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Parashah

Parashah: The term **parashah** (Hebrew: meaning *portion*) is a set of verses that is written in the Torah Scroll without any break within the text. In most cases, a new **parashah** (phonetically pronounced paw-raw-shaw) begins where a new topic or a new thought is clearly indicated in the biblical text. In many places, however, the **parashah** divisions are used even in places where it is clear that no new topic begins, in order to highlight a special verse by creating a textual pause before it or after it.

Each Shabbat, a passage from one of the five books of Moshe is read. This passage is referred to as a **parashah**. The first **parashah**, for example, is **Parashat Bereshit**, which covers from the beginning of **Genesis** to the story of Noah. There are 54 **parashahs**, one for each week of a leap year, so that in the course of a year **Genesis** to **Deuteronomy** is read. During non-leap years, there are 50 weeks, so some of the shorter portions are doubled up. The last portion of the Torah is read right before a holiday called Simchat Torah (Rejoicing in the Torah), which occurs in October, a few weeks after Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year). On Simchat Torah, the last **parashah** is read, and then immediately **Parashat Bereshit** in **Genesis** is read, showing that the Torah is a circle that never ends.

In the synagogue service, the weekly parashah is followed by a passage from the prophets that is referred to as a **haftarah** (which doesn't mean "half-Torah"). It is, the Hebrew name for the reading from the prophets after the reading from the Torah. **Haftarah** is an Aramaic word meaning "after," dessert if you wish. Usually, the **haftarah** portion is no longer than one chapter, and has some relationship to the Torah portion of the week. Some of the scriptures have an **(A)** after them; and others have an **(S)**.

The (A) represents those scriptures read by the **Ashkenazim**, who originate from Jews who settled along the Rhine River, in Western Germany and Northern France, speak Yiddish, and are prominent today in Central and Eastern Europe. Most American Jews today are **Ashkenazim**, who descended from Jews who emigrated from Germany and Eastern Europe from the mid 1800s to the early 1900s.

The (S) represents those scriptures read by the **Sephardic** Jews, who originate from Spain, Portugal, North Africa and the Middle East and their descendants. The adjective **Sephardic** and corresponding nouns **Sephardi** (singular) and **Sephardim** (plural) are derived from the

Hebrew word “Sepharad,” which refers to Spain. The beliefs of **Sephardic** Judaism are basically in accord with those of Orthodox Judaism, though **Sephardic** interpretations of halakhah (Jewish Law) are somewhat different than the Ashkenazic ones.

In messianic synagogues, after the **haftarah** is read, there are suggested readings from the B’rit Chadashah for that particular **parashah**. The **Torah** and **haftarah** portions have been set for centuries; the B’rit Chadashah portions, however, vary greatly. Therefore, many times, I will list several verses that can be read.

Double Torah Portions

The Torah is split up into 54 portions. The entire Torah is completed once per year, which works out to approximately one per week.

More precisely, though, there are 54 weekly portions in the Torah, but only 50 or 51 Shabbats in a year. In addition, there are at least two, and sometimes as many as 4 or 5, times when Shabbat falls on a holiday, and the normal weekly portion is not read that week. How are the calendars and the Torah reconciled?

The normal Jewish year (i.e. not a leap year) is generally 354 days long. 354 divided by 7 is 50 weeks, with a remainder of 4. In other words, there are 50 or 51 Shabbats during a normal Jewish year.

There are also certain times when the normal weekly portion is not read on Shabbat. Such instances are during Passover and Sukkot, when at least one day of the holiday happens on Shabbat, and other holidays which sometimes fall on Shabbat. Thus, there are at least two times during the year where the normal weekly portion is not read on Shabbat.

So now we’re down to approximately 48 Shabbats each year when the weekly portion is read. (Actually, we only read 52 of the 54 portions on Shabbat: The first portion of the Torah, Breishis, is always read on the Shabbat immediately following Simchat Torah. The last portion is always read on Simchat Torah, even though that holiday can never fall on Shabbat.)

The way these problems get reconciled is that certain portions can be combined:

- Vayakhel (**Exodus 35:1-38:20**) and Pekudei (**Exodus 38:21-40:38**)
- Tazria (**Leviticus 12:1-13:59**) and Metzora (**Leviticus 14:1-15:33**)

- Acharei (**Leviticus 16:1-18:30**) and Kedoshim (**Leviticus 19:1-20:27**)
- Behar (**Leviticus 25:1-26:2**) and Bechukotai (**Leviticus 26:3-27:34**)
- Chukat (**Numbers 19:1-22:1**) and Balak (**Numbers 22:2-25:9**)
- Matot (**Numbers 30:2-32:42**) and Masei (**Numbers 33:1-36:13**)
- Nitzavim (**Deuteronomy 29:9-30:20**) and Vayelech (**Deuteronomy 31:1-31:30**).

Some of these seven pairs of portions are combined each year to reconcile the number of Shabbat readings with the need to complete the annual Torah cycle.

During a Jewish leap year, an extra 30-day month is added to the year in the winter. This allows for at least four more weeks in the year, meaning that there is still a need to combine portions, but not as many as in a regular year.⁷