



At The Heart Of *Kriat HaTorah*

What is the source for the institution of *Kriat HaTorah*, the public Torah reading?

Its origin is to be found in an intriguing episode. In parshat *Beshalach* the Torah records that after encountering the Divine at the Red Sea through epic miracles, the Jewish people wandered three days “without water.” Although the literal reading refers to a lack of water to drink, the Sages of the Talmud sensed another layer of meaning. Three days had elapsed since their previous contact with God. This detachment had impaired their spiritual wellbeing.

At that time, according to the Talmud, Moshe in response to the nation’s spiritual malaise instituted *Kriat HaTorah* on Mondays, Thursdays, and Shabbat to ensure that three days would never elapse without a connection with the word of God. (*Bava Kamma* 82a)

It is noteworthy to find the original source for institutionalizing the public reading of the Torah from a pre-Sinai stage. It was

already apparent at that early stage in our history that experiencing the word of God regularly was essential.

However, this is only the first layer in understanding the significance of standardizing Torah reading. Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik zt”l developed a powerful theory regarding another essential component of *Kriat Hatorah*. Namely, the Torah reading corresponds to conjuring up in our hearts and minds the experience of *Matan Torah* and Sinai.

The following incident reported in the Talmud serves as a basic source for the Rav’s contention. The Yerushalmi (*Megillah perek 4*) cites an episode in which Rav Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak visits a shul and witnesses a *kriat HaTorah* in which the reader is “leaning on a post” (or perhaps the table). He is perturbed that he is reading the Torah in such a posture. He claims that “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 evinces awe.”

This vignette supports the Rambam’s position that one must stand for the reading of the Torah (*Hilchot Tefillah* 12:6). *Kriat HaTorah*, the Rav claimed, is not merely the collective or communal recital of Torah texts. Instead, it reenacts the pivotal moment at Mount Sinai during which God’s

word was revealed to the Jewish people.

The Rav argued that this notion is not only articulated in the Talmud but there is actually a compelling mitzvah mandated in the Torah that evinces the Sinai experience. Our public reading of the Torah stems from a concrete source - the practice of *Hakhol*. Take note of the Rambam's descriptions of the once-in-seven year public reading:

"Even converts (who may not understand the actual meaning of the 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 himself as if just now commanded by God Himself" (*Hilchot Chagiga* 3:6).

The Rambam views *hakhol*'s reading of the Torah as an attempt to recreate the experience at Mount Sinai. The association is captured in the very name of the mitzvah - *hakhol* - which invokes the great assembly that characterized Mount Sinai. Additionally, the Torah actually demands the presence at *hakhol* of every man, woman and child, even though the latter may not be formally obligated to study Torah, since their presence assures the presence of a sweeping and all encompassing assembly that echoes Mount Sinai. The formal weekly reading of Torah today has its underpinnings in the *hakhol* reading and therefore the motif of recreating the Sinai experience is an essential component.

The obligation to conjure up the experience at Sinai devolves upon every Jew. It is rooted in an even more fundamental source. The Torah charges us with a lofty task which the Talmud expresses in the following way:

[It is written] "You shall make them known to your children and grandchildren," and following that it is written: "The day that you stood before Hashem your God at Chorev." Just as at Chorev, there was dread and awe, trembling and fear, so too here [in respect to the teaching and studying of Torah] it must be done with dread and awe, trembling and fear (*Berachot* 22a).

The Ramban, in contrast to the Rambam, counts the mitzvah of recalling the experience at Sinai as an independent mitzvah. The Rav alludes to the possibility that our formal reading of the Torah affords us with the opportunity to fulfill this dictum to evoke the memory of Mount Sinai whenever the Torah is formally read. (And From There You Shall Seek, p.140).

This idea may also explain why *kriat HaTorah* (the formal Torah reading) was inserted within the context of prayer. If it was purely an engagement in Torah learning it should have been placed following prayer. The fact that it is placed within the prayer service points to the notion that reading the Torah is a facet of *avodah shebalev*, it is to be experiential and should conjure up sentiments of standing *lifnei Hashem*, in the presence of God. (*Derashot Harav* p.220) ■

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