

“Because We Always Start at the Beginning”:

A Dissent to Rabbi Miles B. Cohen, “Modification of the Triennial Cycle Readings for Combined Parashot in Certain Years”

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The following paper was submitted, in September 2021, as a dissent to “Modification of the Triennial Cycle Readings for Combined Parashot in Certain Years” by Rabbi Miles B. Cohen. Concurring and dissenting opinions are not official positions of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards.

This dissenting opinion was reviewed and approved by Rabbi Richard Eisenberg, the original author of "A Complete Triennial System for Reading the Torah" as approved by the CJLS in 1988.

Rabbi Miles B. Cohen has argued, and the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards has ruled, that in year 3 of the triennial cycle when a parashah that is sometimes combined with another parashah is read separately in that year, that the final third of that parashah should be read. In the original triennial cycle composed by Rabbi Richard Eisenberg and approved by the CJLS in 1988, the first third of the parashah was to be read when the entirety of the parashah had already been read over years 1 and 2. Rabbi Cohen explains, and the Committee was convinced, that this original aspect of the triennial cycle was counterintuitive, and he testified through his experience as editor of the *Luah* used throughout our movement that this has caused much confusion and triggers a variation of practice that the original triennial cycle approved by the CJLS had intended to standardize. We appreciate that reasoning. However, the original cycle continues to offer a valid approach, and that the pattern for year 3 is certainly not an “anomaly” and that its “rationale” was clear. Since the rationale was not articulated in the explanations and appendix to the original 1988 paper, I offer an explanation here.

Rabbi Cohen writes that “the anomalous parashah pairs” are Vayakhel-Pekudei, Tazria-Metzora, Aharei-Kedoshim, Behar-Behukotai, Hukat-Balak and Matot-Masei. He also notes that Nitzavim-Vayelevkh “does not exhibit the anomaly.” These are in fact all of the double parashiyot. The reason why Nitzavim-Vayelevkh is not included in Rabbi Cohen’s list is because, according to the triennial cycle, Nitzavim and Vayelevkh are each read in their entirety when read separately because they are too short to be divided into thirds. The other six groupings constitute every other double parashah pair. Taken with Nitzavim, we find that according to the original cycle, in every case where the first parashah that is sometimes combined with another parashah is read in its entirety over years 1 and 2, and then read separately in year 3, that we read from the first third of that parashah in year 3. Nitzavim does not vary from the pattern because even there we must read the entirety of the parashah in any year that it is read by itself, but we are still beginning at the beginning of the parashah in year 3. This constitutes a clear pattern, rather than the “anomaly” that Rabbi Cohen presents without explanation.

The reason why the first third is read in each of these cases is because the entirety of the parashah in question would already have been read over the first two years of the cycle. The end of the first parashah of a double parashah, for example, will be read together with the beginning of the second parashah when the two are combined in year 2. This only applies to the first parashah of the double pair because the end of the second parashah will not have been read in combination in years 1 and 2 and will therefore need to be read in year 3. The double parashah phenomenon is the most complicated aspect

of the triennial cycle because the together and separate patterns do not follow a three-year cycle. That being said, when the entirety of the first parashah of a pair will have been read by the end of year 2, any portion of that parashah could be read in year 3 in order to fulfill the primary purpose of the triennial cycle which was to ensure that every word of the Torah would have been read from over the three-year period. As there was no necessity to read the final third in year 3 in such cases, the decision was made to read the first third. There were and are several reasons for this.

