

Annual and Triennial Systems for Reading the Torah

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This paper was adopted on April 29, 1987 by a vote of seven in favor, four opposed, and two abstaining (7-4-2). Members voting in favor: Rabbis Isidoro Aizenberg, Ben Zion Bergman, Elliot N. Dorff, Richard L. Eisenberg, Mayer E. Rabinowitz, Seymour Siegel and Gordon Tucker. Members voting in opposition: Rabbis David H. Lincoln, Lionel E. Moses, Joel Roth and Steven Saltzman. Members abstaining: Rabbis David M. Feldman and George Pollak.

Note: "Is There An Authentic Triennial Cycle of Torah Readings?" by Rabbi Lionel E. Moses, was approved by the same vote as an appendix to this paper.

שאלה

Is the widespread practice of dividing a פרשה into thirds, and reading a third each Shabbat in consecutive years acceptable according to halakha?

תשובה

We applaud the thorough research of Rabbi Lionel E. Moses in his responsum on the triennial cycle, appended to this statement. We support, as does he, the validity of (1) the annual cycle; (2) the modified annual cycle of the Tosefta¹ and Rabbi Meir,² in which the first עלייה of the פרשה is read on Saturday afternoon, the second on Monday, the third on Thursday, and the remaining עליות are read on Saturday morning, with adjustments during those weeks when a special reading for a New Moon, holiday, or fast day must be read during the week; and (3) the Palestinian triennial cycle, as delineated by Rabbi Moses, together with the rationales he describes for each of those options. However, contrary to Rabbi Moses, we also consider valid (4) the

The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Rabbinical Assembly provides guidance in matters of halakhah for the Conservative movement. The individual rabbi, however, is the authority for the interpretation and application of all matters of halakhah.

practice of many Conservative congregations to read the first third (commonly the first three עליות) of the normal, weekly פרשה in one year, the second third (commonly the fourth and fifth עליות) in the second year, and the third third (commonly the sixth and seventh עליות) in the third year for the following reason.

It is not in violation of the principle אין מדלגין בתורה since that principle can well mean, as the Babylonian Talmud³ and R. Obadiah of Bertinoro understand it, that one may not skip from one section to another in the reading of a given day. The Babylonian Talmud excuses the skipping done by the High Priest on the Day of Atonement from Leviticus 16:1-34 to Leviticus 23:26-32 because the resulting reading is about one subject, and the same rationale applies to the common practice on a minor fast, when we skip from Exodus 32:14 to Exodus 34:1. Both of those, however, are exceptions to the rule prohibiting skipping from one place to another in one day's reading, with no relevance to what one reads from week to week.

The Advantages of this Form of Modified Triennial Cycle

The distinct advantage of this form of triennial cycle is that it enables a congregation to adhere to the calendar used throughout the Jewish world while at the same time shortening the Torah reading. Both traditional functions of the Torah reading – teaching the Torah to the congregation and reenacting the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai – can be achieved by this triennial cycle, just as it can by all of the other valid options for reading the Torah listed above. This is not the historical, Palestinian triennial cycle, but it is not a violation of Jewish law for the reasons delineated in the last two paragraphs and it therefore is a valid option for congregational practice.

Keeping the Modified Triennial System Flexible

Congregations which use this system may choose to lengthen the section for a given year if it is too short to accommodate seven עליות without ending one or more of the עליות on a negative note. It is also permissible to extend the reading forward or backward in order to include an especially notable section (e.g., the Song of the Seas, the Ten Commandments, the שמע) or one on which the rabbi wants to dwell, provided that the added section is contiguous with the normally designated section. It is a violation of the prohibition against skipping in the Torah reading, however, if one begins in one place and skips to another in order to include a desired section. Similarly, the *Maftir*

section for this triennial cycle should be taken from the last verses of the portion read, whether or not that coincides with the *Maftir* specified in the annual cycle.

Guidelines

Those congregations which follow this type of modified triennial cycle may either read the usual, first עליה of each פרשה on Saturday afternoons, Mondays and Thursdays, regardless of the current year of the triennial cycle, or they may read the first עליה to be read on Saturday morning, provided that it contains a minimum of ten verses which can be divided into three sections without doing violence to the content and without ending any reading on an adverse note. Neither practice would constitute a violation of the prohibition against skipping⁴ as the Babylonian Talmud understands it, since there would be no skipping in the reading of any particular day. Either practice would also help listeners anticipate the פרשה for the next Saturday morning; the former system (reading the usual first עליה of the פרשה) has the advantage of reminding the listener of the name of the פרשה and the context of whatever will be read, and the latter practice (reading what actually will be read as the first עליה the next Saturday morning) has the advantage of preparing the listener for the actual Torah reading for the next Saturday.

The practice which would be ruled out by our reading of the Mishnah⁵ cited in the last paragraph is the system whereby a congregation reads the usual, first עליה each Saturday morning and then skips during the second and third years of the triennial cycle to the fourth or sixth עליה. This practice should be discontinued.

CONCLUSION

The practice of dividing the פרשה into thirds and reading a third each Shabbat in consecutive years is acceptable halakhic practice for Conservative congregations.

NOTES

1. *M. Megillah* 3:10.
2. *B. Megillah* 31b.
3. *B. Megillah* 24a.
4. *M. Megillah* 4:4.
5. *B. Megillah* 4:4.