

Mental Health & Halacha: **Guidelines For Purim**

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Parshat Zachor

- 1) Someone who struggles with agoraphobia, anxiety, trauma, or another significant mental health challenge and finds it difficult to attend synagogue for Parshat Zachor:
 - a) Ideally, if this can be done without causing distress or aggravating one's condition, one should try to stand outside the synagogue and listen carefully to the Torah reading, and in this manner, provided one can hear clearly, one fulfills the obligation.
 - b) If that is not feasible, it is preferable to come to the synagogue after the services have concluded and read, or arrange for someone else to read, the passage from a kosher Torah scroll. If possible, it is preferable that ten men be present.
 - c) If this too is not possible, one should read the passage from a printed Tanach.
- 2) A woman who finds it difficult to attend synagogue due to her mental health challenges may rely on the opinion that women are not obligated to hear Parshat Zachor. Nevertheless, it is recommended that she read the passage from a printed Tanach.
- 3) One who is hospitalized or resides in an in-treatment facility where there is no minyan or Torah scroll is not required to arrange a minyan or access to a Torah scroll. Rather, one should read from a printed Tanach.
- 4) During Shabbat, one may not leave the facility and travel beyond the techum shabbat (2,000 amot) in order to hear Parshat Zachor, even if the staff have granted them permission.
- 5) If a hospitalized person is granted permission from the staff to go home either to hear Parshat Zachor or to hear the Megillah, and all other relevant considerations are equal, it is preferable to attend the reading of Parshat Zachor.
- 6) If one was unable to hear Parshat Zachor on Shabbat due to mental health challenges and can attend services on Purim morning, they should intend to fulfill the mitzvah of remembering Amalek during the Torah reading.
- 7) One struggling with ADHD who briefly loses focus during Parshat Zachor and misses a few words has nevertheless fulfilled their obligation, provided that they heard the primary theme of remembering Amalek.
- 8) One struggling with OCD who is unsure whether they heard every word or had proper intention should not repeat the reading, and has fulfilled their obligation.

Ta'anit Esther

- 1) Ta'anit Esther is not an obligatory fast in the same sense as other fast days; rather, it is a longstanding custom. Therefore, one who is halachically defined as "ill but not in life-threatening danger" (choleh she'ein bo sakana) is exempt from fasting. Their status is similar to that of a pregnant or nursing woman, and they may not be stringent upon themselves to fast. One experiencing significant weakness is likewise exempt. Certainly, someone considered halachically "ill and in danger" (choleh sheyesh bo sakanah) must not fast and is obligated to eat as necessary to protect their health.
- 2) One struggling with an eating disorder of any kind is exempt from fasting and may not fast, even if their condition is currently balanced and stable.
- 3) One caring for a family member with mental health or significant functional challenges, and for whom fasting would impair their ability to provide proper care, is exempt from fasting. If they can fast without compromising care and without significant difficulty, it is appropriate to fast. Each situation should be evaluated individually.
- 4) One who takes psychiatric medication must continue taking it on the fast day. It is preferable to "dry swallow" the pill, but if one is unable to do so, they may take their medication with minimal water. There is no requirement to render the water bitter.
- 5) One who suffers from various symptoms of anxiety and for whom chewing gum is helpful (for example, one who experiences tic disorder or trichotillomania), is permitted to chew gum. There is no difference whether the gum is flavored or not.
- 6) Someone with OCD or another significant mental health challenge who needs to brush their teeth or use mouthwash on the fast day may do so. One may also use a breath freshener spray or strips.
- 7) Someone experiencing significant anxiety leading up to the fast may take a "Tzom-Kal" pill, or a similar aid, to ease both the fast and their mental state. If one's mental state does not stabilize, one is exempt from fasting.

Zecher L'Machatzit HaShekel

- 1) It is a longstanding custom to give charity in commemoration of the half-shekel on Ta'anit Esther or beforehand. Among many Sephardim, the practice is to give the current market value equivalent of the original half-shekel's silver, which is measured at 9 grams of silver. The custom of Ashkenazim and some North African communities is to give three half-coins of the local currency.
- 2) Giving Zecher L'Machatzit HaShekel applies to those who receive government assistance, such as Sal Shikum, or financial support from charity. In cases of severe financial difficulty, Sephardim may follow the Ashkenazic custom. If even three half-coins pose financial difficulty, one half-coin is sufficient. If in previous years one gave on behalf of

their wife and young children, one should continue to do so this year, giving at least one half-coin for each, and should not **seek to annul this practice**.

