

The Torah Cycle of Readings

The Parashot Explained

Publicly reading from the Torah is a demonstration of preparation and commitment to the Jewish community. The holiday of Simchat Torah celebrates the completion of one cycle of reading from the Torah Scroll and the next cycle begins without interruption. This marks the annual cycle, which begins with Bereshit (Genesis) on the 23rd of Tishrei, which is equivalent to September or October on the Gregorian calendar. The readings finish a year later with the reading of the book of Deuteronomy at the time of Sukkot.

The Torah is divided into 54 portions with one being read each week. Inclusive with the weekly portions is a specially selected related subject from the Nevi'im (Prophets), known as the Haftarah. Together along with some commentary makes up a book called the *Chumash*. The weekly Torah readings for the Sefardim are known as *Parashot*, while to the Ashkenazim they are known as *Sidra*.

The Chumash typically will have an index listing the names of all the Torah portions in order. In looking for a Chumash, it may be helpful to know the variety of words used to refer to this book. The word Chumash has a Hebrew derivative that comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for "five," (*chamesh*) referring to the five books of Moses, the Torah. This is how the Torah also became known as the Pentateuch, from the Greek word for five.

The following is a list of Torah portions in the annual cycle, starting from the beginning, Genesis (Bereshit). This list will tell you which Torah portion is scheduled for each week of the year and will have a brief description of its contents.

1. The descriptions were compiled from the following sources: "Adas Israel Chronicle," Adas Israel Congregation (Washington, D.C. 1979-1981). Arthur Chiel, Guide to Sidrot and Haftarot, Ktav (New York, 1971).

Description of Torah Portions

Book of Genesis/Bereshit

1. BERESHIT Genesis 1-6:8

This parashat begins with three simple but very important Hebrew words, "Bereshit barah Elohim..." "In the beginning G-d created..." Here is the most important teaching of Judaism: that there is a G-d and that He is the Creator of all life.

2. NOACH Genesis 6:9-11:32

Unlike other accounts of massive floods in primeval times, the biblical account underscores the ethical foundations of civilization. The world was destroyed because of selfishness and sin.

3. LECH LECHA Genesis 12-17:27

Abraham hears the call to leave his father's house, to search for a new way of life.

4. VAYYERA Genesis 18-22

Abraham's love of G-d is tested. He is impelled to offer his son as a sacrifice, which G-d rejects. The rejection of human sacrifice is a milestone in the growth of civilization.

5. CHAYYE SARAH Genesis 23-25:18

This parashat deals with the life of Abraham and Sarah, his wife, including his purchase of a burial plot in Hebron. It also mentions Rebecca at the well.

6. TOLEDOT Genesis 25:19-28:9

Esau sells his birthright for a bowl of soup and thereby creates a metaphor for repudiating one's potentialities. Jacob acquires his father's blessing.

7. VAYYETZE Genesis 28:10-32:3

Jacob lies down, tired, under the open sky, to sleep. He dreams a remarkable dream. It was a dream that gave Jacob the faith that G-d is everywhere and cares for the well being of man. It gave him new hope for his life ahead.

8. VAYYISHLACH Genesis 32:4-36

Jacob wrestled with G-d's messenger. He is thereupon renamed "Israel", "He who has striven with G-d and with men and has prevailed.

9. VAYYESHEV Genesis 37-40

Joseph is sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Despite every adversity, he never deviates from his faith in G-d.

10. MIKKETZ Genesis 41-44:17

This parashat is a continuation of Joseph's experiences in Egypt. When Joseph's brothers appear before him, Joseph needs time to decide whether to make peace with them or to take vengeance for the past. He plans to test his brothers to see how they feel about their wrongdoings of long ago.

11. VAYYIGGASH Genesis 44:18-47:27

Joseph, by now Prime Minister of Egypt, reveals his true identity to his brothers. Jacob and his sons take up residence in the land of Goshen.

12. VAYYECHI Genesis 47:28-50:26

Jacob blesses his grandsons with words that Jewish parents say to their sons today, "May G-d make you as Ephraim and Manasseh."

Book of Exodus/Shemot

1. SHEMOT Exodus 1-6:1

In this parashat, Moses has a vision while tending his flock one day near Mount Horeb. A voice speaks to him from a burning bush. Moses is given a mission: He must return to Egypt to liberate the Israelite slaves with the assistance of G-d.

