

Textual Tapestries
Explorations of the Five Megillot



Gabriel H. Cohn

TEXTUAL TAPESTRIES

EXPLORATIONS OF THE FIVE MEGILLOT

TRANSLATED BY
David Strauss

Maggid Books

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Preface

The Five Megillot (scrolls) – the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther – belong to Ketuvim (the Writings), and are also the reading material for five Jewish holidays: Passover, Shavuot, Tisha B'Av, Sukkot, and Purim. For this reason, each megilla has a special status in Scripture and must be examined both as a biblical text and in relation to its holiday.

This book is not a commentary on the megillot. Every generation has its own commentaries to these books, from the days of the Midrash, through the Middle Ages, to the modern day. Rather, this work presents an analysis of the megillot, exploring conceptual, literary, and pedagogic themes arising from the texts.

While I have used both traditional and more recent Jewish exegesis for this study, it is entirely founded on the texts themselves. Anyone wishing to understand the megillot – irrespective of his or her theological position regarding the books – can thus benefit from the reflections in this book. I have dealt with the plain sense of the biblical texts, but have also tried to reach the depth of that plain meaning using various methodologies and relevant midrashim.

I invite the reader and student to engage actively in a conversation with the text that started with the very writing of the megillot. This

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conversation demands familiarity with the text and a desire to connect with those who have already grappled with both the text and its commentaries. In this way, the megillot, composed in different historical, literary, and social contexts, can significantly enrich our national and personal lives. An encounter with the text demands intellectual, and at times emotional, effort, but the result is a powerful connection with the holy writings.

The Five Megillot breathe the air of different spiritual worlds: The Song of Songs and Lamentations are written as poetry – love songs, and mourning dirges; the books of Ruth and Esther describe events from the period of the Judges in the Land of Israel and from the days of the Persian exile; and the Book of Ecclesiastes joins the other wisdom books in Scripture. Even though the books' natures vary in genre and historical context, their study methods are identical. We will try to identify the unique character of each book, and to understand its messages. We will note the placement of each book in the framework of Scripture and consider its unique language and style. We will study the inner structure of the texts and analyze the linguistic, stylistic, and narrative connections between passages in the Torah and in the megillot, noting when the words of the Torah, echoed in the megillot, guide us toward the text's meaning. We will identify the fundamental ideas of each book, connecting us to classical and contemporary Jewish thought.

The appendices for each book are a starting point for further study of all the megillot. For the Song of Songs, I will offer units of study that the student can develop based on my investigations. For Ruth, I will present questions for further study. For Lamentations, I will discuss midrashim and *piyutim* (liturgical poems) that expound on the book's wording. For Ecclesiastes, I will consider the book's inclusion in the biblical canon, and offer a unique modern introduction to the book. For Esther, I will expand on the relationship between the halakha (the laws and customs of Purim) and the text, and trace the hostility toward the book's reception over the generations. All of these study methods can be applied across the megillot.

In studying the megillot, I have devoted only limited attention to historical questions outside the text, such as questions regarding the authors of the megillot, the circumstances under which they were written, and the identities of the characters and events mentioned in them (for example, who Ahasuerus was). These discussions, which have always

accompanied the megillot, frequently overshadow the essential messages of the books themselves. My discussion of such questions as authorship and history will therefore be marginal.

The studies in this book may be taught at different levels and can also serve as the basis for community and family discussions, as well as for productive individual study.

This book was originally published in Hebrew. David Strauss has done a wonderful job translating it into English. The translation of the biblical texts is based on the Koren Bible translation that was revised and edited by Harold Fisch. The translation of the rabbinic texts is based on the Soncino editions. Thanks are also due to the staff of Maggid Books, to Avigayil Steiglitz who carefully copyedited it, Nechama Unterman and Orit Sinclair who proofread it, and Rabbi Reuven Ziegler and Tomi Mager who saw the project through.

I would like to express my deep-felt gratitude to my family, especially to my wife, Nechama, for constantly encouraging me to publish my studies.

I am deeply indebted to all the exegetes of the megillot over the course of the centuries for teaching me how to read the biblical texts in depth. Many thanks also to the students to whom I have taught the megillot over the years, for all of the insights and creative ideas that they contributed to the educational dialogue that led to the writing of this book.

