

How Early May One Read the Megillah?

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1. Mishnah Megillah 1:1 (Mishnah Yomit translation)

מגילה נקראת באחד עשר, בשנים עשר, בשלשה עשר, בארבעה עשר, בחמשה עשר, לא פחות ולא יותר. כרפין המקפין חומה מימות יהושע בן נון, קורין בחמשה עשר. כפרים ועירות גדולות, קורין בארבעה עשר, אלא שהכפרים מקדימין ליום הכניסה:

The Megillah is read on the eleventh, the twelfth, the thirteenth, the fourteenth, and the fifteenth [of Adar], never earlier and never later. Cities which have been walled since the days of Joshua ben Nun read on the fifteenth; villages and large towns read on the fourteenth, Except that villages move the reading up to the day of gathering.

2. Talmud Bavli Megillah 2a (Davidson Edition translation)

מגילה נקראת בי"א מגלן מגלן כדבעינן למימר לקמן חכמים הקילו על הכפרים להיות מקדימין ליום הכניסה כדי שיספקו מים ומזון לאחיהם שבכרכים אגן הכי קאמרינן מכדי כולהו אנשי כנה"ג תקנינהו דאי ס"ד אנשי כנה"ג י"ד וט"ו תקון אתו רבנן ועקרי תקנתא דתקינן אנשי כנה"ג והתנן אין ב"ד יכול לבטל דברי ב"ד חבירו אא"כ גדול ממנו בחכמה ובמנין אלא פשיטא כולהו אנשי כנה"ג תקינו היכא רמיזא אמר רב שמן בר אבא א"ר יוחנן אמר קרא (אסתר ט, לא) לקיים את ימי הפורים האלה בזמניהם זמנים הרבה תקנו להם

GEMARA: We learned in the mishna: The Megilla is read on the eleventh of Adar. The Gemara asks: From where do we derive this halakha? The Gemara expresses surprise at the question: What room is there to ask: From where do we derive this halakha? The reason is as we intend to say further on: The Sages were lenient with the villages and allowed them to advance their reading of the Megilla to the day of assembly, so that they would be free to supply water and food to their brethren in the cities on the day of Purim. Accordingly, the Megilla is read on the eleventh due to a rabbinic enactment. The Gemara explains: This is what we said, i.e., this is what we meant when we asked the question: Now, all of these days when the Megilla may be read were enacted by the members of the Great Assembly when they established the holiday of Purim itself. As, if it enters your mind to say that the members of the Great Assembly enacted only the fourteenth and fifteenth as days for reading the Megilla, is it possible that the later Sages came and uprooted an ordinance that was enacted by the members of the Great Assembly? Didn't we learn in a mishna (Eduyyot 1:5) that a rabbinical court cannot rescind the statements of another rabbinical court, unless it is superior to it in wisdom and in number? No subsequent court was ever greater than the members of the Great Assembly, so it would be impossible for another court to rescind the enactments of the members of the Great Assembly. Rather, it is obvious that all these days were enacted by the members of the Great Assembly, and the question is: Where is the allusion to this in the Bible? The Megilla itself, which was approved by the members of the Great Assembly, mentions only the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar. Rav Shemen bar Abba said that Rabbi Yohanan said: It is alluded to when the verse states: "To confirm these days of Purim in their times" (Esther 9:31). The phrase "in their times" indicates that they enacted many times for them and not only two days.

3. Mishnah Megillah 1:3 (Mishnah Yomit translation)

אמר רבי יהודה, אימתי, מקום שנגנסינן בשני ובחמישי. אבל מקום שאין נגנסינן לא בשני ולא בחמישי, אין קורין אותה אלא בזמנה: Rabbi Judah said: When is this so? In a place where people gather on Mondays and Thursdays, but in places where people do not gather on Mondays and Thursdays, the Megillah is read only on its proper day.

4. Rambam Hilchot Megillah 1:9 (Nataf/Sefaria translation)

במה דברים אמורים שמקדימין וקוראין ביום הכניסה בזמן שיש להם לישראל מלכות. אבל בזמן הזה אין קוראין אותה אלא בזמנה שהוא יום י"ד ליום ט"ו. בני הכפרים ובני עירות קוראין ב"ד. ובני כרפין קוראין ב"ט"ו:

To what are these words applicable - that we preempt and read on the day of the assembly? At the time that Israel has a monarchy (ruled over themselves). But at this time, we may only read it in its time, which is the Fourteenth and the Fifteenth: The residents of the villages and the cities read on the Fourteenth and the residents of the [walled cities] read on the Fifteenth.

