**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**Deracheha: Women and Mitzvot**

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Mrs. Miriam Wise, Miriam bat Yitzhak veRivkah, 9 Tevet.

Yehi Zikhra Barukh

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Torah Reading (1)

How did *keri'at ha-Torah* develop? What is the nature of the obligation? Are women obligated to hear *keri'at ha-Torah*? What would be the implications for women reading the Torah?

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# Beginnings

The Torah commands the Jewish people to gather at the end of each Sabbatical year to hear the king read from the Torah. This assembly is known as *hakhel*:

*Devarim* 30:10-13

And Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of seven years, on the occasion of the Sabbatical year, on the festival of Sukkot. When all of Israel comes to be seen before the face of the Lord your God, in the place that He will choose, you will read this Torah before all of Israel in their ears. Assemble the people: the men and the women and the children, and your stranger who is in your gates, that they will hear and that they will learn, and they will fear the Lord your God, and they will take care to perform all the words of this Torah.

Once every seven years, *hakhel* provides an opportunity to echo Sinai: to hear the words of the Torah as part of a powerful experience amidst the entirety of the Jewish people, and to learn from that Torah.

The institution of ritual public Torah reading, *keri'at ha-Torah*, on a more regular basis is not commanded in the Torah. However, the practice goes back even farther than the first *hakhel*, to an enactment of Moshe Rabbeinu:

Yerushalmi *Megilla* 4:1

Moshe enacted that Israel should read the Torah on *Shabbatot*, on *Yamim Tovim*, on *Rashei Chodashim*, and on *Chol Ha-mo'ed,* for it is written "And Moshe declared God's appointed times to the children of Israel" [*Vayikra* 23:44].

According to the mishna, part of Moshe's enactment was to designate the portions for each Rosh Chodesh, specialShabbat, and holiday that highlight the day's significance.[[1]](#footnote-1) The Talmud adds that the initial enactment of *keri'at ha-Torah* included regular *Shabbatot*, Mondays, and Thursdays, ensuring that the Jewish people would not go three full days without the essential spiritual nourishment of Torah:[[2]](#footnote-2)

*Bava Kama* 82a

For it was taught in a baraita: "And they walked for three days in the wilderness and did not find water." The expounders of verses said: "water" is only Torah, as it is written, "Lo, all who thirst, go to the water" [*Yeshayahu* 55:1]. Since they walked for three days without Torah, they became exhausted. The prophets among them stood up and enacted for them that they read on Shabbat, pause on Sunday, read on Monday, pause on Tuesday and Wednesday, read on Thursday and pause on Erev Shabbat [Friday], so that they not rest three days without Torah.

From our earliest weeks as a people, we thirsted for the connection that comes with hearing God’s words. This seems to have been the focus of the first weekday and regular Shabbat Torah readings.[[3]](#footnote-3) They were brief; either one person would read three verses or three people would read one verse each. This provided a sort of minimal meaningful unit of connection:

*Bava Metzia* 88a

Initially they enacted one man [reading] three verses, or alternatively three men [reading] three verses, corresponding to Kohanim, Levites, and Israelites.

The symbolic linkage of the number of verses with Kohen, Levi, and Yisrael fits neatly with the halacha of first calling up a Kohen and then a Levi to the Torah.[[4]](#footnote-4) This symbolism also emphasizes the shared bond of all parts of the Jewish people to Torah.[[5]](#footnote-5) To strengthen that connection, Ezra the scribe issued a Torah-reading enactment of his own, expanding on the first one:

*Bava Kama* 82a

Ezra issued ten enactments: That they read at Shabbat *mincha*, and read on Monday and Thursday…He enacted three men and ten verses.

Ezra's enactment added a reading on Shabbat afternoon, and established a new structure for *keriat ha-Torah*: three readers and at least ten verses total for Shabbat afternoons, Mondays, and Thursdays.

# Fundamentals

Both Moshe and Ezra themselves formally read Torah to the people.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ezra's reading incorporated many of the ritual features of *keri'at ha-Torah* still in place today: a gathering of all who can understand—male and female, reading from atop a raised platform, opening the Torah so all can see, the reader reciting a *beracha*, and the people responding to it.

*Nechemya* 8:1-8

And all the people gathered as one man to the square that is before the Water Gate and they told Ezra the Scribe to bring the scroll of the Torah of Moshe that God commanded Israel. And Ezra the Kohen brought the Torah before the assembly, from man to woman, and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it before the square that is before the Water Gate, from [first] light until noon, before the men and the women and those who understood, and the ears of all the people were towards the *sefer Torah*. And Ezra the Scribe stood on a wooden platform that they made for the purpose… And Ezra opened the scroll before the eyes of all the people, for it was above all the people, and when he opened it, all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord God the Great, and all the people answered, “Amen,” raising their hands, and they bowed down and prostrated themselves before God, faces to the ground. And Yeshua and Bani and Sherevya, Yamin, Akuv, Shabtai, Hodya, Ma’aseya, Kelita, Azarya, Yozavad, Chanan, Pelaya, and the *Levi’im* caused the people to understand the Torah, and the people stood at their station. And they read from the scroll of the Torah of God explained, applying wisdom, and they made the reading understood.