Gabriel H. Cohn
Autumn 2016/5777

Introduction

Reading the Five Megillot

An old tradition indicates the days in the Jewish calendar on which we read the Five Megillot. Masekhet Soferim 14:1 teaches:

As for Ruth, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther, one must recite the blessing “on reading the megilla,” even though they are written in the Writings. One who reads from the Writings must say, “Blessed are You, O Lord, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with His commandments, and commanded us to read the Holy Writings.”¹

Masekhet Soferim then discusses in detail the occasions on which we read the megillot.

The Talmud makes no mention of the tradition of reading the megilla; the first we learn of it is at the beginning of the geonic period,

1. Most manuscripts of Masekhet Soferim do not mention the Book of Ecclesiastes. See below, the section dealing with the Book of Ecclesiastes and Sukkot.

when Masekhet Soferim was composed.² Presumably, though, the practice was based on existing convention. We know that reading Esther on Purim was already a binding obligation in the days of the Mishna (Megilla 1:1).

Many commentators have drawn parallels between the megillot and the holidays on which they are read. Nevertheless, there are differing customs regarding the reading of the Song of Songs, Ruth, and Ecclesiastes on the festivals. In some communities these megillot are not read at all in public. Even Lamentations, which all communities read publicly, is recited without a blessing according to the Sephardic and eastern customs. Only with regard to Esther and its three preceding blessings, is there no disagreement.

The tradition of reading each megilla at a fixed time of year ensures that Jews study and become familiar with all five books. At the same time, the public reading of these books spiritually enriches their corresponding holidays, as expressed in the liturgy of those days. Here, I will examine the relationship between the Five Megillot and the occasions on which we read them, in Scripture, halakha, Jewish thought, and liturgy.

THE SONG OF SONGS AND PASSOVER

The relationship between the Festival of Freedom (Passover) and the Song of Songs is rooted in the traditional interpretation of the book, which sees the book's love song as an echo of God's love for His people, Israel. The Exodus from Egypt marks the beginning of that special connection, a "betrothal" that reaches its climax with the covenant – or "marriage" – at Mount Sinai. Throughout Scripture, the mutual love of man and wife represents the relationship between God and Israel, and the Song of Songs strongly reflects the Bible's conceptual world.³

2. Owing to the complicated nature of Masekhet Soferim – a text with several versions and many additions – it is impossible to date the book with certainty. According to the generally accepted opinion, however, the book was written in its present format during the geonic period. See Mueller edition (Leipzig, 1878) and Higger edition (New York, 1937); and Y. L. Zunz and C. Albeck, *HaDerashot BeYisrael* (Jerusalem, 5714), 47, and notes there.

3. This point was well emphasized by G. D. Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in *Studies in the Variety of Rabbinic Cultures* (Philadelphia, 1991), 1–17.

The Exodus was a turning point in the development of the unique bond between God and His people: “I remember in your favor, the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, when you did go after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown” (Jer. 2:2). It is only natural, during the month of redemption, when we recall the loving relationship between God and His nation, that we should see the Song of Songs as a fitting expression of the festival’s meaning. This is the time when the people of Israel perceive “the voice of my beloved! Behold, he comes” (Song. 2:1). This is the season when nature is rejuvenated, symbolizing the rebirth of a people, who have rejected slavery and embraced freedom. One need not interpret every verse in the book as a metaphor for the Exodus, but we can certainly understand the book as a whole as a song of the redeemed and reunited. The strong connection between the Song of Songs and the Land of Israel, with the book’s elaborate descriptions of the land, also ties the book to the spring and to the renewal of Israel’s national life in its land.⁴

A strong proof of the ancient connection between the Song of Songs and Passover is that many Passover *piyutim*, dating back to the sixth-century poet Yannai, are based on the Song of Songs and its relevant midrashim. We read the Song of Songs at the Seder and in the synagogue on Passover and we must understand the many accompanying *piyutim* in the context of that book. It is precisely these *piyutim* that unite the Torah’s love of redemption with the Song of Songs’ redemption of love.

THE BOOK OF RUTH AND SHAVUOT

Many commentators explain the connection between Shavuot and the Book of Ruth. I will examine some of these explanations:

1. The primary events described in the book occur between the beginning of the barley harvest (1:22) and the end of the barley and wheat harvest (1:23), that is, from Passover until Shavuot. Since the Book of Ruth speaks of “the beginning of the barley harvest” (1:22), and Shavuot is celebrated at the time of the barley harvest (*Sefer HaManhig, Hilkhos Sukka* 58), the Book of Ruth and Shavuot are a fitting match.