5. Talmud Yerushalmi Megillah 1:1

תני בשם רבי נתן כל החדש כשר לקריאת המגילה מה טעמא והחדש אשר נהפך להם מיגון לשמחה וגו' א"ר חלבו ובלבד עד חמשה עשר
It was taught in the name of Rabbi Natan: The entire month is kosher for reading the Megillah. What is the reason?
[Since the verse says] "And the month which was turned for them from anguish to happiness..." And Rabbi
Chelbo said: and it may only be read until the 15th of Adar.

6. Masechet Soferim 14:18

ונהגו העם לומר כן לאומרה במוצאי שבתות של אדר עד שיעברו חמשה עשר באדר ומקרי היכי קרי בשבת ראשונה של אדר קורין העם
ביחד עד בלילה ההוא ובמוצאי שבת שניה קורין מבלילה ההוא עד ודובר שלום לכל זרעו:

The people had the custom to say it on the Motza'ei Shabbatot in Adar until the 15th of Adar passed. How would they read it? On the first [Motza'ei] Shabbat of Adar, the people would read together until "Balaila Hahu", and on the second Motza'ei Shabbat, they would read from "Balaila Hahu" until "Vedover Shalom Lechol Zar'o".

7. Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 688:7

המפרש בים והיוצא בשיירא ואינו מוצא מגילה להוליך עמו יקראנה בשלשה עשר או בשנים עשר או באחד עשר בלא ברכה ואם אי אפשר
להמתין עד ימים הללו י"א שקורא אפי' מתחלת החדש: הגה והכי נהוג ומיהו אם נודמן לו אח"כ מגילה חוזר וקורא אותה ביום י"ד אפי' קרא
תחלה ביום י"ג מ"מ קרא אותה שלא בזמנה: [כל בו ב"י]:

One who is sailing at sea or leaving in a caravan and cannot find a Megillah to bring with them should read it on the 13th, 12th or 11th without a Beracha. If it is impossible to wait until these days, some say that one may read even from the beginning of the month. Rema: And this is the custom. However, if a Megillah became available afterwards, they should reread it on the 14th. Even if they previously read it on the 13th, nevertheless, it was still read outside of its correct time.

8. Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 688:18

...שזהו רק לזכור בעלמא ויש מי שאומר דצריך עשרה כדין שלא בזמנה דצריך עשרה [מג"א סקי"ג] ולא אבין כיון שהיא בלא ברכה אינה
אלא כלימוד בעלמא והרי אינה מתקנת חכמים כלל ולכן י"א דאם א"א לו להמתין עד ימים הללו יכול לקרא אפילו מר"ח לזכרון בעלמא
מיהו אם מזדמן לו אח"כ מגילה ביום י"ד חוזר וקורא אותה בברכה דהקריאה שעברה לאו כלום היא וכמ"ש...

...As it is only as a simple remembrance. One opinion says that one needs a minyan, in accordance with the ruling that "Megillah not at its time requires 10" [Magen Avraham note 13], and I don't understand, since it is being read without a Beracha, it is only like learning it, and it is not from the Rabbis' decree at all, and therefore, there are those who say that if one cannot wait until these days, they can read even from Rosh Chodesh as a simple remembrance! However, if a Megillah became available to them afterwards on the 14th day, one rereads it with a blessing, as the reading that passed was not considered anything, as we wrote...

9. Mishnah Berurah Orach Chaim 688:23

אם טעו וקראו הפרשיות והמגילה באדר ראשון צריך לחזור ולקרות בשני:
If they accidentally read the Parshiyot and Megillah during the first Adar, they need to reread it in the second Adar.

10. Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 692:4

מי שהוא אנוס קצת ואינו יכול לילך לב"ה וצריך להמתין עד אחר שקראו הקהל, וקשה עליו לישב בתענית כ"כ, יכול לשמוע קריאתה
מבע"י מפלג המנחה ולמעלה.

If someone is in a situation of "slight Ones" and is unable to go to the synagogue, and would need to wait until after the community hears megillah, and it is hard for them to remain fasting for so long, they may hear the reading during the day, from Plag Hamincha and on.