- 3) Someone who previously gave according to the custom but is currently hospitalized and unable to give, does not require formal annulment of vows. If possible, the mitzvah may be fulfilled through an agent or by making an online donation, with the intention that it be for this purpose.

Megillah Reading

- 1) One who is in advanced stages of dementia, or whose mental illness halachically defines them as “legally exempt due to lack of halachic capacity” (shoteh), is exempt from positive mitzvot. However, participation in hearing the Megillah, at home or in synagogue, may provide meaningful emotional or psychological benefit. It is appropriate to include them where possible, provided it does not **cause them distress and/or place undue strain on the community**. If the Megillah is read exclusively for such a person, the blessings should not be recited.
- 2) If the Megillah is read exclusively for someone with early or moderate dementia, and it is known in advance that they will not be able to properly follow the reading, the blessings should not be recited, even if they read for themselves.
- 3) One who is unable to attend synagogue due to agoraphobia, anxiety, or another mental health challenge should read, or have someone else read, the Megillah at home from a kosher scroll for them.
- 4) One who reads from a kosher Megillah at home without a minyan recites the blessings beforehand, however, it is customary not to recite the concluding blessing “HaRav et Riveinu” when reading alone. In extenuating circumstances (sha’at ha-dechak) where no other option exists, one may rely upon hearing the Megillah via livestream.
- 5) It is proper to have a printed Megillat Esther in front of oneself while listening, especially if one hears a livestreamed reading. If possible, having a kosher Megillah is preferable. One should follow along so that if a word is missed, it can be read immediately.
- 6) One who struggles with OCD and fears they missed a word should neither repeat it nor seek another reading, as they have fulfilled their obligation.
- 7) One who briefly loses focus during the reading, such as a person with ADHD, fulfills the obligation as long as they continue following along in the text. Even if they think they missed a word or two, they should not reread the Megillah.
- 8) One who cannot tolerate a noisy Megillah reading, such as one who is struggling with PTSD, ADHD, or similar challenges, and whose community offers no quiet option, should hear the Megillah alone at home. One should not be stringent and attend a boisterous minyan if there is concern that this may trigger flashbacks or psychological deterioration.
- 9) Communities should ideally arrange a quiet Megillah reading without loud noise or banging at the mention of Haman, specifically designed for those experiencing PTSD,

anxiety, ADHD, or similar challenges. These rules should be announced clearly in advance. Establishing such a minyan does not minimize the importance of “berov am” (the value of large gatherings) nor the value of publicizing the miracle, on the contrary, it enables broader and more inclusive participation and constitutes a hiddur mitzvah.

- 10) Throwing firecrackers in synagogue should be firmly prohibited. Both out of respect for the synagogue and out of consideration for those struggling with PTSD and anxiety. It is appropriate to prohibit throwing firecrackers not only in the synagogue, but also in the public domain.
- 11) The proper time for the nighttime reading of the Megillah is ideally from nightfall. Nevertheless, in the case of an elderly person living with dementia, or one experiencing significant psychological difficulty who needs to retire early, the Megillah may be read from *plag ha-mincha*. However, in a year when the Megillah is read on *Motzaei Shabbat*, it may not be read prior to the conclusion of Shabbat.
- 12) Ideally the Megillah should not be read during the day before *sunrise*, however, one who must depart early may read from dawn (*alot ha-shachar*). For example: one leaving for a hospital shift or similar obligation.
- 13) One who needs to eat for medical reasons should preferably eat first and hear the Megillah after nightfall (*tzeit ha-kochavim*), rather than hear the Megillah after *plag ha-mincha* while still fasting. The same principle applies to the daytime reading: it is preferable to eat first and hear the Megillah after sunrise, rather than hear it beforehand while having not yet eaten. In all cases where one must eat before Megillah reading, it is advisable to set a reminder so that one does not forget to hear the Megillah.
- 14) Someone who takes psychiatric medication and needs to eat or drink a small amount beforehand, as directed by their doctor or therapist, may do so before the Megillah reading at night or during the day.
- 15) Someone with dementia or various mental health concerns may eat as usual before the Megillah reading, at night or by day, to keep their mental and physical state stable.
- 16) A caregiver who will hear the Megillah later due to caregiving responsibilities, and needs to eat beforehand, may eat fruit or a small amount of *mezonot*. However, one should not establish a regular meal prior to hearing the Megillah.
- 17) A sole caregiver of a person with dementia or another condition requiring close supervision, is considered “engaged in a mitzvah” and exempt from positive commandments when no replacement is available. This applies if fulfillment of the mitzvah would have reasonable potential for impairing the quality of care, even when not actively engaged in a specific caregiving task. Nevertheless, when possible without compromising care, efforts should be made to arrange for a brief replacement or for a home reading. If more than one caregiver is available and logistics allow, each should step away in turn to fulfill the mitzvah.

