

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION  
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)  
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**TALMUDIC METHODOLOGY**  
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[www.vbm-torah.org/archive/metho67/19metho.htm](http://www.vbm-torah.org/archive/metho67/19metho.htm)

This shiur is dedicated in celebration of  
Ahavya and Hillel's successful completion of shana rishona.

**SHIUR #19: KERIYAT HA-TORAH AND HAR SINAI**

*Keriyat ha-Torah* (public Torah reading) is based on an intriguing source. Unlike typical *mitzvot de-oraita* which are founded upon *pesukim* or *derashot*, *keriyat ha-Torah* stems from a pre-Sinai response to a national spiritual crisis. In parashat Beshalach the Torah records that after encountering the Divine at the Red Sea through the epic miracles, the Jewish people wandered three days 'without water.' Though the literal reading refers to the absence of hydration, Chazal sense a more ominous danger: Three days had elapsed since their previous contact with Hashem. This detachment had plunged the nation into spiritual torpor. Recognizing this peril, the contemporary Nevi'im (a fascinating reference to Moshe and perhaps other prophets) instituted *keriyat ha-Torah* on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat Mincha to ensure that three days would never elapse without contact with the word of God. Since the experience of *keriyat ha-Torah* stems from this pre-Sinai stage, the details of the halakha are more elusive; Unanchored to any legislative *pasuk* there are scant sources available to generate the constituent halakhot.

REENACTMENT OF SINAI

The Rav zt"l (Rav Soloveitchik) developed a powerful theory regarding the essence of *keriyat ha-Torah*. The *mishna* in *Megilla* (21a) asserts that Megillat Esther may be read while sitting. Commenting on this leniency, the gemara contrasts *keriyat ha-Torah*, which is UNLIKE Esther reading; it must be read while standing. Rashi believes that the gemara is merely "encouraging" standing

during Torah reading as a "*lekhatchila*" ideal. Unlike Megillat Esther in which standing is meaningless, Torah reading should inspire greater respect expressed through standing. Halakhically though, *keriyat ha-Torah* may be fulfilled while sitting. The Rambam disagrees, concluding that standing is MANDATORY for *keriyat Ha-Torah*. He does not suggest a reason and certainly the requirement of standing is not immediately obvious.

The Rambam's reading of the gemara in *Megilla* is reinforced by an interesting Yerushalmi in *Megilla* (*perek* 4 which is parallel to the Bavli's *perek* 3). The Yerushalmi cites an episode in which Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak visits a shul and witnesses *keriyat ha-Torah* in which the reader is 'leaning on a post' – he claims 'this posture is forbidden; just as it was delivered at Sinai in a manner which instigated fear and trembling so must it be rendered in public in a manner which educes awe.'

This vignette supports the Rambam's position and actually provides a logical basis. *Keriyat Ha-Torah*, the Rav claimed is not merely the collective or communal recital of Torah text. Instead, it REENACTS the pivotal moment at Har Sinai during which God's word was delivered to a human audience. As a redramatization of Sinai, the posture of the audience must resemble the quaking and trembling reported about the participants at Sinai. (Regarding the actual halakha the Shulchan Arukh requires that the *baal keriyah* stand but not the audience. The Rema cites that there are those 'who are *machmir* to stand' during *keriyat Ha-Torah*. See Orach Chayim 141:1 for a discussion regarding the reader and 146:4 regarding the audience).

The continuation of the Yerushalmi cites a related episode in which the same Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak visits a *keriyat ha-Torah* (presumably in a different shul) and witnesses the solitary positioning of the *baal keriyah* who was not joined by anyone on the podium. He registered his disapproval claiming 'just as Torah was delivered through an intermediary agent (*sirsur*) so must it be rendered during *keriyat Ha-Torah*.' The Torah reports that Moshe spoke the words of Torah as Hashem replied (*Moshe yedaber vecha-elokim ya'anenu be-kol* – Shemot 19:19). Ignoring the exact details of this 'teamwork' it is clear that the delivery at Har Sinai was executed "jointly." To capture this ambience *keriyat ha-Torah* must be authored by multiple personalities - *sirsur*. This symbolic role of

intermediary is played by the *gabbai* who stands alongside the reader. Again the Yerushalmi insists on recreating Har Sinai during *keriyat ha-Torah* because it viewed the process as a symbolic redramtization of that moment in time.

This theory may be based in part on an interesting position of the Ramban. While listing the prohibitions which the Rambam omitted in his enumeration of the *mitzvot*, the Ramban cites the prohibition to forget the events at Har Sinai (see Devarim 4:9-10). The Ramban does not deduce any particular ACTIONS necessary to avoid this neglect and the violation of this mitzva - simple memory will do. However, the spirit of his description certainly supports the institutionalization of symbolic ceremonies to help recall the experience at Sinai.