11. Mishnah Berurah Orach Chaim 692:13-14

דהוא שעה ורביע קודם הלילה והטעם דכיון דחשבינן ליה לילה לענין תפילת ערבית שיכול להתפלל בזמן ההוא חשבינן ליה לילה גם לענין
הזה... וכתב הפ"מ ג' דלפי דעת הפר"ח אפילו בין השמשות אין לקרות ובדיעבד אם קרא בבין השמשות ג"כ מסתפק שם אם לא באונס והכרח

גדול יש לצדד להקל. וכתב בח"א דאפילו קרא מקצתה קודם צאת הכוכבים לא יצא וצריך לחזור ולקרוא ובלי ברכה. ועיין בשע"ת בשם הברכי יוסף ובביאור הלכה דמ"מ המיקל לחולה ולילודת למהר קריאתן מבעוד יום קצת יש לו על מי לסמוך:
...Which is 1 and ¼ hours before nighttime, and the reason is, since we consider it nighttime in regards to the Arvit prayer, which one may pray at that time, we also consider it night for this matter... and the Peri Megadim wrote that according to the opinion of the Peri Chadash, one should not even read Bein Hashmashot, and if one already read during Bein Hashmashot, he is unsure there, unless in a case of "Ones" and great pressure, where one can be lenient. And the Chayei Adam wrote that even if he read part of it before sunset, he has not fulfilled his obligation, and he needs to reread it without a blessing. See Sha'arei Teshuvah in the name of Birkei Yosef and in the Beur Halacha, that nevertheless, one who is lenient for an ill or birthing woman to read for them while it is still day somewhat, has what to rely on.

12. Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 692:8

ודימו זה לתפלת ערבית דחשבינן לילה מפלג המנחה אבל הוא תמוה דמה עניין זל"ז דהתם תלוי בקרבנות אבל הכא דקריאת הלילה למידין מן ולילה ולא דומיה לי פשיטא דעד צאת הכוכבים לא הוי לילה [פר"ח] ובוודאי תמוה הוא לבד זה דהא עדיין אינו יום י"ד [וגם הגר"א סק"י הסכים להפר"ח] ומימינו לא שמענו מי שיעשה כן.

And they compared this to the Arvit prayer, that we consider it night from Plag Hamincha and on, but it is bewildering, as how can they be compared to each other, as there it depends on sacrifices, but here, where the reading of the night is learned from "Velaila Velo Dumiya Li", it is obvious that until Tzeit Hakochavim it is not night [Peri Chadash]. And it is certainly bewildering other than this, as it is still not the 14th [of Adar] [and the Gra in note 10 agreed to Peri Chadash], and in our days we have never heard of someone doing this.

13. Aruch Hashulchan Orach Chaim 687:4

...ומיהו פשיטא דזריזין מקדימין למצות ויקרא בתחלת הלילה ודווקא לאחר צאת הכוכבים ואם קראה בין השמשות נ"ל דיצא בדיעבד דספיקא דרבנן לקולא וא"צ לחזור ולקרא פעם אחרת...

...However, it is obvious that "Zerizin Makdimin Lemitzvot" and one should read at the beginning of the night, and specifically after Tzeit Hakochavim. If one read it during Bein Hashmashot, it seems to me that they have fulfilled their obligation Bedieved, since we say that one should be lenient about a doubt about a Rabbinical law, and one would not need to reread it again...

14. Sha'arei Teshuvah Orach Chaim 692:7

...ובבר"י הביא בשם המאירי גבי זמן בני הכפרים שכ' ומכאן סמכו גדולי המפורשים לחולות ויולדות שאין צריכים כ"כ להעריב ורשאין למהר קריאתן מבע"י ואף שהוא עדיין בתחום י"ג עכ"ל:

...And in the Birkei Yosef he brought in the name of the Me'iri about the time of the villagers, that he wrote "and from here Gedolei Hamefarshim [Ra'avad] relied that birthing and ill women do not need to wait until night, and they may accelerate their reading while it is still day, even though it is still within the boundaries of the 13th..."

15. Magen Avraham Orach Chaim 692:6-7

מפלג המנח". נ"ל דאפי' בשבת מותר לעשות כן כשיש לו איזה אונס כמ"ש סי' רצ"ג אך יש לאסור דאין קורין המגיל' בשבת: מפלג המנח'. אחר שיתפלל ערבית אבל אין נ"ל להתיר לטעום...

From Plag Hamincha – it seems to me that even on Shabbat it would be permitted to do so, when there is some sort of Ones, as we wrote in Siman 293, however, we should prohibit it, since we do not read the Megillah on Shabbat. From Plag Hamincha – after he prays Arvit. But it does not seem appropriate to me to permit tasting...