4. See chapter seven, “The Song of the Land of Israel.”

2. The importance of tithes for the poor is celebrated in the Book of Ruth as on the holiday of Shavuot. Ruth's encounter with Boaz takes place during the wheat harvest that ends on Shavuot, when the two-loaf offering is brought from the new wheat.

In *Parashat Emor*, immediately following the section dealing with the two-loaf offering brought on Shavuot, we read: "And when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not altogether remove the corners of your field, when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them to the poor, and to the stranger; I am the Lord your God" (Lev. 23:22). Boaz faithfully fulfilled these obligations to Ruth, who was both poor and a stranger, as he says: "And let fall also some of the handfuls on purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them" (Ruth 2:16). Thus, Ruth is read on that day (*Levush, Oraḥ Hayim*, 494, 2).

The Book of Ruth describes the fulfillment of the commandments of the agricultural gifts that must be left for the poor. It is therefore read on Shavuot, just as the laws of the festival and the laws concerning gifts for the poor are found next to each other in the Torah.⁵

3. Focusing on the conditions through which a person may acquire Torah, *Midrash Zuta* on Ruth (ed. Buber, 1, 1) states: "What is the connection between Ruth and Shavuot that it is read on Shavuot, the time of the giving of the Torah? This comes to teach you that the Torah was given only through affliction and poverty."

Rabbi Avraham Kalfon, in *Hayei Avraham*, 282, tells us that Ruth fulfilled the seven Noahide laws, and when she converted to Judaism, she accepted another 606 commandments (the numerical value of the Hebrew letters comprising her name: *resh, vav, taf*), to show that she now fulfilled all 613 commandments. We therefore read the Book of Ruth on Shavuot, the day on which the Torah was given. Likewise, our forefathers entered into the covenant at Mount Sinai by accepting the Torah, like all non-Jews who convert. It is therefore fitting that on Shavuot, the day of the giving of the Torah, we read a book about a convert.

5. The mitzvot concerning the agricultural gifts that must be left for the poor (gleanings, forgotten sheaves, corner of the field, and poor man's tithe) are among the mitzvot of which a potential convert to Judaism must be informed prior to his conversion (Yevamot 47a).

4. Just as the Book of Ruth focuses on loving-kindness, so too the Torah focuses in its entirety on loving-kindness, as we read: “And on her tongue is a Torah of loving-kindness” (Prov. 31:26) – and the Torah was given on the festival of Shavuot (*Lekah Tov* on Ruth, ed. Bamberger).

5. The author of *Zikhron Devarim* writes (p. 37):

I heard that a certain sage responded in connection with the Oral Law, saying: Surely everyone agrees that King David was a holy man, a wise man, and filled with the spirit of God. And he descended from Ruth the Moabitess, and it is written: “An Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of the Lord” (Deut. 23:4). If so, show honor to the truth of the words of the sages who said: “A Moabite” – but not a Moabitess (Yevamot 76b). And the heretics are forced to admit that the words of the sages are true and just. Understand that he spoke well. I once had a debate with the Karaites on this matter, and they could not answer me, and they stood astonished. (Rabbi Eliezer Tzvi HaKohen Tzwillfel, *Sefer Sanigor* [Warsaw, 5645], p. 146)

In other words, on the day of the giving of the Torah, we stress the importance of the Oral Law by reading a book that is based on a regulation that is part of the Oral Law, for all accept King David’s legitimacy. The Book of Ruth is read on Shavuot in order to emphasize that the Written Law and the Oral Law entered the world together.

6. It seems to me that the correct reason here is that the Book of Ruth was written by the prophet Samuel in order to prove the lineage of King David descending from Ruth the Moabitess. Even God Himself agreed on the matter, and the book ends with the lineage from Peretz to David in his honor, as we find in several midrashim. Additionally, David was born on the festival of Shavuot, as we see in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Ḥagiga* 2:3) and cited by the *Tosafot* in *Ḥagiga* (17a, s.v. *af atzeret*). And it is well known that God completes the years of the righteous to the day; thus, David also passed away on Shavuot. It is fitting, therefore, to read the Book of Ruth on the birthday of King David, peace be upon him, in his honor (Rabbi Shaul of Amsterdam, *Binyan Ariel* [Turnov, 5665], 248).