2. VA-AYRA Exodus 6:2-9

G-d begins to bring plagues upon the land of Egypt, but Pharaoh's heart will not be moved.

3. BO Exodus 10-13:16

Upon suffering the tenth and most destructive plague, makat bechorot (the smiting of the first born), Pharaoh tells Moses and Aaron to take their people forth from Egypt.

4. BESHALLACH Exodus 13:17-17

The Egyptian oppressors drown but "The children of Israel walked upon the dry land in the midst of the sea" reflecting the mighty hand of the Lord. This was the turning point separating the period of slavery from that of freedom.

5. YITHRO Exodus 18-20

The Ten Commandments are revealed at Mt. Sinai amidst thunder and lightning. The Israelites tremble before G-d's power and majesty.

6. MISHPATIM Exodus 21-24

This portion deals with many specific laws. We may deduce from this that it is inadequate to be a Jew "in general"; Judaism is lived in and through specific application.

7. TERUMAH Exodus 25-27:19

The opening words of the parashat set the stage for our voluntary support of the Jewish community. "The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Tell the Israelite people to bring Me offerings; you shall accept offerings for Me from every person whose heart so moves him."

8. TEZAVEH Exodus 27:20-30:10

The Ner Tamid, or perpetual lamp, burning before the ark, is described here. The rabbis interpret the lamp as a symbol of Israel, whose mission it was to become "a light of the nations," Isaiah 42:6.

9. KI THISSA Exodus 30:11-34

The Israelites forsake their G-d by worshipping a golden calf. Moses shatters the tablets of the Law when he sees the people's idolatrous worship.

10. VAYYAKHEL Exodus 35-38:20

The Israelites begin construction of the Tabernacle. Despite its sanctity, Moses admonishes the people that observance of the Sabbath takes precedence over the building of the tabernacle. "On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a Sabbath of complete rest, holy to the Lord."

11. PEKUDEY Exodus 38:21-40

This parashat describes the final steps in building Israel's first house of worship. This takes place in the wilderness at Sinai while the people are on their long march to the Promised Land. The Tabernacle is to be portable so that it can be set up and taken down as the people move from one camping site to another.

Book of Leviticus/Vayyikra

1. VAYYIKRA Leviticus 1-5

This portion details the laws for sacrifices offered in the Sanctuary. After the times of the First and Second Temple, prayer replaces sacrifices as the form of worship.

2. TZAV Leviticus 6-8

This parashat tells the laws for sacrifices brought to the altar of the Sanctuary which was Israel's house of worship during their years of wandering in the wilderness. The idea was that G-d blesses man with crops and flocks and, in turn, man gives these gifts to G-d. This portion also describes the event in the sanctuary when Aaron, the first High Priest, and his sons, were initiated into their holy assignment as priests, Kohanim.

3. SHEMINI Leviticus 9-11

This parshat contains laws concerning the purity and holiness of the people of Israel. The sacrifices that they are to bring to the sanctuary are only a part of their obligation. They must also, as part of their religious observance, act in every way with a sense of holiness. Here are the beginnings of the religious laws dealing with kosher and non-kosher, or clean and unclean, as they pertain to eating as well as other areas of human activity.

4. THAZRIA Leviticus 12-13

This Torah portion deals with sickness and health, with what was considered clean and unclean. The physical well-being of the community was a sacred concern among the Israelites. Physical cleanliness and health were considered important in order to achieve spiritual well-being. From early in Jewish history, the care and treatment of the sick was considered of greatest importance for the community.

5. METZORA Leviticus 14-15

The Kohanim were given the responsibility for healing the sick, including leprosy and other skin ailments. How does this treatment of illness belong to religion? How we live, what we eat, what we think, how we act in our everyday life, according to Judaism, all are included in the religious life.

6. ACHAREY MOT Leviticus 16-18

Only on Yom Kippur could the High Priest enter the Holy of Holies which contained the Ark of the Covenant which, in turn, contained the Tablets of the Law. Neither the High Priest's plea for forgiveness nor other ritual acts could achieve final forgiveness for Israel. Each Israelite was required to fast and atone on this day. Together, the High Priest and Israel, in sincerity, sought to achieve forgiveness for sins.