16. Beur Halacha to Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 692:4

...ואפשר במקום שהדחק גדול אף בצבור יש להקל לקרות אף שאין עדיין לילה גמורה:

...And it is possible that in a [circumstance] where the pressure is great, even for a public reading [i.e. a minyan], one can be lenient to read even if it is not completely night.

17. Reading the Megilla Before Sundown, Harav Yehuda Amital (Kwass translation)

Question from a soldier:

It is very likely that, as soldiers, we will not have the opportunity to read the megilla after nightfall; sometimes our maneuvers or patrols are scheduled for night-time, leaving us unable to read the megilla at its normal time, after "tzeit ha-kokhavim" (when three medium-sized stars are visible in the night sky). Can we read it earlier, as long as it is done after "pelag ha-mincha" (an hour and a quarter before sunset)? If so, can it be read at that time with its berakhot?

Answer:

The answer to our question is dependent on several issues:

1. Does night begin at "pelag ha-mincha" (one-and-a-quarter hours before sunset) or only at "tzeit ha-kokhavim" (when three medium size stars are visible in the sky)?
2. Even if night can be seen as beginning at pelag ha-mincha in some areas of Halakha, would this be true for the megilla reading?
3. Even if night begins at tzeit ha-kokhavim, could the megilla still be read as early as pelag ha-mincha?

The Talmud (Berakhot 26 and 27) understands that the dispute of Rabbi Yehuda and the Sages regarding the time period of the afternoon service (until pelag ha-mincha or until dark) also applies to when the evening service can begin. The gemara rules that one can choose to follow either the Sages or Rabbi Yehuda ("De-avad ke-mar avad, u-de'avad ke-mar avad"). Night-time prayer can, at least according to Rabbi Yehuda, begin at pelag ha-mincha.

The Tosafot on the first page of Berakhot, trying to justify the Ashkenazic custom of reciting the Shema before tzeit ha-kokhavim, apply Rabbi Yehuda's position to Shema. The night-time Keriat Shema can also begin at pelag ha-mincha. If both the night-time Keriat Shema and Ma'ariv can begin at pelag ha-mincha, might not the same apply to the megilla reading?

The Terumat Ha-deshen (109) asks if one can read the megilla before dark if, after fasting all of Ta'anit Esther, he felt he could not hold out until the end of the megilla reading without eating. Applying the Tosafists' position about Shema to the megilla reading, he rules that reading early is preferable to eating before reading. Because he assumes that the time span for saying the night-time Shema is determined by when night begins (and not the more local criterion of "when people go to sleep" - "u-veshokhbekha"), he can apply this definition of night to the megilla reading. In other words, if pelag ha-mincha can mark the commencement of night for Shema, it can do so for megilla as well...

Afterwards I came across the comments of the Netziv in his Ha'amek She'eila on the She'iltot (Vayakhel 67:13) who at great length supports the position of the Terumat Ha-deshen. He proves that the megilla can be read from pelag ha-mincha and one need not wait until tzeit ha-kokhavim.

One issue still stands in the way of putting the Terumat Ha-deshen's position into practice. The Gra (reinforced by the Bi'ur Halakha) qualifies the Terumat Ha-deshen's position and states that only those who normally follow Rabbi Yehuda's position (that night begins at pelag ha-mincha) and who always pray Mincha before that time, can follow it and read megilla from pelag ha-mincha and on. Otherwise the person's practice is inconsistent ("tarti de-satri"). It is therefore questionable whether we, who do not always make sure to pray Mincha before pelag ha-mincha, can rely on this leniency.

One can speak of several levels of consistency, though. We might require that a person consistently follow Rabbi Yehuda throughout his whole life. However, we might only require that on the same day one does not pray both a late Mincha and an early Ma'ariv. In a discussion of early Ma'ariv on Shabbat evening, the Mishna Berura (OC 267:2) rules leniently, only requiring that on that particular day a person not act inconsistently. We could therefore permit soldiers to read megilla early, even if they do not always pray Mincha before pelag ha-mincha. This is certainly a classic "time of great need" ("she'at ha-dechak") for soldiers who will be occupied with security matters during the night hours.

If there is no possibility of reading the megilla at night, it can be read along with its berakhot as early as pelag ha-mincha. One should make sure on that day to pray Mincha earlier than pelag ha-mincha to avoid inconsistency.