Ezra focused on making the Torah "explained" and understood, so that the reading could be a means of both hearing God's word and learning it in public, as *hakhel* had been. The institution of a *metargem* (translator) who would repeat every verse, translated into the Aramaic vernacular, also derives from Ezra's reading and further entrenches *keri'at ha-Torah* as a communal act of Talmud Torah (learning Torah).[[7]](#footnote-7) Rashi explains that the Targum is meant to ensure that the unlearned, both men and women, could understand the reading:

Rashi *Megilla* 21b s.v. *U-vnavi*

For the Targum is only to make it understood to the women and the unlearned, who do not know the holy tongue… and with the Targum of Torah we need to make an effort in order that they should understand the *mitzvot*…

*Keri'at ha-Torah,* like *hakhel*, harkens back to the revelation at Sinai, as an act of listening to the word of God "with quaking and trembling"[[8]](#footnote-8) and of learning from it for the entire Jewish people. The reader, in a sense, plays the role of God on High or of Moshe, His intermediary, to whom the people respond. The Talmud Yerushalmi makes this comparison explicit, referring to the *metargem*:

Yerushalmi *Megilla* 4:1

Rav Chagai said: Rav Shemuel son of Rav Yitzchak entered the synagogue. He saw Chuna stand and translate without having any man stand in his place. He said: It is prohibited to you. Just as [Torah] was given through an intermediary, so we need to conduct ourselves with it through an intermediary… "I was standing between God and you at that time to tell you the word of God" [*Devarim* 5:5]…

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik develops the idea:

Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, "In the Matter of *Takkanat Moshe*," in *Shi'urim Le-zecher Abba Mari II*, 210.

…Reading the Torah in public is equivalent to the experience of standing before the *Shechina* as at Mt. Sinai. This phenomenon has something of a reenactment of the meeting between God and the people of Israel hidden within it. In hearing the reading, the community must picture for themselves that the Torah is given from Sinai at that moment, with voices and lightning and the shofar's blast very strong.

A symbolic reenactment of receiving the Torah demands the presence of a symbolic representation of the Jewish people. Perhaps this is why Torah reading appears in the mishna's list of rituals requiring a quorum of [ten men](https://www.deracheha.org/minyan/).

Mishna *Megilla* 4:3

We do not make an abbreviated communal repetition of *Shema* [for those who missed saying it], and we do not pass before the *aron kodesh* [as a prayer leader], and they [the *kohanim*] do not raise their hands [to bless the congregation], and we do not read from the Torah, and we do not read *haftara* from the Prophets…with fewer than ten.

Many halachic authorities thus view Torah reading itself as a *davar she-bikdusha*, an act that sanctifies God's name.[[9]](#footnote-9)

# Obligation

We've seen that Moshe Rabbeinu's enactment entailed a minimum of one reader and three verses, and Ezra's at least three readers and ten verses. In another step, noted by the Mishna, the other Shabbat and holiday readings took on numbers of readers that varied with the special features of each day:

Mishna *Megilla* 4:2

On *Rosh Chodesh* and *Chol Ha-mo'ed*, four read; we do not have fewer than those, we do not add to them, and we do not read a *haftara* from Prophets…This is the rule: Any [day] that includes *mussaf* and is not a Yom Tov – four read; on Yom Tov – five; On Yom Kippur – six. On Shabbat – seven; we do not have fewer than those, but we do add to them, and we read a *haftara* from Prophets.

For some readings, the mishna permits adding to the number of readers (in practice, typically restricted to Shabbat and Simchat Torah).[[10]](#footnote-10) The mishna also mentions the institution of a reader from the Prophets, known as *maftir*, who would first read from the Torah in order to show honor to it[[11]](#footnote-11) but who would not count toward the seven.[[12]](#footnote-12)

We have seen that *keri'at ha-Torah* requires the presence of a minyan. The obligation of *keri'at ha-Torah* is typically understood as communal.[[13]](#footnote-13) An individual should participate in a communal ritual obligation, but may be required to do so only if otherwise there will be no quorum.

The Talmud relates that Rav Sheshet would learn by himself during the Torah reading.

*Berachot* 8a

Rav Sheshet would turn his face and learn [by himself]. He said: we are involved with our [matters] and they [the community] with theirs.

Rashi ad loc

Would turn his face and learn [by himself] - his mishna, while they would read from the *sefer Torah*.

Though it is possible that Rav Sheshet's was a unique case, a simple reading of this passage seems to indicate that he had no personal obligation to hear the reading, and thus that the obligation is communal.

