

Educational Comments During Megillah Reading

By Rabbi Zachary Truboff

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The megillah is one of the most fascinating stories in all of the Tanakh, and many steps are taken to make the reading as engaging as possible. We make noise when we hear Haman's name being sounded. Certain verses are to be recited by the congregation and then repeated by the reader. And some readers will even go out of their way to recite the lines of different characters of the megillah in different voices. All that being said, for some congregations where many present do not understand the megillah, there may also be a value in the rabbi adding educational comments. Is such a thing permitted or is it considered a *hefsek* (interruption) that would require one to hear the megillah from the beginning?

Though debated in the Mishnah (Megillah 2:3), the halacha follows the position of R' Meir that one must read or listen to the entire megillah in order to fulfill the mitzvah properly. Not one word can be omitted, or one has failed to discharge their obligation. Because of this, those who read megillah are often very careful to ensure each word is recited clearly so that all can hear. Many megillah readers even make a point of repeating Haman's name after the congregation has made noise, just in case it wasn't heard the first time properly.

The question of whether a *hefsek* invalidates the reading of megillah is not directly addressed by the Mishnah, but it does state (Megillah 2:2) that "If one reads the megillah *b'serugin*, they have fulfilled their obligation." The gemara is uncertain as to what *serugin* means and brings the following story to clarify the term.

The Sages did not know what was meant by the word *seirugin*. One day they heard the maidservant in Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's house saying to the Sages who were entering the house intermittently rather than in a single group: How long are you going to enter *serugin serugin*? (Megillah 18a)

From this, the rabbis learned that *serugin* means "at intervals" and the gemara concludes that if one reads the megillah, with pauses along the way, they still fulfill their obligation. The Shulchan Aruch (690:5) rules this way as well. Yet, if pauses are permitted during the reading of megillah, what about verbal interruptions, which are potentially more problematic?

A teshuvah of the Rashba (1:244) deals with this exact question. He was asked what should be done in a case where the reader made the blessing before the megillah and started to read but then stopped and left when they heard the sound of a scuffle outside. When they return, would they be obligated to read the megillah from the beginning or should they just continue where they left off? Rashba concludes that speaking after the beracha but before beginning the megillah would undoubtedly be a *hefsek*. However, once one has begun reading, the only concern is that the reader's concentration may be disrupted if they were to speak on matters unrelated to the megillah, which could cause them to lose their proper intention for the mitzvah. Even so, Rashba concludes it would still not be a *hefsek* if the megillah reader spoke about unrelated matters, and the Rema (690:5) follows his opinion. Yet, Mishnah Berurah (Shaar Tziyun 690:18) cautions that pausing during the megillah would not be a *hefsek* but only *bedieved*. Ideally, one should not read in this fashion.

Would speaking during the megillah reading about the megillah itself be different? The Mishnah (Megillah 2:2) appears to address this question. It states that "If one was writing a Megilla, or expounding upon it, or correcting it, if he had intent, he has fulfilled his obligation." According to this when one reads the megillah, they are permitted to expound upon it, and this would seem to imply one could speak without it being considered a halachic interruption. The Yerushalmi (Megillah 2:2) builds on this and says that one can expound upon the megillah as long as one doesn't do so in such a way that they direct their attention to unrelated matters. The Rosh (Megillah 2:1) cites this Yerushalmi and concludes that as long as one expounds upon the matters of the megillah it would not be considered a *hefsek*, and the Shulchan Aruch (690:13) rules accordingly. Mishnah Berurah (Shaarei Tziyun 690:43) affirms this and states that even though it wouldn't be permitted to do something similar during Torah reading, megillah is unique because one is doing so to publicize the miracle (*pirsumei nisa*). The Mishnah Berurah (690:19) does add the caveat that this primarily applies to the one reading megillah, but the listener should be careful not to speak, lest they miss even one word of the megillah and fail to fulfill their obligation.

From this, we can conclude that educational comments are permitted, especially if they are done between the various chapters of the megillah. While this may not be appropriate for every community, those who might benefit from it should not see it as halachically inappropriate. If it is to be done, it is a good idea to tell all those listening to the megillah that they should not speak while it is read and must be careful to hear every word.

Rabbi Zachary Truboff ('10) is the Director of Rabbinic Education for the International Beit Din and the author of "Torah Goes Forth From Zion: Essays on the Thought of Rav Kook and Rav Shagar". Before making aliyah, he served for nearly a decade as the rabbi of Cedar Sinai Synagogue in Cleveland, Ohio. Currently, he lives in Jerusalem with his wife Jen and their four children.