hilchot Megilla 1:1-2)

The Shulchan Aruch confirms that all are obligated to read the megillah: men and women. (Orach Chayim 689:1)

There is a view held by some Rishonim, based on the Gaonic work Halachot Gedolot and cited in Tosafot on Erechin 3a, that listening is different from reading, and that while women are obligated to listen they are not obligated to read. This would mean that women would be unable to read for men. The Shulchan Aruch cites this as a minority view:

'If a deaf mute, or a minor, or a mentally-deficient person reads, someone who listens from this person does not fulfil his obligation. There are those that say that women cannot discharge the obligation of men.' (Orach Chayim 689:2)

We posed the question to Rabbi Daniel Sperber, the posek for our community. Rabbi Sperber ruled that women can certainly read for men.

Glossary

Gaonim= Rabbinic authorities in Babylon soon after the Talmud was written

Rishonim = Rabbinic authorities who live after the Talmud but pre-date the Shulchan Aruch (including Rashi, Rambam and Tosafot)

Shulchan Aruch = preeminent code of Jewish law. Compiled by R. Joseph Karo (Spain and Israel 1488-1575)

Posek = Rabbi who gives halachic rulings