Indeed, Ramban describes *keri'at ha-Torah* as a communal obligation. He explicitly contrasts *keri'at ha-Torah* with *keri'at ha-megilla* (megilla reading) on Purim, which is an individual obligation:

*Milchemet Ha-shem Megilla* 3a (Rif Pagination)

…The items taught in our mishna [one does not repeat *Shema*…and does not read the Torah…with fewer than ten] all are obligations of the community and are only for those obligated in the matter. But [with respect to] *megilla*, just as the community is obligated, so is each and every individual obligated…

Ramban specifies that the communal obligation applies to "those who are obligated in the matter." His meaning is unclear,[[14]](#footnote-14) in part because the nature of a communal obligation is subject to debate. Once *keri'at ha-Torah* is taking place, individual community members may be free of any obligation.[[15]](#footnote-15) Or they may be free of obligation so long as a minyan of them listens attentively.[[16]](#footnote-16) Or perhaps all present have an obligation to hear the Torah being read.

In the Talmud, Rava teaches that we should follow the lead of the people of Ezra's time and spend the Torah reading in quiet attention. Rava may view the obligation of *keri'at ha-Torah* as communal, but require attentive listening among those present, as a show of respect and awe.[[17]](#footnote-17)

*Sota* 39a

Rava son of Rav Huna said: once the *sefer Torah* has been opened, it is prohibited to speak even about a matter of Halacha, as it is said "And when he opened it the entire people stood" [*Nechemya* 8:5], and standing refers to silence, as it is said: “And I prayed, for they did not speak, for they stood [were silent] and did not respond further" [*Iyov* 32:16]. Rabbi Zeira said Rav Chisda said, from here: "And the ears of all the people were toward the Torah scroll" [*Nechemya* 8:3].

Shulchan Aruch records a range of views on what is required of those present for *keri'at ha-Torah*. He ultimately describes attentive listening to *keri'at ha-Torah* as fitting, but not clearly obligatory. He contrasts this with the personal, Torah-level obligation in [*Parashiyot Zachor* and *Para*](https://www.deracheha.org/arba-parashiyot/):

*Shulchan Aruch* OC 146:2

Once the reader has begun to read from the *sefer Torah*, it is prohibited to speak even in matters of Torah, even between one man [reading] and another, even if he has completed the portion. And there are those who permit learning quietly. And there are those who say that if there are ten who pay attention to the *sefer Torah*, it is permitted [for others] to speak (in matters of Torah)…or to read the verses twice with Targum during *keri'at ha-Torah* is permitted. All this is not relevant to *Parashat Zachor* and *Parashat Para*, which require ten on a Torah level, for one must pay attention and hear them from the reader; and it is correct that for all portions it is fitting for one who is careful with his matters to pay attention and to hear them from the mouth of the reader.

The view that *keri'at ha-Torah* is a communal obligation to hear the Torah has been widely embraced, including by more recent halachic authorities such as Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach and Rav Ovadya Yosef.[[18]](#footnote-18) Rav Auerbach writes that an obligation to hear the Torah only applies to those already present in synagogue.

*Halichot Shlomo* 12 *Keri'at Ha-Torah*; Addendum 17

It is a mitzva upon all who pray to hear *keri'at ha-Torah*…Those from abroad who come to *Eretz Yisrael* in years when the reading is not the same, and miss hearing a portion, do not need to make up for it and hear the portion that they missed, for *keri'at ha-Torah* is a communal obligation. Addendum: Regarding the matter of *keri'at ha-Torah*, if it is a communal obligation or the obligation of each individual…There is only an obligation within the prayer congregation.

# Women Hearing

Now that we've looked at the nature of the obligation, we can ask how it relates to women hearing or reading *keri'at ha-Torah*.

According to the prevalent view that *keri'at ha-Torah* is indeed a communal obligation, the individual's basic responsibility is to ensure the presence of a minyan so that it can take place. Since a woman does not count toward this minyan, she cannot be included in the communal obligation to help form it.

Some early halachic authorities make a different argument for women's not being obligated. They view *keri'at ha-Torah* as a communal act of *Talmud Torah* (Torah study), and infer from women's exemption from the [formal *mitzva* of *Talmud Torah*](https://www.deracheha.org/learning-torah-1-exemption/) that women are exempt from any obligation in *keri'at ha-Torah*. This would be in contrast to minor boys, who are not themselves obligated in *Talmud Torah*, but whose fathers must teach them.

*Beit Ha-bechira* (Me'iri) *Megilla* 23a

…She [a woman] is exempt [from *keri'at ha-Torah*] and in any case a minor…he has a connection to [the mitzva of[ *Talmud Torah*, that others are commanded to teach him.

Though women’s exemption seems straightforward among early halachic authorities, we find more ambiguous language in *Masechet Soferim*:

*Masechet Soferim* 18:5-6

There are those who read the Book of Lamentations [*Megillat Eicha*] in the evening, and there are those who delay it to the morning, after *keri’at ha-Torah*…If he knows how to translate it that is best, and if not, he gives it to one who knows how to translate it well, and he should translate in order that the rest of the people and the women and the children will understand, for women are obligated to hear the reading of a book like men, and how much more so males…The basic *halacha* is to translate for the people and the women and the children each portion, and the Prophet[ic reading] of Shabbat after *keri'at Ha-Torah*.