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The connection between David and Ruth the Moabitess also has contemporary significance, which can be understood from the words of Rabbi Moshe Yaakov Charlap, when he received the news of the United Nations' resolution regarding the establishment of the State of Israel on November 29, 1947:

This is the way that the light of the Messiah begins to shine. When the young David was brought before King Saul, the latter asked about him: "Whose son is the young man?" (I Sam. 17:56), as he saw royal signs in him. Doeg the Edomite said to him: Rather than ask whether or not he is fit for the monarchy, ask whether or not he is fit to enter the congregation (Yevamot 76b). At the very beginning there were those who cast doubt on the very suitability of the founder of the monarchy, and only over the course of time did it become clear that everlasting kingdom issued from him: "It shall be established forever like the moon, and the witness in the sky is sure" (Ps. 89:38). David, king of Israel, lives and endures. (*Maayanot* 6 [Jerusalem, 5718]: 160)

7. There is a progression from the Song of Songs that we read on Passover to the Book of Ruth that we read on Shavuot. The former describes the youthful love between a lover and his beloved, and is read on the festival that always falls in Nisan, the month of the ripening of the produce. The latter describes the devoted love between a more mature woman and her redeemer, and is read on the festival that falls in the summer during the harvest season. The love between the people of Israel and their God developed in similar fashion: from the youthful love of those who had sought freedom at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, to the more emotionally mature love of those who were ready to accept the yoke of the commandments at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.

LAMENTATIONS AND TISHA B'AV

On Tisha B'Av, Torah study is forbidden, because the words of the Torah fall into the category of: "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart" (Ps. 19:9). However, the books of Job and Lamentations and the

prophecies of doom in the Book of Jeremiah are excluded from this prohibition, as it is stated in the Talmud:

Our rabbis have taught: All the restrictions that apply to the mourner hold equally well for Tisha B'Av. Eating, drinking, bathing, anointing, the wearing of shoes and marital relations are forbidden on that day. It is also forbidden thereon to read the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings, or to study Mishna, Talmud, Midrash, halakhot, or aggadot; he may, however, read such parts of Scripture which he does not usually read and study, such parts of Mishna which he usually does not study; and he may also read Lamentations, Job, and the sad parts of Jeremiah; and the schoolchildren are free from school for it is stated: "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart." R. Yehuda said: Even such parts of Scripture which he does not usually read he may not read, nor study parts of the Mishna which he does not usually study, but he may read Job, Lamentations, and the sad parts of Jeremiah; and the schoolchildren are free [from school], for it is stated: "The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart." (Ta'anit 30a)

The *Shulḥan Arukh* accepts the viewpoint of R. Yehuda, who restricts the scope of materials that may be studied on Tisha B'Av (*Orah Ḥayim* 554:1), but adds:

But one is permitted to study *Midrash Eikha* ... and also to study commentaries to Lamentations.

From here we see that studying the Book of Lamentations, even with its commentaries, is central to Tisha B'Av. Indeed, it is obligatory. The source for this obligation is Masekhet Soferim 14:1, referred to earlier, which states that one recites a blessing over the reading of the book. Masekhet Soferim explains the rules for reading the Book of Lamentations (18:5):

There are those who read the Book of Lamentations at night, while others delay it until the morning after the Torah reading. For after

the Torah reading, one person stands up, his head covered in ashes, and his clothing hanging down, and he reads, weeping and wailing. If he knows how to translate it, that is well; if not, he hands over [the task] to someone who knows how to translate it well, and he translates it, so that the rest of the people, women, and children will understand it.

These practices are customs. They are not mentioned in the Talmud and are brought only in *Masekhet Soferim*, which dates from the period of the *Geonim*. They were, however, already accepted in all Jewish communities in the days of the early halakhic codes.⁶

Over the course of time, the morning service of Tisha B'Av was expanded, as was customary on other special occasions, with the insertion of special prayers into the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer, which were called *kinot* (dirges). When their numbers increased, these *kinot* were separated from the *Shemoneh Esreh* prayer, and pushed off until after the Torah reading. In the manner of mourners, congregants sat on the floor while reciting them.

