

Triennial Cycle: Updated FAQs

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What's a triennial cycle?

The triennial cycle was the original order of weekly Torah readings used by Jews in *Eretz Yisrael* for a millennium and a half, from the time of *Ezra haSofer* until the era of the *Geonim*. It consists of reading portions of roughly 20 to 50 *pesukim* each week, thus finishing the Torah in about three-and-a-half years.

Don't we have to read the whole Torah every year?

Sometime during the Talmudic period, a new custom arose in Bavel to triple the length of the weekly readings so as to complete the entire Torah in one year. Eventually, this became the near-universal practice, as a result of the general triumph of the Talmud Bavli over the Talmud Yerushalmi. Any congregation that wants to revert to the original practice may do so.

But if my *schul* does it the *Bavli* way, do I have to as well?

The short answer is: yes, you do. The Talmud Bavli (*Berachot* 8a) records that לעולם לישלים אדם פרשיותיו עם הצבור שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום, which is taken by most *Rishonim* and the *Shulhan Aruch* to mean that you must read the entire *parasha* yourself concurrently sometime during the week.¹ So if you daven in such a *schul*, that's what you've got to do.

So what's the point of making a triennial cycle?

First and foremost, this is for *schuls* to use. If you run a *schul*, use it. However, there are other reasons we are publicising it. First, the fact is that a lot of people don't actually read the *parasha* each week. If you're one of them, then learning according to the triennial cycle is certainly better than nothing. By studying it along with others, we hope you can maintain a manageable daily programme of Torah study and also see the benefits of using the triennial cycle, eventually using it with the whole congregation. If you're one of the people who does learn the *parasha* properly every week, why not join in with this as an additional extra?

What are the benefits of the triennial cycle?

Once you have followed the triennial cycle for a bit, you'll see why *Hazal* instituted it in the first place.

¹ There are differences of opinion regarding the time period in which this may be done.

- The reading in *schul* takes a third of the time, so you have time to *lein* at a dignified speed and not rush through it like 95% of *schuls* do.
- When learning it yourself, you have time to read a range of commentaries and understand the *pesukim* at a more sophisticated level. It's a totally different experience.
- *Hazal* instituted special *parashiyot*, such as *parshat Zachor* and *Parah*, to be read on certain weeks. When finishing the Torah within one year, there is no time to do this, so the original *takanah* was changed to reading them as an additional *maftir*. Those who follow the triennial cycle can follow the original *takanah* of *Hazal* and give the ארבע פרשיות the time they deserve.
- No more double-parashas, ever!
- Because the typical *aliyah* in the triennial cycle is between three and seven *pesukim*, it is possible for a man of ordinary capacities, if given a few days' notice, to prepare adequately and read it accurately when given the *aliyah*. This obviates the need for having a *ba'al koreh* read it for him, a practice which flatly contradicts the *Tosefta* (*Megilah* 3:12) and which is of dubious legitimacy. Standard *halacha* holds that in order to avoid the possibility of a ברכה לבטלה, the person given the *aliyah* must whisper along with the *ba'al koreh* (*SA OH* 141:2), which frequently doesn't happen. The triennial cycle makes it possible for the typical congregation to avoid these problems by doing it properly.
- The long *parashiyot* used in the annual cycle contain multiple stories and legal units. As a rule, attention is focussed each week on a headline passage, or simply the opening section, which is all that most schools manage to finish. Even the minority that actually read the whole *parasha* themselves only think about and discuss a small portion. The triennial cycle means the congregation learns all of the Torah not just in theory, but in practice.
- Because the weekly readings are shorter, the triennial cycle makes it more practical for synagogues to carry out *k'riat haTorah* according to the original institution of שנים מקרא ואחד תרגום. In addition, individuals can realistically learn the *targum* for themselves, an essential process in gaining a rounded understanding of Jewish Aramaic, necessary for understanding a wide number of fundamental sources, and understanding how *Hazal* read the Torah.²

Do I have to follow this calendar?

Absolutely not. As far as anyone knows, each congregation could start and finish the Torah on whatever date they wanted. In addition, there were at least three different

² Rav Bar-Hayim strongly encourages participants to learn the passage with Targum Onkelos, using an accurate version that appears, for example, in *Torat Haim*, the *Humash* published by Mosad HaRav Kook.

ways of dividing the Torah into 141, 154 and 167 *parashiyot*, respectively. However, by following this calendar, you save yourself the trouble of working one out yourself and you can also join a community of people learning along with you.

What's so special about three years?

The term 'triennial cycle' is actually a slight misnomer. In fact, the typical cycle used in *Eretz Yisrael* and other countries where the Jews followed the original practice lasted roughly **three and a half** years. However, there is nothing special about this length and different communities would finish the Torah in closer to three or four years depending on how large or small they made the *parshiyot* and how frequently they interrupted for special readings. *Hazal* instituted the triennial cycle not so that Jewish communities could finish the Torah in any specific length of time, but so that they would have a coherent, manageable section of the Torah to learn each week.

How was this calendar made?

To make it easier for you, the division of the Torah portions is based on the division that can be found in any Koren *Humash* on the opposite side of the page to the ordinary chapter numbers. The *Haftarot* were chosen based on research by Professor Yosef Ofer using various manuscripts, principally from the Cairo Genizah. Readings for special days were chosen based on Mishnah, Tosefta and Yerushalmi.

Isn't this what Conservative *schuls* do?

No. The common practice in Conservative worship houses in America is to follow the traditional annual cycle, but only read a third of it, switching which third from year to year. This is obviously completely inane and unsurprisingly has no basis in Judaism. As it happens, prominent figures in the Conservative movement have pointed out the foolishness of this practice and encouraged its members to follow an actual triennial cycle, but it does not seem that any have actually taken it up. While the triennial cycle used by Jews for 1,500 years would remain legitimate regardless of what Conservative Jews were doing, in this case the question doesn't even arise and you have no reason to worry that you are replicating a heretical practice.

But I love the annual cycle. I dedicate three hours each week to learning the whole *parasha* with *Rashi* and *Onkelos* and then in *schul* the *leining* takes 40 minutes and everyone listens with reverence and concentration. Every year I get to *Simhat Torah* knowing I have really completed the Torah and looking forward to starting again. Do I have to do the triennial cycle just because it is more original?

Ashrecha! The annual cycle was instituted by *Amoraim kedoshim* in *Bavel* and has clear advantages when done correctly. While the triennial cycle is undoubtedly the more original practice, and the one mandated by the Mishnah, Tosefta and Yerushalmi,

the annual cycle is also entirely legitimate and proper. Once there is widespread public awareness of the different strengths of the annual and triennial cycles, different congregations can choose which one is more appropriate for furthering their *avodat Hashem*.