That "women are obligated to hear the reading of a book like men" implies an obligation in *keri'at ha-Torah*. However, a close reading seems to indicate that Masechet Soferim refers specifically to *Megillat Eicha* (in which case, the meaning of "obligated" here is unclear),[[19]](#footnote-19) while women's hearing the Targum of *keri'at ha-Torah* is desirable but not obligatory.

As above, women were part of the reason for the institution of the Targum in the first place, as an opportunity to understand Torah and *mitzvot*. Women were included in *hakhel* and in Ezra's reading. Does this rich history of women hearing *keri'at ha-Torah* have halachic implications?

Magen Avraham suggests that it does. He interprets the phrase “reading of a book” in *Masechet Soferim* broadly. Based on that phrase, on women's obligation in the mitzva of *hakhel*, and on a Talmudic statement (that we'll get to shortly), he suggests that women might in fact have an obligation to hear *keri'at ha-Torah*, at least when present for it:

Magen Avraham 282:6

It is understood from here [*Megilla* 23a] that a woman is obligated to hear *keri’at ha-Torah* even though it was enacted on account of *Talmud Torah* and women are not obligated in *Talmud Torah*. In any case, it is a mitzva to hear, like the mitzva of *hakhel* in which the women and children are obligated, see 146. In *Masechet Soferim* 18 it is written "the women are obligated to hear the reading of a book like men…and it is a *mitzva* to translate for them that they understand." But women here are accustomed to going outside.

Magen Avraham concludes his comments by citing a custom in his locale for women to leave the synagogue during the Torah reading. While it's not clear why the women would leave, it may have been a function of the lack of Targum into Yiddish. His acknowledgment of the custom without protest implies a concession that any obligation for women to hear *keri'at ha-Torah* would apply only to those present for it.[[20]](#footnote-20)

A couple of centuries later, Aruch Ha-shulchan rejects the comparison to *hakhel* and argues vociferously that women are not obligated in *keri'at ha-Torah* in any way. He cites the relationship of *keri'at ha-Torah* to the formal mitzva of Talmud Torah as one reason, and then notes that *keri'at ha-Torah* is a [positive and time-bound](https://www.deracheha.org/positive-time-bound-mitzvot/) commandment, from which women are typically exempt,[[21]](#footnote-21) a suggestion raised centuries earlier in Tosafot (below).[[22]](#footnote-22)

Aruch Ha-shulchan OC 282:11

It seems to me that [*Masechet Soferim*] did not mean a full obligation, but rather similar to children [exempt from *mitzvot*]. For she [a woman] is exempt from *Talmud Torah*, and furthermore there is no [*mitzva*] more time-bound than this…and one should not compare it to the *mitzva* of *hakhel* that the Torah commanded to "gather the nation, the men, the women, and the children," for this is a special mitzva once in seven years that the king read *Devarim*, which are words to conquer [the soul]. But for us to say that they [women] are obligated every Shabbat in *keri'at ha-Torah* is certainly an astonishing thing, and what is done every day will prove it, and on the whole it is impossible for them to hear…

Halachic consensus remains that women have no obligation to attend Torah reading. Common practice reflects this. As Aruch Ha-shulchan notes, hearing *keri'at ha-Torah* every week would not be practically tenable for many women. It remains praiseworthy, though, for women to hear *keri'at ha-Torah*.

Even assuming she is exempt, a woman should listen attentively when present for *keri'at ha-Torah*. In so doing, she voluntarily participates in fulfillment of a communal *mitzva*.

Rav Hershel Schachter, *Tze'i Lach Be'ikvei Ha-Tzon*, p. 22

….Even according to the opinion of those who dispute the above Magen Avraham cited above, in any case, if they [women] were to come to synagogue, they would in any event fulfill the mitzva of *keri'at ha-Torah* as one who is not obligated in a mitzva but performs it…

As in our discussion of [*tefilla be-tzibbur*](https://www.deracheha.org/tefilla-be-tzibbur/), communal prayer, it is not clear whether a man has an obligation beyond ensuring the minyan, while it is widely agreed that a woman does not. On the other hand, when a woman hears *keri'at ha-Torah*, she is a member of the community fulfilling the mitzva. (See more [here](https://www.deracheha.org/tefilla-be-tzibbur/).)

