

## The Weekly Torah Portion

The weekly Torah portion is a great unifier of our people. Jews of all stripes read the same words of Torah week after week all over the world. These words serve as inspiration and connections to history and current events, as well as to our life events. For this reason, we scour the weekly Torah portion to deliver a message for a Shalom Zachor, a Bris, Simchat Bat, Pidyon Haben, Upsherin, Bar or Bat Mitzva, Aufruf, wedding, Sheva Brachos and sadly at a funeral as well. The Torah portion can connect to current events just as it can connect to a graduation ceremony, a special anniversary or birthday, or any commemorative event.

The purpose of this work is to offer the reader a multifaceted approach to the weekly Torah portion. For the purpose of brevity, I will refer to the weekly Parsha, even though, technically, this is a misnomer. The custom of breaking up the Torah into weekly portions, beginning with Bereshis and ending with V'zos Habracha was the Babylonian custom and these portions are known as Sidros. There are 54<sup>1</sup> Sidros in the Torah and they are read from the first Shabbos after Simchas Torah until Simchas Torah the next year.<sup>2</sup> The older custom, practiced in Israel, was to read the Torah over a period of three years, beginning with the first of Nissan.<sup>3</sup> These portions are more correctly called Parshiyot<sup>4</sup> and the Torah is divided into approximately 154 of these.<sup>5</sup> By the 12th century this custom of a triennial cycle of Torah completion was no longer in practice with few exceptions.<sup>6</sup> Based on this, it is more correct to speak of the Sidra of the week than the Parsha of the week, but I will refer to the language commonly used and call our weekly portion the Parsha.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The number 54 includes V'zos Habracha, which is never read on Shabbos. It is therefore, according to some accounts, not considered a weekly Torah portion. Midrash Lekach Tov to Shir Hashirim 4:12: כה גן בעול אחרתי כלה connects the numerical value of the word "גן" to the 53 Torah portions (excluding V'zos Habracha). Chida suggests that the title of the medieval work by Rav Aharon ben Yossi HaCohen, Sefer Hagan is based on the same numerical value of the word "גן". See Sefer Hagan, Introduction, pg. 22-23 (M. Orlian Mossad harav Kook, Jerusalem, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> BT Megillah 31B. Rambam, Mishne Torah Hilchos Tefilla 13:1 refers to the completion of the Torah taking place on Sukkot. See Avraham Ya'aris' Toldos Chag Simchas Torah, Mossad Harav Kook, Jerusalem 1998, especially chapters 3 and 4, to trace the connection of Torah completion to this holiday.

<sup>3</sup> BT Megillah 29B. Rambam Mishne Torah Hilchos Tefilla 13:1 refers to this as a "custom that is not widespread".

<sup>4</sup> If the line of text ends and is open to the end of the line this is known as a Parsha Pesucha - an open-ended Parsha. If the line continues after a space of at least 9 letters, this is known as Parsha Setuma - a closed ended Parsha. Rambam disqualifies a Torah that doesn't close a Parsha line according to tradition, and lists all the correct closings at Hilchos Sefer Torah, Chapter 8.

<sup>5</sup> There are varying traditions of this total. The Parsha numbers can be found in the margins of the Koren Tanach and these are their numbers  
Bereshis: 43  
Shemos: 29  
Vayikra: 23  
Bamidbar: 32  
Devarim: 27

For a complete 3 year listing of the breakdown of the Torah reading by Parsha, over 3 years, see Encyclopedia Judaica, 1st edition Vol. 15 pg. 1386-1390; Triennial cycle.

<sup>6</sup> See above note 2

<sup>7</sup> In addition, the entire Bible is broken into chapters. This is the work of medieval Christians and is usually included in our Bibles, Concordances and reference guides for the sake of convenience and expedience. The only Biblical book where Chazal refer to chapter numbers is Tehillim, which has its own natural chapter headings. BT Berachos 9B considers Tehillim chapters 1 and 2 to be the same chapter, which throws off subsequent chapters by one. BT Megillah 17B similarly numbers Tehillim chapters one less than our Masoretic text for the same reason. In addition to Tehillim chapter 2, chapters, 10 and 33 also have no natural chapter headings, and they also blend into the chapter just before them. This would leave Tehillim with 147 chapters, and might explain a cryptic commentary of Ba'al Haturim Bereshis 47:29 that connects the 147 years of Yaacov's life with the chapters of Tehillim. The source for 147 chapters in Tehillim is found at Yerushalmi Shabbos 16:1 and is based on Tehillim 22:4 which refers to תהלות ישראל as a hint to one chapter of Tehillim for each of Yisrael's 147 years. See also Midrash Tehillim (Shocher Tov) chapter 22.

## The Four Shabbos Prayers

Four selections each week will connect to a key phrase in each of the four prayers of Shabbos.

### Maariv

אתה קדשת את יום השביעי לשמך תכלית שמים וארץ

You sanctified the seventh day for Your Name's sake , the conclusion of the creation of heaven and earth.