The primary concern was to help congregations facilitate Torah reading. This was one of the principal reasons for the triennial cycle: to reduce the amount of Torah reading that a limited number of qualified Torah readers would need to prepare for any individual week. Because the beginning of each parashah remained the reading for Saturday afternoon and Monday and Thursday mornings, the original triennial cycle, as approved by the CJLS in 1988, prescribed the beginning of the parashah (of the first parashah of a double-parashah pair that is read separately in year 3 when the parashah was already read in its entirety over years 1 and 2). Since the beginning of that selection will already have been learned by the Torah reader(s) for synagogues that have a Shabbat afternoon, or Monday and Thursday morning minyan, this assignment had a significant practical benefit. Another reason the 1988 triennial cycle preferred the beginning of the parashah was that it is generally easiest to locate in the Torah scroll. Additionally, as the CJLS had decided to maintain the same parashah assignments as the rest of the Jewish world, the beginning of the parashah was optimal in maintaining that connection. Before the triennial cycle was standardized by the CJLS in 1988, some congregations would read the first paragraph of the parashah for the first aliyah, and then skip to the second or third third, starting with that initial paragraph as it was most associated with the weekly parashah assignment. While the triennial cycle responsum argued that it was generally not permissible to skip over verses on a given Shabbat (from the opening paragraph to a later section in the parashah, although it did affirm that it was permissible to do so from Shabbat to Shabbat), when it was possible to read from the beginning of the parashah that would be preferable.

A similar situation is addressed by the Talmud at Megillah 31b where a braita records a difference of opinion between Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah as to the proper assignments of Torah readings for the Shabbat afternoon and Monday and Thursday morning services:

תנו רבנן: מקום שמפסיקין בשבת שחרית שם קורין במנחה, במנחה שם קורין בשני, בשני שם קורין בחמישי, בחמישי שם קורין לשבת הבאה, דברי מאיר. רבי יהודה אומר: מקום שמפסיקין בשבת שחרית שם קורין במנחה ובשני ובחמישי ולשבת הבאה.

The Rabbis taught: At the place where they stop reading [the Torah] on Shabbat morning [i.e. the end of the prior week's parashah] they start to read on [Shabbat] minhah [i.e. the beginning of the new week's parashah]. At the place where [they stop reading at Shabbat] minhah they start to read on Monday. At the place where [they stop reading on] Monday they start to read on Thursday. At the place [they stop reading on] Thursday they start to read on the following Shabbat. Such is according to Rabbi Meir. [But] Rabbi Yehudah says: At the place where they stop reading on Shabbat morning they start to read at [Shabbat] minhah and on Monday and on Thursday and on the following Shabbat.

The question the gemara addresses through this braita is what section of the parashah of the week should be assigned on Saturday afternoon, and on Monday and Thursday mornings. Rabbi Meir held that the reading should be sequential. The new week's parashah should be started on Shabbat minhah. The next section should be read on Monday morning and the subsequent section on Thursday morning and the remainder of the parashah would be read on the following Shabbat. This system is intuitive as at each service the next section of the Torah would be read. However, Rabbi Yehudah disagrees, holding that the beginning of the parashah should be read on Shabbat minhah as well as Monday and Thursday and the following Shabbat (when the entirety of the parashah would be read). While both Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Yehudah employ systems where the entirety of the parashah is read over the course of the week, Rabbi Meir follows a sequential pattern whereas Rabbi Yehudah preferences the beginning of the parashah. The halakhah, and current practice, follows Rabbi Yehudah.

While the gemara does not explain why Rabbi Yehudah prefers to back up to the beginning of the parashah on Monday and Thursday (and the following Shabbat), Rabbi Yosef Karo offers the following explanation in the Bet Yosef to the Tur at Orah Hayim 135:3: שלעולם מתחילים לקרות בראש הסדר , that we always begin to read at the beginning of the parashah. (Karo codifies the halakhah in the Shulhan Arukh at Orah Hayim 135:2). We associate each parashah (Karo uses the words *seder* or order, from which we get *sidrah*) with a beginning, and when we have a choice to read any section it is preferable to read the first section so as to always start at the beginning.

Besides the pragmatic reasons of reducing the amounts of Torah reading our Torah readers must prepare from week to week, the preference for the initial third in the first parashah of a double pair when read separately in year 3 of the triennial cycle when the entirety of the parashah was read over years 1 and 2 accords with the preference of the halakhah, following the opinion of Rabbi Yehudah in the braita, to start the parashah at the beginning when possible.