Many women arriving late for synagogue make up prayers during Torah reading. Rav Elyashiv, however, rules that this practice is not ideal:

Rav Yitzchak Yaacov Fuchs, *Halichos Bas Yisrael* I 2:49, n. 104-105

[n. 104]…HaGaon Rav Yosef Sholom Eliashiv states that since today's women are often capable of understanding the Torah reading, it is highly recommended that they remain in the synagogue and listen to *K'riath HaTorah*. [Text 49]…A woman who comes late to the synagogue on *Shabbath* may recite the *Shacharith Shemoneh Esrey* during *K'riath HaTorah*. [n. 105] This is based on a ruling of HaGaon Rav Yosef Sholom Eliashiv that it is better for a woman to miss *K'riath HaTorah* than miss the time for prayer.

In other words, though a woman arriving late to synagogue may be permitted to make up *Shemoneh Esrei* during Torah reading, this is specifically when she will otherwise miss the time for prayer. In other cases, it is preferable for a woman to delay making up prayer until after Torah reading, so that she can listen to it and thus, as Rav Shachter notes, fulfill the mitzva.

Why don't more women attend keri'at ha-Torah?

At the hakhel ceremony at the end of each shemitta year, every member of the Jewish people participates in hearing the Torah, to strengthen faith and mitzva observance.

Initially, the Jewish people's everyday language was Hebrew, enabling even those without formal education to understand the words of the Torah, at hakhel and otherwise.

But those who returned from Bavel with Ezra and Nechemya spoke Aramaic, so Ezra’s reading prioritized inclusivity. Ezra made sure that the people could see the Torah as well as hear it, and that the reading would be translated into the Aramaic vernacular. Given women’s exemption from the formal mitzva of Torah study, this simultaneous translation had particular import for making the reading accessible to women.

By Magen Avraham's time, however, women in some communities customarily left synagogue at the time of the reading. Perhaps this was because there was no longer a translation or because it was otherwise difficult to follow the reading. Even today, though, when chumashim with translation are widely available, many women skip synagogue on Shabbat morning altogether, and those who attend often arrive only for mussaf, or make up shacharit during keri'at ha-Torah. While in many cases women's not attending keri'at ha-Torah is a result of other responsibilities, such as childcare, this is not always the case.

Given that women's hearing keri'at ha-Torah was initially a priority and remains an opportunity to fulfill a mitzva, what can we do to encourage greater attendance?

First, we can educate women about the mitzva opportunity involved in hearing it and also clarify that a woman's making up prayers during keri'at ha-Torah is only a last-case resort limited to shemoneh esrei when she will otherwise miss the time for it.

Second, we could do more to make Torah reading accessible to women. Our synagogues could work on ensuring adequate acoustics and lighting, so that the reading can be heard and followed from the women's section. The Torah can be [passed near (or into](https://www.deracheha.org/contact-with-sefer-torah/)) the women's section. An effort can be made to ensure that women can see hagbah.

These are not new ideas. As we've seen, from its origins, public Torah reading has prioritized inclusivity in an effort to emulate standing at Sinai, when women were present. To this end, we can take inspiration from the Jews of Cochin, India, who created a structure to bring the reading closer to women at synagogue and mimic standing at Sinai:[[23]](#footnote-23)

Barbara C. Johnson, "Cochin: Jewish Women's Music." *The Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*, Jewish Women's Archive

Many Kerala Jewish girls were educated in Hebrew along with boys (sometimes in mixed schools, sometimes separately), learning from an early age to read the Hebrew prayers and the weekly Torah portion, together with the *ta’amei mikra* for chanting it. Women attended synagogue on Sabbaths and holidays, when the Torah was read from a second upper bimah (unique to Kerala synagogue architecture) on a balcony immediately in front of the women’s section, separated only by an open lattice screen, where they could see the Torah scroll as well as follow along carefully in the readings and prayers. Certain older women were noted for their proficiency in Hebrew and sometimes it was a grandmother or “aunty” who coached young boys as they prepared for the ritual of chanting their first *haftarah* and Torah portions in the synagogue.

Conducting the Torah reading in a way that maximizes women's hearing and proximity sends a strong message. In the Cochin community, the second bima in front of the ezrat nashim both reflects and fosters a strong tradition of women's engagement in Torah study.

# Women Reading

Who can read from the Torah in public? The Talmud tells us that the fundamental halacha allows for “everyone” to count toward the seven readers on Shabbat, including women.[[24]](#footnote-24) However, the same passage teaches that women are not permitted to read in practice, because of an ancillary reason: *kevod ha-tzibbur*, the honor of the congregation.

*Megilla* 23a

Our rabbis taught [in a baraita]: Everyone counts toward the count of seven, even a minor and even a woman. But our sages said: A woman may not read the Torah, because of *kevod ha-tzibbur* [the honor of the congregation].

In a future piece, we plan to discuss *kevod ha-tzibbur* and the resulting practical halacha. Our current focus, though, is on the rationale behind a woman's being able to read at all, even in theory, given that women do not count toward the minyan for *keri'at ha-Torah* and are widely understood to be exempt from hearing it.

Halachic authorities have explained this rationale in a few ways, following from their understandings of the halachic role of the person reading the Torah.