We pray four times over Shabbos and these prayers traverse history, and take the Shabbos observer on a whirlwind journey beginning with creation. The first prayer, Ma'ariv refers directly to the verses in Parshas Bereshis that speak of God's creation and cessation of creative activity, or melacha, on Shabbos. Melacha, related to the word malach, meaning angel, is not a function of labor, but of creativity. This is a very spiritual time and we invite angels to begin the Shabbos with us as we contemplate the peacefulness of our transition from the six days of activity to the day of rest.<sup>8</sup>

### Shachris

ישמח משה במתנת חלקו כי עבד נאמן קראת לו כליל תפארת בראשו נתת בעמדו לפניך על הר סיני

Moses rejoiced in the gift of his portion that You called him a faithful servant. A crown of splendor You placed on his head when he stood before You on Mount Sinai.

The second prayer moves to Matan Torah, the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai seven weeks after we attained our freedom from Egyptian slavery. We were turned into beasts of burden to perform numerous tasks and to build great edifices and towering structures for others. The redemption from Egypt made it possible for us to break the yoke of Paroah's servitude so that we could serve God. Shortly afterwards, we put our considerable latent talents to work in the construction of God's sanctuary, the Mishkan. The common juxtaposition of this construction with the observance of Shabbos<sup>9</sup> teaches that the halachic definition of Melacha on Shabbos is precisely that which went into the construction of the Mishkan. The forbidden labors of Shabbos total 39 activities and they fall into four categories of Melacha that underscore the connection of Shabbos, not only to the Mishkan and creation, but also to Yetzias Mitzrayim, the redemption from Egypt. The first category comprising the first 11 Melachos, are all connected to the processing of food. The second category comprising 13 Melachos are connected to the processing of clothing. The third category, comprising 7 Melachos are connected to the processing of leather-works and the final 8, to building structures. While all 39 were necessary in the construction of the Mishkan, they are also essential activities that underscore the building blocks of human dignity, insofar as we differ from animals. Animals don't process food. They don't weave threads into clothes, they don't form leather into shoes and they don't build structures within which to live. Yetzias Mitzrayim gave us the humanity necessary to be Mishkan builders and Shabbos observers.

<sup>8</sup> There is a custom to sing about Shabbos angels on Friday night, based on BT Shabbos 119B. Perhaps the angels (מלאכים) are invited to replace (מלאכה) which is eschewed for Shabbos. In the end we send them from the table because angels don't eat so they leave before we start the meal.

<sup>9</sup> Shemos 31:12-17, and 35:23 both reference Shabbos observance, and are embedded within larger Torah instructions for the construction of the Mishkan. This is understood by our sages to teach that the Mishkan is not to be constructed on Shabbos. Vayikra 26:2 also juxtaposes Shabbos observance with God's Mikdash.

## Mussaf

ושם נעשה לפניך את קרבנות חובותינו תמידים כסדרם ומוספיים כהלכתם

There we will perform before you the rite of our required offerings, the continual offerings in their order and the mussaf offerings according to their laws.

The third prayer takes us to the Messianic era, and makes reference to the temple service. This will usher a redemptive age which we call a שכולו שבת, a time period where we will perpetually enjoy the blessings that Shabbos offers us. Ramban<sup>10</sup> divided history into 6 one thousand year epochs each one connected to a day of creation. On the first two days, says Ramban, the world was still in a confounded state where the land masses and waters were not yet fully separated. This corresponds to the first two thousand years traversing the time of Adam Harishon to the age of Avraham when he found God.<sup>11</sup> Thus began the spreading of the message of a living unseen, single God to the exclusion of any other. This is likened unto the spreading of vegetation throughout the earth on day three. Day 4 when the luminaries are created exemplify the shining light of the Temple, which would be a conduit between Heaven and Earth. But the luminaries are not always visible. They appear and disappear. They wax and wane. This is exemplified by the construction and destruction of two Temples during the fourth millenium, which takes as to the creation of beasts on day 5 and day 6. This is a very dark period of history, for the world and for us. The creation and perfection of man, somewhere in the 6th day, which would be between the years 5000 and 6000, signifies the Messianic arrival for which we still wait. The year 6000 begins the יום שכולו שבת as we enter the 7th millennium. This will take us to a perfected world, on the way to the realization of an eschatological prophecy of Zecharia which is a part of our daily liturgy. Zecharia refers to a day in the future when: ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד. In that day God will be one and His name one. The Talmud<sup>12</sup> asks, אטו האדנא לאו אחד הוא? Is He not one today? The answer to this appears in Mincha.