The number of *kinot* grew over the centuries, and with them, different customs regarding which *kinot* to recite and in which order. Most *kinot*, based on scriptural verses and midrashim, relate to the Destruction of the Temple. Some recall the horrors of later periods, such as the *kina* written by the Maharam of Rothenburg, "*Shaali Serufa BeEsh*." A number of *kinot* are arranged acrostically, similar to the Book of Lamentations itself.

The wording and structure of the Book of Lamentations have served as the basis of many *kinot*. The numerous references to the terminology of the book indicate that they faithfully expressed the experience of loss and ruin in every generation.

It is significant that several *kinot* make associations in each stanza with words of rebuke found in the Torah.⁷ This linguistic connection testifies that the authors of these *kinot* saw a fulfillment of the words of

6. See Rabbi S. Y. Zevin, *HaMo'adim BaHalakha* (Jerusalem, 5704), 356ff. He also discusses there the various opinions concerning the recitation of a blessing over the Book of Lamentations.

7. See Lamentations, Appendix I: Midrashim on the Book of Lamentations.

the Torah in the suffering that accompanied the Destruction. In this way, Lamentations became an essential element in the covenant between God and the people of Israel.

The connection between the Book of Lamentations and Tisha B'Av is a natural one. In the wake of the prohibition to study most of the other biblical books on Tisha B'Av, and considering that many commentaries, midrashim, and *piyutim* are based on the wording of Lamentations, study of the Book of Lamentations has logically become an intrinsic part of the day of Israel's commemoration of the Destruction.

THE BOOK OF ECCLESIASTES AND SUKKOT

Regarding the Book of Ecclesiastes, Masekhet Soferim states as follows:

As for Ruth, the Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, and Esther, one must recite the blessing “on reading the megilla,” even though they are written in the Writings. (Masekhet Soferim 14:1 [ed. Higger, New York, 1937])

Higger notes that a significant number of the manuscripts of Masekhet Soferim available to him omit mention of Ecclesiastes, and that a later scribe may have added it, so that the text would correspond to the prevalent practice.⁸ Indeed, Masekhet Soferim later notes the occasions on which we read all the other megillot (14:15-17; 18:5), but makes no further mention of the Book of Ecclesiastes.

Nevertheless, the medieval halakhic authorities certainly connected the reading of Ecclesiastes to Sukkot or Shemini Atzeret. Perhaps, after all the other megillot were established as holiday readings, they sought an appropriate occasion on which to read Ecclesiastes. The reading of Ecclesiastes is mentioned in *Mahzor Vitry* (ed. Horowitz, 440), *Sefer HaManhig* (*Hilkhot Hag*, 57), and *Sefer Maharil* (*Hilkhot Sukka*, 53). In the last-mentioned source, we read: “Ecclesiastes is recited on the

8. In the two Oxford manuscripts and in the two Adler manuscripts and in other manuscripts as well, Ecclesiastes is not mentioned. The manuscripts are described by Higger in his introduction to the book (pp. 81–89). Higger emended the text based on *Mahzor Vitry* and other sources.

Intermediate Day of Sukkot that falls on Shabbat, and one recites over it the blessing ‘on reading the megilla.’”

However, even today, the public reading of Ecclesiastes is not as widely accepted as that of the other megillot. It is likely that because of the debated standing of Ecclesiastes in Scripture, and because many demanded that the book be suppressed,⁹ halakhic authorities instituted the public reading of the book in the synagogue, if at all, at a relatively late date.

A number of commentators suggest a connection between Ecclesiastes and Sukkot:

1. In *Orhot Hayim*, Rabbi Aharon, son of Rabbi Yaakov HaKohen (early fourteenth century) summarizes the explanations offered by the authors of *Maḥzor Vitry* and *Sefer HaManhig*:

It is the custom in France to read the Book of Ecclesiastes on Shemini Atzeret before reading the Torah. The reason for this practice is that it is written, “Give a portion to seven, and even to eight” (11:2), which alludes to the seven days of the festival and the eighth day; and it warns about vows, that one should not come to transgress because of them the prohibition of “You shall not delay” (Deut. 23:22). Some suggest a different reason, namely, that King Solomon said it [Ecclesiastes, in Hebrew *Kohelet*] in a great assembly (*behak’hel*) to offer rebuke to Israel, and it is written: “And all the men of Israel assembled themselves (*vayikahalu*) to King Solomon at the feast in the month of Eitanim” (1 Kings 8:2). It is good to read it in the synagogue... in order to fulfill the obligation of one who is not well versed in it. In Provence, it is read in the sukka.