**I. Discharging Obligation** Is the role of the reader to discharge the obligation of *keri'at ha-Torah*? Only a person who is fully obligated in a mitzva can discharge others’ obligation in that mitzva.

Mishna *Rosh Ha-shana* 3:8

This is the rule: Whoever is not obligated in a matter does not discharge the obligation of the masses.

If women are fully obligated in *keri'at ha-Torah* like men, then that could help explain why women count toward the seven readers. In fact, this line of argument is what first led Magen Avraham to suggest that women are obligated in *keri'at ha-Torah*.

Given that Magen Avraham's view is rejected, though, one could argue instead that *keri'at ha-Torah* requires only **some** readers to discharge obligations, and that our sages expanded the pool of potential readers beyond those able to discharge the obligation, in order to facilitate finding seven qualified readers.

Responsa Rivash 326

When they enacted that there be seven reading from the Torah, the enactment was that a minor who knows how to read would count toward the seven, in order that it not burden the community that all seven be adults, and perhaps they would not find those who would know how to read. They permitted even a woman for this reason, were it not for *kevod ha-tzibbur*. And in any case, they did not permit minors [to read] all of them [the seven readings].

This view also would explain how women might count as readers without counting toward the requisite minyan. Similarly, Rabbeinu Nissim suggests that women can be **some, but not all**, of the readers, because women cannot fully discharge the obligation:

Ran *Megilla* 13a (Rif pagination)

Everyone counts toward the count of seven, even a woman and even a minor. That means they count to complete, and not that all of them be minors or women, for since they are not subject to the obligation, they cannot fully discharge the obligation.

The minimum number of readings that adult men must perform in order to discharge the community's obligation may be more specific. The minimum may be **three** readers, to satisfy Ezra's enactment, which would leave up to four readings open to women. Or it might suffice for a **single** reader to discharge obligations, to satisfy Moshe's enactment, leaving up to five open to women, after a Kohen and Levi have read the Torah.[[25]](#footnote-25)

*Beit Ha-bechira* (Me'iri) *Megilla* 23a

There is one who says that, in any case, every reading needs one adult [male] reader, and since one has read, Moshe Rabbeinu's enactment has been completed and there is no further reading except from Ezra's enactment. For the number of readers was not from Moshe Rabbeinu's enactment, rather only the reading itself. And one can complete the reading through a woman or a minor, but the entire reading may not be done by a woman or minor.

Alternatively, as Maharam reportedly rules regarding a bondsman, who is exempt from positive time-bound commandments like women, the mishna might only allow for a woman to count for the seventh reading:

*Hagahot Maimoniot*, Laws of *Tefilla* and *Nesi’at Kappayim*, 12:17

[Canaanite] bondsmen may not read from the Torah except for the seventh reading, as we say, everyone can complete, etc….[From] My teacher our Rav [Maharam].

In our next piece, we'll see Tosafot make a similar suggestion.

**II. Making it Heard** If the obligation in *keriat ha-Torah* is simply that the Torah be heard, then perhaps it is irrelevant whether the reader can discharge obligations. The reader's essential role might be to read the Torah audibly, in which case it may not matter who does so. Meiri cites this view with respect to a minor:

*Beit Ha-bechira* (Me'iri) *Megilla* 24a

A minor reads from the Torah, for the intention is only to make it heard to the people, and this is not a full mitzva like other *mitzvot*…

Rav Moshe Feinstein applies this reasoning to women readers as well.

Responsa *Iggerot Moshe* OC II:72

Therefore, it easily makes sense that even a minor goes up [to read] and we discharge the obligation through his reading, and similarly a woman [may read] even if she is exempt from *keri'at ha-Torah* and it would not be in her power to discharge others' obligations in other *mitzvot* in this type of situation, because the listeners don't need to discharge their obligation through the reader, but rather their hearing the reading is a mitzva and this the listeners do themselves.

Either understanding of the reader’s role in *keri’at ha-Torah* can account for why a woman should theoretically be able to read Torah for the congregation. Since the first two *aliyyot* are reserved for a Kohen or Levi, though, and since the Talmud speaks only of the Shabbat reading, even that theoretical ability is limited. According to the view that the reader discharges obligations, it may be limited further to the last one or four of the seven readings on Shabbat.

Still, theoretical and practical limitations on women's reading do not detract from the halachic value of women hearing *keri'at ha-Torah*.

In our next piece, we'll look at the *aliya la-Torah* and at readings in women's *tefilla* groups.

# Further Reading

רב דוד אויערבאך, הליכות ביתה, פרק ט

הגרי"ד סולובייצ'יק, "קריאת התורה בשבת, שני וחמישי" שיעורים לזכר אבא מרי א

הגרי"ד סולובייצ'יק, "בעניין תקנת משה" שיעורים לזכר אבא מרי ב

Frimer, Aryeh and Dov, "Women, Keri'at ha-Torah and Aliyyot." *Tradition* 46:4 (Winter 2013), pp. 67-238.