7. KEDOSHIM Leviticus 19-20

This surveys the foundations of Judaism, summarizing some of the most important ethical teachings of the torah. This sidra clearly states that Israel must consider life as sacred. "You shall be holy; for I, the Lord, your G-d, am holy." These ethical teachings are summarized in the proclamation; "You shall love him (the stranger) as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt."

8. EMOR Leviticus 21-24

This parashat includes the lesson that the weekly Shabbat and the holidays, which come at different seasons of the year, are intended to teach Israel the holiness of time. On these days, there is opportunity to stop work and business, pause, and consider life's meaning and purpose, and to be refreshed.

9. BEHAR Leviticus 25-26:2

This parashat defines a remarkable approach to the relationship that should exist between man and the earth that gives him sustenance. Balance is to be achieved on the basis of faith that "the earth is the Lord's." Man is only given the privilege of using it to sustain him and therefore must never abuse the land.

10. BECHUKOTAI Leviticus 26:3-27

Moses puts an important challenge before Israel – to choose the way of the Torah. Let Torah's laws be the basis for Israel's life and the people will live well and prosper, and there will be "peace in the land."

Book of Numbers/Bamidbar

1. **BAMIDBAR Numbers 1-4:20**

This reports in detail the taking of the census of all adult males of Israel in the second year after their exodus from Egypt. It also tells how the large number of men, women, and children were organized for encampment during the years of wandering. The Tabernacle was always placed in the center of the camp.

2. NASO Numbers 4:21-7

Here is introduced the priestly benediction first spoken by Aaron and his sons in the Tabernacle of the wilderness long ago. The Birchat Kohanim implores, "May the Lord bless and keep you. May the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. May the Lord lift His countenance to you and grant you peace."

3. BEHAALOTCHA Numbers 8-12

Moses needed great faith and courage to carry out his task as Israel's leader in the face of recurring criticism and uprisings. That is the underlying message of this portion.

4. SHELACH Numbers 13-15

Shelach tells the story of the spies sent to survey the land of Canaan in preparation for its conquest. They reported that it was good agricultural land, but so strongly fortified that the Israelites could not possibly conquer it. Lacking faith, they raised a protest against Moses. Bitterly disappointed, Moses, the great leader, pleaded to G-d to forgive the people. Moses' plea was accepted, but G-d decreed that this adult generation would never enter Canaan.

5. KORACH Numbers 16-18

This parashat reports another uprising against Moses due to Korach's envy. Moses prayed to G-d that justice be done against the rebels, and they were punished with death. It was the only way that the Israelites could be made to understand that Moses was truly the leader of Israel and that Aaron was legitimately Kohen ha-Gadol.

6. CHUKKAT Numbers 19-22:1

This portion tells of the death of Miriam and Aaron, Moses' sister and brother. This was a sad time in the life of Israel's great leader. It was a period when the wilderness generation was quickly passing, making way for the younger generation who were to be given the opportunity to enter the Promised Land.

7. BALAK Numbers 22:2-25:9

This parashat tells of Israel's confrontation with the Moabites, a people through whose territory Israel wished to march peacefully in their way to Canaan. Seeking to fight Israel, Balak, the King of Moab, sought to have Israel cursed. Instead of being cursed, the Jews are given a blessing, including the famous words, "How goodly are your tents, O Jacob, your dwelling places, O Israel!"

8. PINCHAS Numbers 25:10-30:1

Here, Moses is instructed to go up to Mt. Abarim, to get a good view of the Promised Land, since he was not permitted to cross over and enter. Moses is also told to appoint Joshua as his successor to Israel's leadership. The appointment ceremony was to be public; so that when Moses died it would be clear in the people's mind that Joshua was their new leader.

9. MATTOT Numbers 30:2-32

Having arrived east of the Jordan River, two tribes, Reuben and Gad, together with half the tribe of Manasseh requested that they be permitted to settle there. Moses criticized them. Did they plan to separate themselves from the rest of Israel, who would be settling on the west side of the Jordan? The leaders of these tribes assured Moses that they were fully loyal and would share in every responsibility of Israel.

10. MASSEY Numbers 33-36

This parashat reports on the wanderings of Israel from the time they left Egypt to the time they reached the borders of Canaan. It also gives a detailed description of what were to be the boundaries of the land of Israel.