According to this passage, the book itself alludes to a festival of seven days (Sukkot), as well as a separate eighth day (Shemini Atzeret), and it is precisely on this festival that the congregation must be instructed to fulfill its vows. On Sukkot, in the month of Eitanim (Tishrei), Solomon assembled the people; the Book of Ecclesiastes, which itself was written

9. Regarding the discussions about the repression of the Book of Ecclesiastes, see Ecclesiastes, Appendix I: Ecclesiastes in the Biblical Canon.

by Kohelet, the son of David, demands a great assembly of people for the sake of Torah study and moral rebuke. This call is apparent in his very name, Kohelet, which contains the root letters ק-ח-ל, “to gather.”

2. The author of the *Levush* suggests another explanation:

And the reason is that Sukkot is the “time of our joy” and the Book of Ecclesiastes praises and urges people to rejoice in their lot and not to run after money, for taking pleasure in that which one [already] has is a gift from God. (*Levush HaTor*, 663, 2)

3. Another, more recent, explanation connects three megillot to the three pilgrimage festivals:

The three pilgrimage festivals symbolize this cycle of the seasons of the year: In the ripening season, which corresponds to youth, we read the Song of Songs on Passover (“the time of the singing bird has come” – 2:12); in the harvest season, we read the Book of Ruth, in which the wheat harvest is mentioned; in the ingathering season – old age – we read Ecclesiastes which mentions the end of all men, and concludes with “the end of the matter.”¹⁰

Indeed, we read the Song of Songs, which describes a period of early love, when “the flowers appear on the earth” (2:12). The Book of Ruth, which we read in the harvest season, reflects the high point in man’s life, when responsibility for his family and household is his central focus. In contrast, we read the Book of Ecclesiastes, which describes the end of life (in particular chapter 12), in the autumn, when the falling leaves herald the arrival of winter. The reflections of the author of Ecclesiastes are those of a person who is reviewing his life and parting from this world.

4. We may add to all of the above explanations that it is precisely the Book of Ecclesiastes that is most fitting to read on Sukkot, the “time of our joy (*simḥa*).” Not only does the root ש-מ-ח (rejoice) appear eighteen

10. M. Zer-Kavod, *Kohelet, Daat Mikra* (Jerusalem, 5743), 6.

times in the Book of Ecclesiastes, far more often than it appears in the entire Torah (twelve times), but we see that the author's realistic perspective on life liberates him from false hopes, and allows him to use his days on earth positively. The reality of the world is a fact, but we must fill the cycle of life with significance. Hence, the repeated appeal of Ecclesiastes to rejoice:

So I saw that there is nothing better than that a man should rejoice in his work; for that is his portion; for who shall bring him to see what shall be after him? (Eccl. 3:22)¹¹

THE BOOK OF ESTHER AND PURIM

The Book of Esther is the only megilla over which we recite a blessing both before and after reading it. Even a single individual who reads the book in order to fulfill his obligation must recite a blessing before doing so. The Mishna mentions the obligation to read Megillat Esther on Purim (Megilla 1:1). Both the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud discuss at length the laws regarding the reading of Esther. R. Yehoshua b. Levi says: "One is obligated to read the megilla at night, and then again during the day" (Megilla 4a). The importance that the sages attached to reading the Book of Esther is evident from Tractate Megilla – named after the Megilla of Esther – in which the sages discuss the laws of reading the megilla in great detail.

The obligation to read the Book of Esther is so binding and cherished that:

Torah study should be neglected in order to hear the reading of the megilla. All the more so does this apply to the other mitzvot of the Torah, the observance of which is superseded by the reading of the megilla. (*Shulhan Arukh, Oraḥ Ḥayim 687*)

11. This approach is presented by Rabbi J. Carlebach in his introduction to Ecclesiastes (see Ecclesiastes, Appendix II: A Unique Introduction to the Book of Ecclesiastes) and by Lea Goldberg in her poetry.