1. Mishna *Megilla* 3:4-6

   Rosh Chodesh Adar that falls on Shabbat, we read *Parashat Shekalim*…On Pesach, we read the *Parashat Mo’adot* in *Torat Kohanim* [*Vayikra*]. On Shavuot, “*Shiv’a shavu’ot*.” On Rosh Ha-shana, “*Ba-chodesh ha-shevi’i be-echad la-chodesh*.” On Yom Kippur, “*Acharei mot*.” On the first Yom Tov of the festival [Sukkot], we read the *Parashat Mo’adot* in *Torat Kohanim* [*Vayikra*] and on the rest of the days of the festival, the sacrifices of the festival…On Monday and Thursday and Shabbat at *mincha*, we read according to their order [the weekly *parasha*] and they do not count towards the sum [of *aliyot* that will be read the following Shabbat], as it is said, "And Moshe declared God's appointed times to the children of Israel" [*Vayikra* 23:44] – their mitzva is that they should read each one at its time. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rambam explicitly attributes this aspect of the enactment to Moshe as well:

   Rambam, Laws of *Tefilla* and *Nesi’at Kappayim* 12:1

   Moshe Rabbeinu established for Israel that they should read Torah in public on Shabbat and on Monday and Thursday mornings, in order that they should not go three days without hearing Torah. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, “Torah Reading on Shabbat, Monday, and Thursday,” in *Shi’urim Le-zecher Aba Mari* I, 160-167.

   …What is the benefit of a reading bereft of understanding? The answer is simple. Even with such a reading, the soul is exalted….The obligating factor in Torah reading is not the mitzva of study, but the mitzva of sanctification of the person through Torah study… His enactment focused on the reading and hearing of the words, and not on understanding them… [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Shulchan Aruch* OC 135:3

   A Kohen reads from the Torah first, and after him a Levi, and after him a Yisrael. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, “Torah Reading on Shabbat, Monday, and Thursday,” in *Shi’urim Le-zecher Abba Mari* I, 157.

   “Three men corresponding to *Kohanim*, *Levi’im*, and *Yisraelim*” … represent the assembly of the congregation of all Israel… [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Shemot* 24:7

   And Moshe wrote all the words of God…and he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the ears of the people, and they said, all that God has spoken, we will do and we will hear. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Megilla* 3a

   That which is written: “And they read from the scroll of the Torah of God explained, applying wisdom, and they made the reading understood” [*Nechemya* 8:8]. “And they read from the scroll of the Torah of God” – this is Scripture, “explained” – this is Targum, “applying wisdom” – these are the [divisions into] verses, “and they made the reading understood” – this is the punctuation with cantillation, and some say: these are the Masoretic traditions. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Berachot* 22a

   As it is taught: “And you shall make known to your children and your children’s children” [*Devarim* 4:9] and it is written after that “the day that you stood before the Lord your God at Chorev” [*Devarim* 4:10] just as there [it was] with fear and awe and quaking and trembling, also here with fear and awe and quaking and trembling… [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Mishna Berura 143:1

   With fewer than ten – since it is a *davar she-bikdusha* and is not done with fewer than ten, as it is written, “and I will be sanctified within [*be-toch*] the children of Israel” [*Vayikra* 22:32]. We learn from a textual link “*toch*”-“*toch*.” Here it is written, “within [*be-toch*] the children of Israel.” There it is written, “Separate from within [*mi-toch*] this assembly [*eida*]” [*Bemidbar* 16:21]. And there is no *eida* less than ten.

   Some, however, including Ran, view the need for minyan here as a distinct rabbinic enactment, and not as a sign of its being a *davar she-bikdusha*:

   Ran on Rif, *Megilla* 13b, Rif pagination

   We do not read from the Torah, and we do not read *haftara* from the Prophets with fewer than ten. For it is a rabbinic enactment and they enacted it only in public. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Shulchan Aruch OC 282:1

    We take out the *sefer Torah* and seven read from it; and if one wants to add, he adds. Rema: And this is the law on Yom Tov, it is permissible to add to the number of readers. Some say that on Yom Tov one does not add, and this is the custom in these lands, except for Simchat Torah, when we add a lot [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Megilla* 23b

    As Ulla said: Why does the one who reads a *haftara* from Prophets need to read from the Torah first – because of the honor of the Torah, and since it is for the honor of the Torah – it does not count towards the number [of readers]. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Shulchan Aruch OC 282:4

    We are accustomed for seven to read and with them to finish the *parasha*, and he says *kaddish*, and goes back and reads with the *maftir* what the seventh read. Rema: And thus we are accustomed on Yom Tov, for the *maftir* is not included in the count of readers [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A few halachic authorities view *keri'at ha-Torah* as an individual obligation. Everyone subject to an individual ritual obligation must personally discharge it. For example, if *keri'at ha-Torah* is an individual obligation, then a person who missed it needs to seek out or convene another reading.

