

TRIENNIAL CONFUSION

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WHETHER OR NOT IT IS TRUE that the synagogue had its origin in Bible study sessions, we once took pride in the fact that the intellectual experience of *talmud Torah* is the core of our worship. One might have thought that in spiritually troubled times such as ours when prayer has become so problematic, the Torah-reading would become more popular: if it is not within him to pray, the modern American Jew—supposedly the most highly educated in history—can surely read, listen, and be taught. But far from becoming more popular, the Torah-reading has itself become so problematic that some people have come to believe that the only way “to exalt the Torah” (*lehagdil torah ulehaadir*) is through abridgment.

The tradition has provided a refuge in this predicament—the triennial Torah-reading cycle which was followed in ancient Palestine. This precedent has encouraged many congregations to reduce the time allotted to the Torah-reading by two-thirds, which at least makes the reading less “burdensome.” It should also make the reading more meaningful: by proceeding at a more deliberate pace through the Torah and by focussing on a shorter segment of the text each week, more details can be given greater attention than is possible under the one-year cycle.

distortion

DESPITE ITS POSSIBLE BENEFITS, the triennial cycle has now become a grotesque distortion which bears little resemblance to its alleged precedent. For while the ancient Palestinian Jews read through the entire Torah *in sequence* during the three and a half year period, many American congregations have instead adopted a peculiar mixture of the one- and three-year cycles. They have retained the weekly *parashah* division of the one-year cycle, but read the first third of each *parashah* in the first year of cycle, the second third in the second year, and the final third in the third year of the cycle. Adding to the confusion, some congregations

also include—no matter what the year—the opening sentence from which the *parashah* derives its name, and the concluding *maftir* section as defined in the one-year cycle. The *haftarot* of the one-year cycle are retained throughout.

The modern “triennial cycle” is not only an inauthentic imitation of the ancient one but also a denial of the mishnaic dictum *ein midalgin ba-torah*, “there is to be no skipping in the Torah (reading)”¹ (*Mishnah Megillah*, IV, 4). The Jerusalem Talmud records the following exchange on this mishnah: “(This is) because we do not roll the Torah (scroll) in public.” Rabbi Yose: ‘Suppose it is a small section’ (being skipped, so that no rolling would be necessary)?² He was answered: ‘The reason is so that they will read the Torah to Israel in order.’³ Rashi,⁴ followed by commentators on this mishnah in the Jerusalem Talmud, finds the latter reason to be decisive, stating: “(This is) because the mind of one who hears the (reader) skipping from place to place is not (sufficiently) at ease to pay attention.”⁵

So seriously did the rabbis take the sequence of the Torah that *smikhut haparashot* (inference from the juxtaposition of sections) became an exegetical principle. Even apart from this homiletical concern, one need only contemplate a few typical skips within the modern triennial cycle (which divides the *parashot* after *shelishi* and *chamishi*) to understand the confusion it entails. In *parashat Noah* the congregation hears of the flood one year, Noah’s departure from the ark a year later (admittedly, this fits the story’s own chronology!), and his drunkenness in the third year. In *parashat Vayera*, the first year’s reading ends with Lot’s request to flee to a nearby town, but the answer is not heard until the second year. In *parashat Balak*, Balaam travels to Balak in the first year, undertakes his cursing assignment in the second, and is dismissed by Balak in the third. In these and many other cases, narratives are simply left incomplete for one or two years while their sequels are read immediately: one week the congregation hears God’s promise that Sarah will give birth (*parashat Vayera*); the next week it learns of her death (*parashat Hayyei Sarah*); only a year later, does it hear of the birth of Isaac (*Vayera*).

There were some compelling reasons for this disjunction of the *parashot*. In a discussion of the triennial cycle published in *Beineinu* (January

1 *Mishnah Megillah* IV, 4.

2 For further sources see S. Lieberman, *Tosefta Kifshutah*, Moed, p. 1193.

3 *Yerushalmi Megillah* IV, 5, 75b.

4 *Megillah* 24a.

5 As in the case of the modern disjointed triennial system, where major skips take place from week to week and the rolling is not done during the service.

