

Can a Bar Mitzvah Boy Read Parshas Zachor?

Rabbi Yehuda Balsam

The bar mitzvah is a celebration of a boy becoming obligated in the 613 mitzvos, contained within the Torah. The greatest of all the mitzvos contained in the Torah is the study of Torah itself. It is perhaps for this reason that the minhag developed that a Bar Mitzvah boy is generally called upon to read from the Torah on the Shabbat following his 13th birthday. Generally, the halachah embraces such a practice as a wonderful public display of ahavas hatorah and gratitude towards Hakadosh Baruch Hu. However, a Bar Mitzvah that coincides with parshas zachor may contain halachic problems that would prevent the Bar Mitzvah boy from reading this portion of the Torah. What follows is an investigation of the requirements necessary for one to read from the Torah, a categorization of parshat zachor, and a definition of Bar Mitzvah; all of which are necessary to properly understand this issue.

Can a Kattan read from the Torah?

The Gemarah in Megilah (23a) quotes a Tosefta that says: Everyone may be called to the Torah for one of the seven Aliyos, even a Kattan. The Gemarah then has a machlokes whether a kattan can be called for maftir. This is a bit strange considering the Mishnah (24a) that teaches us that a kattan may be called for maftir. Rabbeinu Tam (cited in Mordechai siman 809) explains that a kattan may be called for maftir which simply repeats the final aliyah that was already read. However, a kattan may not read a new portion of the kri'ah, such as the maftir for Chanukah Shalosh Regalim etc. for which a separate sefer torah is read. This is because the maftir on these days constitutes a chovas hayom. Thus a kattan, who is not obligated in mitzvos cannot discharge an adult's requirement to read this part of the Torah (see Rosh Hashanah 29a). Rabbeinu Tam's opinion is supported by the Tashbetz (1:131) who explains that the only reason a katan can receive one of the seven normal Aliyot is that the Tzibbur fulfills its obligation of krias hatorah with the other olim. This opinion is quoted by the Rivash (shut 35), who explains that a kattan may only receive one of the seven alios if a gadol is actually reading the Torah. The Rivash adds that in his community, this opinion is not followed. Rather, ketanim are called up for maftir. This opinion is supported by the Mordechai (809) and the Mahril (shut 167). They understand the fact that a kattan may be called for one of the seven aliyos to be a clear indication that a kattan may receive maftir. This is the opinion accepted by the Rema (O.C. 282:4) although he does note the dissenting authorities. The Magen Avraham (see M.B. 23) writes that one should make certain that the kattan is a capable reader.

Does this apply to Parshas Zachor?

Based on the manner in which the Beis Yosef (O.C. 282) cites the opinions of the Mordechai and the Maharam Mirutenburg (who say that a kattan may be called for any maftir) one can understand that a kattan can even be called for the four parshiyos. Indeed this is included in the Rema's aforementioned ruling that a katan can be called

up for any maftir. This begs the question: how can a kattan be called up for parshas zachor? Tosfos (Berachos 13a), the Rashba (ibid) and the Ritva (Megilah 17b) all claim that the reading of parshas zachor constitutes a mitvah de'oraisa. A kattan is not obligated in any mitzvos and should not be able to help others fulfill their own commandment. This concern is raised by the aforementioned Mahril, as well as in the Kneset Hagedolah (282). (For a novel answer to this question, see the Bach (ibid)). The Mishnah Berurah (23) cites an answer from the Pri Megadim. He explains that nowadays, Ashkenazim have the minhag that a separate ba'al koreh reads the Torah, not the individual receiving the aliyah. This ba'al koreh, if he is a gadol, allows the tzibbur to fulfill its obligation even if the one receiving the aliyah is a kattan. However, the kattan himself may not read the torah portion of parshas zachor (see Sha'ar Hatziyun 27). The Mishnah Berurah also cites the opinions of the Eliyah Rabbah and the Derech Hachaim that a kattan may not even receive the aliyah. This follows the logic of the Maharshal (cited in Taz 685:2) who claims that even if the ba'al koreh who reads the Torah is a gadol, the chiyuv of parshas zachor can only be fulfilled together with its brachos. Therefore the one who recites the brachos on the Torah must be a gadol as well. This seems to be the opinion of the Aruch Hashulchan (282:16) as well.

Is a Bar Mitzvah boy really a gadol?

In order to be considered a full fledged gadol, a boy must not only reach the age of thirteen years and one day, he must also show the elementary stages of maturation. This is demonstrated by the beginnings of puberty, referred to in the Gemarah (Niddah 58b) as Shte'i Sa'aros. Normally, one has the right to assume that a boy who reached the required age is also physically qualified. This is known as chazakah d'ravah. However, The gemarah (ibid) tells us that chazakah d'ravah only applies to dinim d'rabanan, but for biblical obligations one would need to know for sure whether the requirements have been fulfilled. This leads to a problem for bar mitzvah boys, for we are not interested in advertising the young man's private affairs. Thus one does not wish to inquire of the individual concerning his status, and even if the answer to the inquiry was somehow known, one would not wish to make this information public for fear of embarrassing other Bar Mitzvah boys. It is for this reason that the mikra'ei kodesh (Harrei Kodesh siman 1) recommends that a bar mitzvah boy not read parshas zachor. This opinion is mirrored by the Tzitz Eliezer (7:1), and Rav Moshe Shternbuch. Rav Shternbuch adds that if the bar mitzvah boy tells us that he is a full fledged gadol, we may believe him based on the din of eid echad ne'eman b'issurim (Gittin 2b). This is also quoted in the name of the Steipler (Orchos Rabeinu 2:31). However, Rav Shternbuch discourages asking the boy for tzni'us reasons, and recommends that the bar mitzvah boy receive the aliyah of maftir but not read parshas Zachor. Everyone agrees that he may read the haftorah, and may read the Torah on a normal Shabbos.