#### FURTHER SINAI EXPRESSIONS

The Rav deciphered an additional element of *keriyat ha-Torah* based on this association to Sinai. The gemara in *Megilla* (21b) demands a minimum of three *aliyot* during *keriyat Ha-Torah*. Special days augment the number of *aliyot* but the base number remains the same. One version of the gemara attributes this minimum *shiur* to the three-part demographic division of our people into Kohanim, Leviim and Yisraelim. Why should *keriyat ha-Torah* be modeled upon this symbolic division of different populaces? [NOTE: This gemara should not be confused with the gemara in *Gittin* 59b which awards the first aliya to a kohen and the second a levi etc. That gemara explains the secondary evolutionary stage: having established the need for three *aliyot* (in the gemara in *Megilla*), how do we best allocate these *aliyot* with an eye to honoring the kohen as well as preventing contention in the struggle to receive *aliyot*.]

The Rav suggested that to fully capture the Sinaitic flavor of *keriyat Ha-Torah*, the attendance of an entire nation would be necessary. Har Sinai is repeatedly referred to (Devarim 9:10, 10:4, 18:16) as *yom hakahal* – the day of assembly, in which the entire nation (according to midrashic sources, even future unborn Jews) convened to receive the word of God. Reinstating that experience would demand a similar *kahal* or population of Jews. Obviously, unable to convene a national audience, we allocate three *aliyot* to capture symbolically that which we cannot achieve through actual expression. By designating three aliyot we achieve a numeric-representative sampling of an entire nation and capture

the full flavor of *yom hakahal*, thereby lending to *keriyat ha-Torah* its Sinaitic quality.

An additional halakhic consequence of this aligning *keriyat ha-Torah* to Sinai emerges from a Rambam in Hilkhhot Tefilla 12:6 in which he requires the *baal keriyah* to repeat basically any mistake in the reading - even phonetic mistakes which may not alter the actual meaning. Interestingly enough, the Rema does not adopt this stringency forcing correction only for instances in which the content was affected by the misreading. The Rav explained the Rambam's stringency about the reading of *keriyat ha-Torah* as an enactment of Har Sinai. To fully capture the moment at Sinai not only must the 'stage' resemble the original delivery (standing, intermediaries and an assembly). The rendered text must exhibit fidelity to the original rendering. Even if no cognitive differences emerge, if the text is rendered differently the experience of Sinai may be compromised. In fact, the Rav reported, that Rav Chayim of Brisk would typically correct the reader (and encourage repetition) even for misread *trup* or cadences which do not affect meaning. Evidently, he felt that the accurate cadences could also help capture the sense of Har Sinai.

Of course, this tethering of *keriyat ha-Torah* to Har Sinai cannot be predicated upon the aforementioned source in Parashat Beshalach of wandering without water for three days - a description which occurred PRIOR to Har Sinai. Evidently, *keriyat ha-Torah* was instituted for alternate reasons, and after Har Sinai it became reconstituted as a reenactment of Har Sinai.

## HAKHEL

The Rav asserted, instead, that employing public Torah reading as a reenactment of Har Sinai stems from a more concrete source - the practice of *hakhel*. When the Rambam describes the once-in-seven year public reading he writes (*Chagiga* 3:6): 'Even converts (who may not yet appreciate the nuances of Torah) are obligated to listen with fear and awe AS THOUGH IT WERE THE ACTUAL DAY IN WHICH THE TORAH WAS DELIVERED...EACH PERSON SHOULD ENVISION THEMSELVES AS IF JUST NOW COMMANDED FROM GOD HIMSELF.' The Rambam justifies the rendering of *hakhel* by the king because he serves as God's agent to deliver Torah. Hearing Torah from him

(with the typical fear associated with a king) helps agitate the requisite fear and awe in memory of Sinai. The Rambam views *hakhel's* reading of the Torah as an attempt to recreate the experience at Har Sinai. This association is captured in the very name of the mitzva – *hakhel* - which invokes the great assembly which characterized Har Sinai. The Torah actually demands the presence at *hakhel* of every man, woman and child even though the latter two may not be formally obligated to STUDY Torah, since their presence assures the presence of a sweeping and all encompassing assembly. The legislation of *hakhel* as a reenactment of Sinai may have been the source for the reconstitution of *keriyat ha-Torah* (a pre-Sinai custom) into a reenactment of Har Sinai.