Book of Deuteronomy/Devarim

1. DEVARIM Deuteronomy 1-3:22

This consists of Moses' farewell to Israel, delivered at the end of his long period as its leader. He was soon to die and wanted to use his remaining strength to review for Israel its history, its special relationship with G-d, and its future as a people.

2. VA-ETHCHANAN Deuteronomy 3:23-7:11

Here, Moses continues his farewell to Israel, with a review of the Ten Commandments and an appeal not to forget what they experienced at Mt. Sinai. Moses then gives to Israel the great Sh'ma message. Israel must hear as clearly as possible that there is but one G-d, have a deep love for Him, study His teachings carefully, and live by them inside and outside their homes. Moses warns Israel, as strongly as possible, that when they enter Canaan, they must live their own sacred way of life. They must not intermarry with any of the pagan people whom they will meet in Canaan. To do so would weaken Israel's covenant with G-d.

3. EKEV Deuteronomy 7:12-11-25

What does G-d require of Israel for all His generosity to us? Nothing that is beyond the reach of each of us: only that we love and serve Him and live by the commandments that He revealed to us.

4. RE'EH Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17

"Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if ye shall hearken unto the commandment of the Lord your G-d, which I command you this day; and the curse, if you shall not hearken..." The future depends on our making the right choice. To do right, we must follow the laws, which Moses now spells out in detail.

5. SHOFETIM Deuteronomy 16:18-21:9

Justice must be carried out in the land which the Israelites will soon settle, "Justice, justice must you follow, that you may live, and inherit the land which the Lord, your G-d, gives you."

6. KI THETZE Deuteronomy 21:10-25

Moses reviews a variety of laws that are intended to strengthen family life and human decency in Israel. Parents are responsible for the education of their children. If one finds lost property, it must be returned to the owner. Accident prevention is obligatory for property owners. Law requires kindness to animals. The community is responsible for the needs of strangers, widows, and orphans. The law requires honest business practices; weights and measures must be absolutely dependable.

7. KI THAVO Deuteronomy 26-29:8

The people soon would be crossing the Jordan. Their first assignment was to write the code of laws by which they were to live, as a sign that this land was theirs in consequence of the covenant and on the condition of carrying out the law. The second assignment, on entering the land, was to build an altar for public worship on which to bring peace offerings to G-d.

8. ITZAVIM M Deuteronomy 29:9-30

In Moses' third farewell address to Israel, he points out that all Israel is gathered for the completion of the covenant with G-d. It is binding upon all the generations of Israel that will follow for all time to come. The Torah and its teachings will be theirs as much as if they had personally received it at Sinai. The covenant is unending.

9. VAYYELECH Deuteronomy 31

Here, Moses completes the writing of the Torah and entrusts it to the Kohanim and elders of Israel. He instructs them to read the Torah before the people at regular intervals. The Torah was not to remain the special preserve of the priests, but it was to be heard by and be familiar to all the people.

10. HAAZINU Deuteronomy 32

At the beginning of his role as Israel's leader, Moses sang a song of praise to G-d at the crossing of the Red Sea. Now, though he will soon die, Moses' faith in G-d is as strong as ever. He sings a final hymn of joy to G-d on the banks of the Jordan with the Promised Land on the horizon.

11. VESOTH HA-BERACHAH Deuteronomy 33-34

Before Moses goes up to the mountaintop to have a brief look at Canaan, he blesses the tribes of Israel. He then goes up, dies, and is buried in the Valley of Moab. Israel mourns his passing deeply and turns to his successor, Joshua, for leadership.

Getting ready for Bat or Bar Mitzvah?

If you have a child approaching a [Bar or Bat Mitzvah](#), you may request a specific date for his or her ceremony and review the various Torah portions. Here are some ideas to consider. Perhaps your child would like to read the same portion which his father, her mother, or a favorite relative read at their Bar or Bat Mitzvah. Perhaps your youngster would like to read a section that includes his biblical namesake, or other material of particular interest to him. But remember that all the portions are valuable. One scholarly rabbi has said that every week he wants to say, "This is the best, most important portion in the cycle." This reflects the fact that each section has its own significance, which becomes apparent when one has studied it with care and supervision.