- 18) If someone did not hear the Megillah during the day and does not have a kosher scroll, they should recite Hallel without a blessing. The same applies if one heard the Megillah via livestream.
- 19) If, prior to Purim, one knows that one will be unable to hear the Megillah reading on Purim and has access to a kosher Megillah, it is preferable to read (or hear) the Megillah before Purim, from the 11th of Adar, without reciting the blessings.

Mishloach Manot

- 1) One may send mishloach manot to someone whose mental condition halachically defines them as a shoteh, though it is preferable to send to an additional individual as well.
- 2) One who is exempt from mitzvot due to mental illness may nevertheless benefit emotionally from participating in preparing and/or distributing mishloach manot. It is appropriate to involve them as much as possible so long as it is beneficial for them and not burdensome.
- 3) Someone with an eating disorder who may be harmed by involvement in food preparation may appoint an agent (shaliach) to send on their behalf, or purchase a ready-made package for one person. If they wish to express friendship to others, they may send non-food gifts that express their friendship and appreciation.
- 4) One may not appoint someone who is halachically defined as a shoteh to deliver mishloach manot on their behalf.
- 5) A hospitalized person may appoint a shaliach to give mishloach manot on their behalf. The food need not first be legally transferred to them. A shaliach may use their own food, so long as they intend to give it for the appointee. A shaliach may be appointed by phone.
- 6) One who is hospitalized or residing in a residential facility where outside food is not permitted, may perform a formal act of acquisition (kinyan) on one's allotted meal, such as lifting the tray in order to acquire it, thereby designating it as one's own, and then exchange meals with a friend, thus fulfilling the mitzvah. If meals are diet specific, one may perform the kinyan on their friend's meal, so that the subsequent swap results in them receiving the correct food for their needs.
- 7) If one sends food that the recipient is unable to eat due to dietary restrictions, allergies, or similar concerns, the sender has fulfilled the mitzvah on a technical level. Nevertheless, ideally one should take such considerations into account in advance, in order to enhance friendship and increase the joy of the day.
- 8) It is forbidden to send wine or alcohol to someone who is struggling with alcohol addiction or has struggled in the past.

Matanot La'Evyonim (Gifts to the Poor)

- 1) One may fulfill matanot la'evyonim by giving to a poor individual whose condition halachically defines them as a shoteh.
- 2) A legal guardian managing the finances of someone with mental health challenges should give matanot la'evyonim on their behalf, in an amount similar to what they gave in previous years, however the amount should be adjusted to their present financial ability.
- 3) A hospitalized individual can perform the mitzvah of matanot la'evyonim with an online donation made via various organizations that ensure the money is distributed to the poor on Purim. Those who do not have access to their phone or wallet may fulfill the mitzvah through a shaliach, or a family member may give on their behalf with that intention.

The Purim Feast and Joy

- 1) There is a mitzvah to rejoice on Purim, as the Megillah states, "to make them days of feasting and joy." Included in this mitzvah is the responsibility to be mindful of those for whom joy is difficult, as well as those with deep emotional struggles. Friends, neighbors, and the broader community bear a responsibility to be attentive to the needs of those struggling with mental health, and to their families who shoulder the burden of care throughout the year, especially on Purim. Each person should offer support and joy according to their ability and the needs of the individual.
- 2) Someone taking psychiatric medication is prohibited from drinking alcohol on Purim, if the medical instructions indicate that alcohol has a negative interaction with their medication.
- 3) One whose mental state makes alcohol consumption unsafe or destabilizing, is prohibited from drinking alcohol on Purim.
- 4) Someone struggling with alcohol addiction, whether in recovery or long recovered, must refrain entirely from drinking alcohol and should avoid any situation that may threaten their stability.
- 5) It is forbidden to offer alcohol to someone who struggles **with addiction or who has** previously struggled with addiction.
- 6) Someone dealing with depression who finds it hard to feel joy should participate in the meal to the best of their ability.
- 7) Someone with an eating disorder, especially if in treatment, should eat according to their regular meal plan or therapeutic guidelines. Their meal counts as the Purim feast, even without bread.
- 8) Someone with dementia or severe mental illness who is halachically exempt, may still benefit emotionally from participating in the Purim meal. It is appropriate to include them gently and respectfully, so long as it does not burden them.

If you have any questions or comments, feel free to reach out to Maaglei Nefesh's rabbinical staff via our website at <https://mnefesh.org/>