

## Introduction to Tractate Megillah

In tractate *Megillah* the law combines rules for declaiming the Megillah, the scroll of Esther that must be recited at Purim, and rules for declaiming other obligatory passages of Scripture. Israel must hear these passages from Scripture not only in community—that is, with other Israelites, for instance, in the marketplace of the village—but also in the framework of a particular location, the synagogue and there alone. This accounts for the *Megillah*'s presentation first of the case (the public recitation in the synagogue of the Megillah) and then of the rule (the public declamation of other passages of the Torah).

- I. The laws of declaiming the scroll of Esther
- II. The laws of synagogue property and liturgy
  - A. The disposition of synagogue property
  - B. Rules for reading scriptures in synagogue worship
  - C. The lections

*Megillah* primarily addresses the proper understanding of the synagogue. A synagogue is not defined by a contained space of a particular character. Rather, a synagogue is defined as the presence of the quorum of male Israelites assembled for the conduct of certain specific activities. The law in *Megillah* does not specify the traits that a building must exhibit in order to qualify for use as a synagogue, though it does recognize that a building may be consecrated for synagogue activities alone. The law, however, does indicate what is necessary for the conduct of the activities particular to a synagogue, and it does so in terms of the presence of holy Israel embodied in ten males. The synagogue finds its definition in its function; it is not a place to which Israelites go to meet God, as the Temple is. Rather, it is utopian in the simplest sense: anyplace where ten Israelite males conduct a specified activity, the function of the synagogue is carried out. A synagogue exists without regard to the location of the assembled male Israelites or the character of the space that contains them. Now, as a matter of fact, that qualification is explicitly not the case when we define the two other venues where Israel and God meet, the Temple and the “enlandised household.” This enlandised household extends to the village, that is, the household in the Land of Israel possessed of a plot of land in the Land. To state matters negatively, the Temple cannot be defined as the place where ten Israelites come together to kill a cow. The enlandised household cannot be set forth as a location where ten Israelites produce crops; it is only a plot of ground owned by an Israelite in the Land of Israel that produces crops.

The Temple is locative in that it can only be where it is and nowhere else—in Jerusalem on the Temple mount. And, in positive terms, it is there and only there that the activities characteristic of the Temple can be carried out. Israelites may say their prayers anywhere, may gather to hear the Torah declaimed in any location. But to slaughter an animal designated for God, to collect its blood and toss the blood upon a stone altar, to burn up parts (or all) of the animal as an offering made by fire to God—these activities can take place only in that one place.