The source for the mitzva of reading the Book of Esther is found in the book itself: “And these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation” (Est. 9:28). Rashi comments on this verse: “Remembered’ – through the reading of the megilla.”

The Book of Esther is read on Purim, that is, on the fourteenth or fifteenth of Adar. The book itself alludes to the fact that Purim does not have one uniform date: “‘To confirm these days of Purim in their times’ (Est. 9:31) – [which indicates that] they laid down many ‘times’ for them” (Megilla 2a).

The Book of Esther spells out the two dates. The fourteenth of Adar:

“Therefore the Jews of the villages, who dwell in the unwalled towns, make the fourteenth day of the month of Adar a day of gladness and feasting, and holiday, and of sending choice portions to one another.” (9:19)

The fifteenth of Adar:

“But the Jews who were in Shushan gathered together on the thirteenth of the month, and on the fourteenth of it; and on the fifteenth day of the same they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.” (9:18)

The Book of Esther is read on the fifteenth, not only in the city of Shushan, but in other cities as well: “Cities which had been walled during the days of Joshua the son of Nun, read on the fifteenth” (Mishna Megilla 1:1).

R. Shimon said in the name of R. Yehoshua b. Levi: They showed honor to the Land of Israel that was desolate at that time, and set the criterion back to the days of Joshua the son of Nun. (Y. Megilla 1:1)

It was precisely through this megilla, which relates entirely to the exile, that the sages wished to honor the Land of Israel, which lay in ruins

during that period. They therefore ruled that the cities that had been walled during the days of Joshua the son of Nun, observe Purim on the fifteenth of Adar, and this is the practice in Jerusalem to this very day.

THE ORDER OF THE BOOKS

The Talmud (Bava Batra 14b) tells us that the Writings were originally arranged in chronological order:

The order of the Writings is Ruth, the Book of Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, the Song of Songs, Lamentations, Daniel and the Book of Esther, Ezra, and Chronicles.

The Book of Ruth, “the mother of the monarchy,” preceded the books of Psalms (attributed to King David), Job, and Proverbs (attributed to King Solomon). Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs are also attributed to King Solomon. Lamentations mourns the Destruction of the Temple built by King Solomon, and the books of Daniel and Esther describe the exile that followed the Destruction. Ezra and Nehemiah recount the return to Zion, and Chronicles reviews the history of all these periods.

In the table below, we compare the different arrangements of the books of the Writings over the centuries. In the Middle Ages, the scriptural books were arranged in various ways; the example below (middle column) is from the thirteenth century.¹² Today, almost all editions of the Hebrew Bible group the Five Megillot together, but not in chronological order of when they were written:¹³

12. This example is brought from Codex British Museum Or. 2201.

13. In many medieval manuscripts – including Sephardic manuscripts, manuscripts with the *Mesora*, British Museum codices, Hasley 5710–11, Add. 15251 – the books appear in the same order, with the exception of one change: Chronicles is the first book in the Writings, before the Book of Psalms. From a chronological perspective, this order is understandable, since the Book of Chronicles embraces the entire biblical period, and therefore it could appear either at the beginning or at the end of the Writings. This is the order of all the printed editions, apart from the first three editions and the Bomberg editions of 1521/1525, where the megillot are found immediately after the five books of the Torah.

Talmud	Medieval manuscript	Today's printed editions
Ruth	Psalms	Psalms
Psalms	Job	Proverbs
Job	Proverbs	Job
Proverbs	Ruth	Song of Songs
Ecclesiastes	Song of Songs	Ruth
Song of Songs	Ecclesiastes	Lamentations
Lamentations	Lamentations	Ecclesiastes
Esther	Esther	Esther
Daniel	Daniel	Daniel
Ezra and Nehemiah	Ezra and Nehemiah	Ezra and Nehemiah
Chronicles	Chronicles	Chronicles

Whereas at first the books were organized chronologically, according to the time they had been written, over the course of the generations the megillot were rearranged in chronological order according to the time of year that we read them. In the post-talmudic period, the Five Megillot were arranged together after the three “wisdom books” (Psalms, Proverbs, and Job), and before the three historical books (Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, and Chronicles).

All Jewish communities began reading the megillot at their appointed times in the calendar, which influenced the *piyutim* of those holidays. These readings profoundly strengthened the connection between the Jewish people and the megillot.