    If *keri'at ha-Torah* is an individual obligation, then the reader discharges the obligation on behalf of each individual:

    Responsa Ra'avan 73

    …For Ezra enacted for Israel that they read the Torah on Monday and Thursday and Shabbat, and the Torah reader discharges the community of their obligation to read, therefore he says to the community 'you must recite a *beracha* and read like me. Consent to my reading and to my *beracha* and recite the *beracha* with me,' and they respond and [thus] recite the *beracha*… [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ran writes that at least six of them must not have heard *keri'at ha-Torah* as yet:

    Ran on Rif, *Megilla* 3a

    … For all those that are considered there are communal obligations, and we do them only if ten, or a majority of them, are obligated in the matter, such as if they have not heard *kaddish* and *barechu*… [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Tzaphenat Pe’ane’ach, Laws of *Tefilla* and *Nesi’at Kappayim*, 12

    For where there is a community, then the individual is exempt from reading, which is not the case if there is not a community – then, the obligation falls on each person to ensure that there are ten for *keri’at ha-Torah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. *Sefer Shibbolei Ha-leket, Inyan Tefilla*, 39

    The law of the communal mitzva to hear *keri’at ha-Torah*… Ba’al Halachot Gedolot wrote these words, that it is permissible [to act like] Rav Sheshet when there are ten listening, but if there are not ten listening – no. Other authorities resolve it that specifically Rav Sheshet, whose occupation was Torah, but not everybody… I found in the name of Rav Simcha, nowadays, why are people accustomed to read and look at books while they are still reading, and one can say that specifically speaking is prohibited, and even about halacha, in order not to disturb the others who are listening to the Torah and the *mitzvot* that depend on it, but to read to oneself in a whisper, when there is no such concern, is fine. However, it is a question for the Rav, because one is also commanded to hear *keri’at ha-Torah*, as it is written, “and the ears of all the people were towards the *sefer Torah*,” and if he reads a book, he will concentrate on understanding what is before him and will not be able to understand what they are reading; therefore, it seems it should be prohibited. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Alternatively, this passage might support the view that there is an individual obligation in *keri'at ha-Torah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Responsa *Yabia Omer* IV, YD 31

    …In truth, even the actual hearing of the reading of the *sefer Torah* in public is not an individual obligation upon every individual in the congregation, but rather a general obligation upon the community. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. *Benei Banim* II:10

    …For the phrase “reading of a book” used in *Masechet Soferim*, its meaning is the Book of Lamentations, which it is discussing [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Responsa *Benei Banim* II:10

    That which Magen Avraham innovated … that women are obligated to hear *keri’at ha-Torah*… in my humble opinion, the obligation is when they are already present in synagogue… [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. It is possible, though, that the exemption does not apply to communal obligations.

    Responsa *Mishneh Halachot* 6:326

    It makes sense to say specifically for a mitzva that is incumbent on each individual we say that women are exempt from positive time-bound *mitzvot*, but for a positive mitzva of the community, even if it is time-bound, women are also obligated unless there is an explicit teaching to exempt. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Rav David Auerbach raises the possibility that the exemption from positive time-bound *mitzvot* should not apply to *keri'at ha-Torah* on *Shabbat*, because women are obligated in most *halachot* of *Shabbat*.

    *Halichot Beitah* 9:1, note 2

    It is possible to say that they [our sages] thought that the actual mitzva is time-bound, and even so, since women are obligated in all the actions of Shabbat, for everyone who is [obligated] in *shemira* [guarding – refraining from prohibited labor] is [obligated] in *zechira* [remembering – positive *mitzvot* of Shabbat], and this includes all the obligations of Shabbat… If so, even given that *keri’at ha-Torah* in general is not specific to Shabbat, nevertheless, since on Shabbat seven read from it, it is similar to the other obligations of Shabbat in which women are obligated, even though they are time-bound *mitzvot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Available here: <https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/cochin-jewish-womens-music> [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ran seems to imply that this halacha is restricted to Shabbat (which would fit well with *Halichot Beitah*'s argument in note 19). Mishna Berura cites authorities following this approach. Meiri, however, suggests that the theoretical permission could theoretically apply to all Torah readings:

    Ran on Rif, *Megilla* 15a, Rif pagination

    A minor reads from the Torah. To complete the count of seven…

    Mishna Berura 282:11

    Toward the count of seven [readers]- but not to the count of three [Magen Avraham] and in Olat Shabbat he wrote further that this is also the case regarding the counts of 4-6 that there are on Rosh Chodesh, Yom Tov, and Yom Kippur, also [a minor or woman] does not count.

    *Beit Ha-bechira* (Me'iri) *Megilla* 23a

    Everyone counts toward the count of seven or any count of *keri’at ha-Torah*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Rambam cites a similar view regarding a minor:

    Rambam, Commentary on the Mishna, *Megilla* 4:6

    A minor reads from the Torah, one of the later Ge’onim said that this is after the third reading. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)