## Mincha

אתה אחד ושםך אחד ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ

You are one and Your name is One, and who is like Your people Israel one nation on earth

The answer relates to God's name. God's very being is impossible for us to grasp. This is why we don't pronounce His name the way it is spelled. The spelling bespeaks a combination of past, present and future and transcends time, space, and dimension.<sup>13</sup> Today God's name is not one. It is pronounced differently than it is spelled. The Talmud answers that in a time of clarity, after the redemptive age has taken grasp and the blessings of that glorious time will accrue to mankind, we will pronounce God's name as it is spelled, and the full scope of Zecharia's prediction will take hold.<sup>14</sup> For this reason the Mincha prayer begins אתה אחד ושםך אחד ומי כעמך ישראל גוי אחד בארץ "You are one and your name is one who is likened into your nation Israel one people in the land." The spirit of Shabbos has transformed us into a

<sup>10</sup> Ramban to Bereshis 2:3 לעשות ברא אלקים לעשות based on Tehillim 90:4 אחמול כיום בעיניך כיום אחמול, כי אלף שנים בעיניך כיום אחמול. For even a thousand years in Your eyes are like bygone yesterday.

<sup>11</sup> There are different opinions of this age. Nedarim 32A puts Avraham's age at finding God, at 3. Rambam, Hilchos Avoda Zara1:3, has his age at 40, and Ramban at 48. (See Bereshis Rabbah 64:4) This puts Avraham's discovery of God just before the start of the third millenium.

<sup>12</sup> BT Pesachim 50B

<sup>13</sup> This is the plain meaning of אהי-ה אשר אהי-ה, which God told Moshe when he asked for God's name, at Shemos 3:15

<sup>14</sup> The pronunciation must wait for this time period, which the Gemara calls Olam Haba, the World to Come. (Pesachim 50B) The Mishna considers such a pronunciation before this time to be so severe a dogmatic sin that one who pronounces God's name in this manner would forfeit his share in the World to Come. See BT Sanhedrin 90A; BT Avoda Zara 18A

place that is very close to God and His name. This is why Seuda Shlishit is always a very spiritual time where singing and spiritual words of Torah are appropriate.

These four prayers correspond to four sections of every Parsha in this work.

Ma'ariv - a brief D'var Torah that can be shared at the Shabbos table.

Shacharis - a brief introduction to the Torah reading that encapsulates the message of the Parsha mostly in the realm of P'shat.<sup>15</sup>

Mussaf - The main homiletic exposition of the Parsha with a more global message in the realm of D'rash.<sup>16</sup>

Mincha and Seuda Shlishis - The spiritual side of the Sidra, often accompanied by a story, or gematria.<sup>17</sup> Gematria or numerology enters the realm of Remez or Sod, the more esoteric level of Biblical exposition. Between the four main sections of each weekly portion, the Parsha will be expounded according to P'shat, Remez, Drash and Sod, an acronym for פֶּרְדֵּס, Pardes, which represents the multi-faceted approach this work will take to the Torah.

In addition each Parsha will include an explication of the Haftara and its connection to the Parsha, and each Parsha will have what I call "Mussar Moments", brief aphorisms that will connect to the Parsha with a brief explanation.

In addition the reader will have an opportunity to connect the Parsha to 3 sets of events:

1. Birth, Shalom Zachor, Simchas Bas, Bris, Pidyon Haben, Upsherin
2. Bar or Bas Mitzva
3. Aufruf, wedding, Sheva Brachos

Finally, every Parsha will contain an exposition of a word contained therein, that is either rare, unusual or deserves special attention. I call this the Word of the Parsha.

These are the 10 sections of each Parsha that will be contained in this work. they are ordered as follows:

1. Friday Night
2. Introduction to the Parsha
3. Introduction to the Haftara
4. D'rasha
5. Mussar Moments

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<sup>15</sup> The word P'shat stems from the same word in Hebrew which means to skin an animal להפשיט. It takes the simple surface level meaning of the word or story-line. This is in contrast to the next approach.

<sup>16</sup> Drash is a deeper exposition of the text than P'shat. It digs beyond the outer level understanding of the text to deliver its message.

<sup>17</sup> See Lech Lecha (9) for an elaboration on the concept of Gematria.

6. Birth Events

7. Attaining the Age of Mitzva Obligation - Bnei Mitzva

8. Marriage

9. Seudah Shlishis

10. Word of the Parsha

I thank my life partner, Alisa who has commented over the years on many of these thoughts and worked with me studiously through the entire work. This work was also considerably enhanced by the editing and careful reading of my son Ellie. His scholarship and advice were indispensable. I also thank my children Shonnie and Yoni, Chani and Joel, Moshe and Renee, Ellie and Carly, Esti and Aaron, and Mindy and Yoni and their families who have kept our Shabbos table alive with Torah, Zemiros and Shabbos spirit. I also thank the multitude of guests we've had over the years who have contributed Shabbos ideas to our table. My 30 plus years at Congregation Ohab Zedek has been a time of great growth for my family, and I dedicate this work to all those who have made Shabbos such a glorious experience. At the end of Friday night services, right after my weekly Mussar moment, I bless the Congregation with the line from benching that asks: "הרהמן הוא ינחילנו יום שכולו שבת ומנוחה לחיי העולמים" May the Merciful One bring us the day in which we will be totally Shabbos and rest, in eternal life." After this I say, "May the next 24 hours be מעין עולם הבא" - May Shabbos bestow upon us a taste of the World to Come. I do hope that this work will enhance Shabbos in the eyes of the reader.