1974), Rabbi Solomon M. Kaplan pointed out the problems that would be raised for American Judaism by the *sequential* reading of the ancient triennial procedure: it would supposedly create disunity between congregations following the triennial cycle and those following the annual cycle because at almost any given time they would be reading widely separated parts of the Torah, and it would eliminate (or render meaningless) Simhat Torah two years out of three, since the Torah-reading would only be completed every third year.

precedent

WEIGHTY AS THESE PROBLEMS may seem, they are not serious enough to justify disrupting the continuity of the Torah. Nor is their toleration unprecedented: Benjamin of Tudela reports (ca. 1170) that in Cairo the synagogue of Babylonian Jews followed the annual cycle while the synagogue of Palestinian Jews in the same city finished the Torah in three years. Far from being divided by the discrepancy, “the two communities have an established custom to unite and pray together on the day of the Rejoicing of the Law, and on the day of the Giving of the Law.”⁶

We can learn from the Cairo Jews’ tolerance of different readings within their city’s congregations. Such a difference would never be noticed in any particular congregation but only by members of a synagogue on one cycle visiting a synagogue on the other cycle. There is no gainsaying the ideal of every congregation in the world reading the same *parashah* at the same time, but failure to achieve this ideal is far less serious than the effects of a disjointed reading of the Torah on worshippers in their home synagogues week after week.

Simhat Torah is more of a problem, but the example of the Palestinian Jews in Cairo shows that followers of the triennial cycle can also find a way to celebrate Simhat Torah meaningfully. The holiday itself is a rather late development; congregations which are innovative enough to shift to the triennial cycle would presumably feel free to make the necessary changes. The focus would have to be on rejoicing over our *possession* of the Torah rather than completion of its reading. (See Theodor H. Gaster’s *Festivals of the Jewish Year* for suggested observances on the themes of Simhat Torah.)

Another problem with a sequential reading of the Torah over three years is the question of *haftarot*. Knowledge of the *haftarot* used for the 154 to 175 weekly portions (*sedarim*) of the ancient triennial cycle is incomplete. The establishment of a complete triennial cycle of *haftarot*,

6 Quoted by L. Jacobs in *Encyclopedia Judaica* 15, col. 1247.

based on the work of Büchler and Mann,⁷ would have to be undertaken by an official representative or (of committee) the Conservative movement whose decision would be accepted by all of its constituents. There is hard work to be done here, but an increase in the number of *haftarot* offers the educational bonus of exposing congregants to more of the Prophets. Such a procedure is far more appetizing than a disjointed reading of the Torah.

alternatives

I MYSELF WOULD PREFER to see no abridgment of the annual Torah-reading cycle at all. I have not heard of any cases where the triennial cycle has improved attendance. If time must be saved, the endless and unedifying *mi-sheberakhs* after each *aliyah* are—except for special occasions—far more expendable (along with such bar mitzvah gimmickry as the laying on of the *tallit*).

Abridgment, however, does not tackle the essence of the problem. A major obstacle to the appreciation of the Torah-reading is the archaic English of the Hertz *Chumash*; there is no better means of overcoming that obstacle than the superbly readable new Jewish Publication Society translation. The branches of the Conservative movement, along with the other sectors of American Judaism, ought to join in urging JPS to get on with the Hebrew-English edition of the Torah and *haftarot* which it promised as long ago as 1962. The longer we have to wait for this edition, the longer our problem will continue. In addition, we ought to encourage the publication of a new synagogue commentary which will speak to contemporary Jews as the Hertz commentary spoke to an earlier generation.

In conclusion, we ought to take positive steps to enable the Torah to speak to our congregations. Resorting to the triennial cycle is simply a retreat from the problem. But if some of us must abridge, let us do so in a sensible way. A triennial system which disregards continuity and serves up weekly readings without beginning or end implies that nobody is paying enough attention to the Torah-reading to notice.

⁷ See *Encyclopedia Judaica* 15, cols. 1387-1389 for summary and bibliography; cf. vol. 16, cols. 1343-1344.