

Beshalach: Reading the Torah Portion

- Rabbi Tabory explains the relationship between Moshe Rabbenu's institution of Torah reading three times a week, and Ezra's addition to this Takanah, Kohen, Levi, Yisrael. He gives Rav Soloveitchik zt'l's explanation, including an episode from the life of the Brisker Rav.

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(A short devar Torah by Rabbi Tabory based on an approach by Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. It is from Zomet Institute[SMTP:zomet@virtual.co.il] Shabbat?B'Shabbato ?)

BY RABBI BINYAMIN TABORY

“And they traveled for three days in the desert but found no water’ [Shemot 15:22]. Those who understand texts said, water can only refer to Torah ... Since they went three days without Torah, they were corrupted. Therefore, the prophets among them decreed that they should read the Torah on Shabbat ... on Monday ... and on Thursday ... so that they would not go three days without Torah” [Bava Kama 82a].

The Talmud explains that the “prophets” in the desert decided on the principles of reading the Torah, and Ezra added the details, such as to call three people to read a total of at least 10 verses. Who were these prophets? The Rambam feels that the phrase refers to Moshe, since “Moshe was the greatest prophet of all, and all the other prophets in his generation were part of his Beit Din. In addition, they didn't make any decisions without his agreement, and it is therefore proper to give him the credit”. It is written in the Talmud Yerushalmi that Moshe commanded that the Torah should be read on Shabbat, on holidays, on Rosh Chodesh, and on Chol Hamoed (Megilla).

Is this practice a Torah or a rabbinical obligation? The Talmud quotes an opinion, based on sources from the Torah, that the Torah “was said in all languages” [Megilla 17b]. Rashi explains that the Torah may be read in any language. But Tosafot asks how the source of this law could be a Torah verse if the custom of reading the Torah is only a rabbinical decree. Their answer is that the Talmud is referring to Torah obligations, such as “Zechor”, the command to remember the evil of Amalek.

On the other hand, the BA”CH questions the words of the Tosafot: “The fact that the Tosafot assumed that Torah reading is a rabbinical requirement established by Ezra is problematic. This is especially true in view of the statement in Bava Kama that Moshe instituted the reading of the Torah (note that our version of the text attributes this to “prophets” and not to Moshe) ... According to this, all of the Torah reading on Shabbat and holidays is a Torah mitzvah.” It may be that the BA”CH based his reasoning on the Talmud Yerushalmi quoted above, and in addition that he considers a decree by Moshe as having the status of a Torah mitzvah. He explicitly refers to the reading on Shabbat and holidays, but the Tashbei”tz expands this to include all public reading of the Torah (section 163).

My mentor, Rabbi J.B. Soloveitchik, had a novel approach, that while there is only a rabbinical obligation to read the Torah, observing the custom is a fulfillment of a Torah requirement. He

explained that studying the Torah includes accepting the yoke of the heavens, and if this is done in the presence of a minyan of ten men, the reading has the status of a holy ritual. This is the reason that the prayer “Barechu” precedes the Torah reading, in order to emphasize this relationship. It is said that the Rabbi of Brisk once arrived at the start of the Torah reading but missed the “Barechu”, and he sighed and said that he would now have to find a different place to hear the Torah reading, in order to fully observe the ritual.

(Submitted by Nisson Shulman)