

Triennial Torah Reading

A congregation has read Torah according to the triennial cycle for five years. The rabbi wishes to return to the traditional annual cycle. Before deciding the matter, the congregation and the rabbi agreed to study the matter. Is there any halakhic objection to the triennial cycle and what procedure should be followed should the congregation decide to continue its current practice?

Differences in Torah reading systems are not new. Not only was there a difference between the annual Torah reading system of Babylonia (resulting in the annual celebration of Simhat Torah) and the triennial system of Palestine (resulting in only a triennial celebration of Simhat Torah), there were even differences among Palestinian congregations themselves (see Dr. B.M. Lewin, *Otzar Hilufei Minhagim*, Makor, Jerusalem, 1972, p. 98; A. Epstein, *miKadmoniyot haYehudim*, p. 58; Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*; David Novak, *Law and Theology in Judaism*, vol. 2, Chapter 10). The Talmud was already aware of these differences (see *Megillah* 29b), and the Massoretic notes at the end of each book of the Torah still number each book's respective *sedarim*, the smaller divisions of the Torah following the triennial system. Yet by the time of Maimonides, though the Palestinian system was known, the annual Torah reading cycle was the norm. Thus he writes: "The common custom in all Israel is to complete the Torah reading in one year..." (*Laws of Prayer* 13:1).

In 1974, Rabbi Jeffrey Tigay analyzed the Torah reading systems employed in Conservative synagogues and published his findings in an article entitled "Triennial Confusion" (*Conservative Judaism*, vol. 29, no. 1, Fall, 1974, pp. 81-84). He wrote that while we would have expected that the spiritual morass of our times which has made sincere prayer problematic would have resulted in the popularization of Torah reading—especially as a vehicle for study, the opposite is

the case. The Torah reading itself has been perceived as so onerous as to warrant abridgement. To be sure, there are those who would argue that a truncated Torah reading would make it more meaningful and greater attention could be paid to the details of smaller segments. Yet despite these possible benefits, Rabbi Tigay wrote, "The triennial cycle has now become a grotesque distortion which bears little resemblance to its alleged (Palestinian) precedent." He goes on to say that not only is the modern "triennial cycle" an "inauthentic imitation of the ancient one but also a denial of the Mishnaic dictum *ein medallegin baTorah*, 'there is to be no skipping in the Torah (reading)'" (Mishnah *Megillah* 4:4). Interestingly, the Jerusalem Talmud itself supports this dictum (*Megillah* 4:5, 75b) concluding that "they will read the Torah to Israel in order".

Commenting on the Mishnah, RaShI (*Megillah* 24a, s.v. *ve' ein medallegin*) explains the reason for the proscription stating that this is because the listener will be confused and inattentive if skipping occurs.

Rabbi Tigay illustrates how correct RaShI was by citing some typical skips in congregations that read one third of each *parashah* in each of three successive years. In the first year, the congregation hears of the Flood, but it learns of Noah's departure from the ark one year later and of his drunkenness in the third year. In the first year of *Parashat Vayyera*, the reading ends with Lot's request to flee to a nearby town, but the response is not heard until the second year. One week, the congregation hears of God's promise that Sarah will give birth, and the next week it learns of her death. Only a year later does it hear of the birth of Isaac. "In these and many other cases", writes Rabbi Tigay, "narratives are simply left incomplete for one or two years while their sequels are read immediately."

Recent attempts to standardize the triennial reading system have not lessened the confusion. ("A Complete Triennial System for Reading the Torah", Rabbi Richard Eisenberg, Rabbinical Assembly Committee on Jewish Law and Standards, August 1988, and supplementary letter of Rabbi Eisenberg, July 28, 1989.) These attempts all differ from the system of dividing the weekly Torah into four parts with the first section to be read on Shabbat afternoon, the second section on Monday morning, a third section on Thursday morning, and the balance to be read the following Shabbat morning. This cumulative system appears to be legitimate since it is mentioned in the Mishnah (*Megillah* 3:6), sanctioned by the *Tosefta* (*Soferim* 10:4; *Megillah* 4:10), and discussed in both Talmuds (*Megillah* 31b and Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 3:7). However, what is clear from a close reading of the Mishnah is that whatever was read during the week was repeated the following Shabbat morning (see Rabbi Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshuta*, *Mo'ed*, p. 1174). Besides, the Jerusalem Talmud rejects the cumulative system sanctioned by the *Tosefta* in favor of the close reading of the Mishnah, and the Babylonian Talmud rejects the cumulative system—identified with the opinion of Rabbi Meir—in favor

of the normative view of Rabbi Judah (see Rabbi David Novak, *Law & Theology in Judaism*, Second Series, pp. 170–171).

Aside from the fact that the triennial system is at variance with Jewish practice since the days of Maimonides, contrary to the Mishnah, and inimical to the proper understanding of the Torah, it simply does not produce the benefits its proponents suggest. There are no reported cases where a shift to the triennial system has increased synagogue attendance or made the congregants more sophisticated students of Torah.

If a congregation is currently not reading the full Torah portion each week, every effort should be made to move them back to complete reading on the annual cycle. In situations where the transition back to tradition must be gradual, then (based on *Soferim* 11:6; Rabbi Meir ben Barukh Ha Kohen, *Hagahot Maimoniyot* to Maimonides, *Laws of Prayer*, Chapter 12, subparagraph *mem*; Rabbi Joseph Karo, *Shulhan Arukh, Orach Hayyim* 137:3 and 282:7) at least the first four sections should be read on Shabbat morning and the last three sections along with the first section of the coming week's *parashah* should be read on Shabbat afternoon. Gradually, the Shabbat morning Torah reading should be expanded until the full portion is read.

Rabbi David Novak for the Panel of Halakhic Inquiry.