

# Judaism: Reading the Torah

The tradition of reading the [Torah](#) out loud in [synagogue](#) dates back to the time of [Moses](#). The practice of "completing" the Torah reading with a passage from the [Navi](#), called the [haftarah](#), is mentioned in the [Mishnah](#). Today, the [Torah](#) is divided into 54 portions, one to be read each [Shabbat](#), with two portions read together twice during the year. The entire reading is completed every [calendar year](#).

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## Origins

The tradition of reading the [Torah](#) out loud dates back to the time of [Moses](#), who would read the [Torah](#) publicly on [Shabbat](#), [festivals](#), and [Rosh Chodesh](#). According to the [Talmud](#), it was [Ezra](#) the Scribe who established the practice, which continues today, of reading the [Torah](#) also on Monday and Thursday mornings and [Shabbat](#) afternoons. These days were picked because Monday and Thursday were traditionally days that the Jews would go to the nearest towns to shop and trade. Also, this way the people would never go for more than three days without getting spiritual sustenance from the [Torah](#). There were breaks in the practice, but since the [Maccabean](#) period in the 2nd century BCE, public [Torah](#) reading has been maintained continuously. It was also in the [Maccabean](#) period that the Jews started reading from the [Torah](#) consecutively, reading on [Shabbat](#) afternoon, Monday, and Thursday from the point at which they left off the previous [Shabbat](#) morning.

In the early times, there were two traditions as to how the reading on [Shabbat](#) mornings should proceed. In [Israel](#), the [Torah](#) was divided into 155 portions and took three years to read. In the early 19th and 20th centuries, [Reform](#) and some [Conservative](#) congregations followed this triennial cycle but this has been largely abandoned in favor of the annual cycle. In [Babylonia](#), the [Torah](#) was split in 54 sections and took one year to read (some portions were read together in non-leap years). The size of the sections vary, containing anywhere between 30 and more than 150 verses. This latter custom became accepted for [Orthodox](#) and most [Conservative](#) Jews. The only break from the weekly cycle is when [Shabbat](#) is a holiday with a special [Torah](#) portion. The [Torah](#) is read on [Shabbat](#) and [festivals](#) between the *shacharit* (morning) and *mussaf* (additional) services and on weekdays at the end of *shacharit*.

## Customs

There are always at least three people on the [bimah](#) (raised platform from where the [Torah](#) is read). According to the [Talmud](#), one should not stand alone to emphasize that [God](#) gave the [Torah](#) through an intermediary. The person on the bimah is also there to correct the reader's pronunciation and "*trop*" (also

called *ta'amei hamikra*, meaning a series of musical notations that dictate the tune of how the Torah is read), since the Torah scroll has no punctuation or vowels. A *gabbai* (synagogue official) is also there to call people up to the Torah.

The reader uses a *yad* (literally, "a hand"), usually a six to eight inch piece of silver fashioned in the shape of a finger, to point to the words of the Torah as he reads them. This is done so the reader does not obstruct the vision of the person honored with the *aliyah* and does not mar the dignity of the Torah by touching it. In Sephardi congregations, the Torah is carried inside a large wooden cylinder that stands erect when open, and the Torah parchment is in an upright position when it is read. In Ashkenazi congregations, the Torah lies flat.

There are a few passages in the Torah read quickly and in a low voice. These passages, from the sections of *B'chukotai* and *Ki Tavo*, list the curses that befall those who do not observe the law.

## Taking Out and Putting Back the Torah

Removing and returning the Torah to and from the Ark are among the most ceremonial parts of the service. The honors of opening the Ark (called *peticha*) and taking out the Torah (*hotza'ah*) are given to worshipers; in some congregations, these two honors are combined and given to one person. When the Ark is open, the congregation rises out of respect. When the Torah is taken from the Ark, there is a procession in which the Torah is carried around the synagogue and people reach out to kiss it. On Shabbat and holidays, the ritual starts with several biblical and talmudic verses recited out loud in unison. In Ashkenazi custom, these verses begin with the phrase "*ein kamocha baelohim adonai v'ain k'maasecha*" (There is none like Thee among the gods, O Lord, and there are no works like Thine). Sephardic and Hasidic congregations begin with the words "*ata haraita lada'at, ki hashem hu ha'elohim, ain od milvado*" (You have been made to recognize that the Lord is God; there is none besides him) and continuing "*Av harachamim*" (Father of mercy).

At this point, whoever is chosen to take out the Torah approaches the Ark. When the *chazzan* (prayer leader) begins "*Vayehi binsoa*" (When the ark would travel), this person opens the Ark doors. If it is a weekday, he immediately takes out the Torah. If it is Shabbat, he waits until after the prayer "*Brikkh shmei*" (Blessed is the Name), a personal prayer in Aramaic asking God to bless the Jewish people. On festivals, a Biblical verse listing the Thirteen Attributes of God and a prayer for personal welfare are inserted before *Brikkh shmei*. The man who removes the Torah scroll hands it to the chazzan and closes the Ark. The chazzan takes the Torah in his arms and says the phrase beginning "*gadlu lahashem iti*" (Exalt the Lord together with me). On Shabbat and holidays, he faces the congregation and this is prefaced with the verse of *Shema* and the verse beginning "*echad eloheinu, gadol adonenu*" (One is our God, great is our Lord). As the congregation responds with verses from *Chronicles* and *Psalms* praising God's greatness, the *chazzan* carries the Torah from the Ark to the *bimah*. Often, the synagogue leaders follow the Torah in a procession. The Torah is held with the right hand, resting on the right shoulder.

When the Torah is returned to the Ark, the chazzan again holds the Torah and recites a verse from *Psalms* to which the congregation responds. As the Torah is carried back to the Ark, the congregation recites *Psalms* 24 (on weekdays) or 29 (on Shabbat). At the words "*uvnucho yomar*" (and when it rested), whoever is putting back the Torah (called *hakhnasah*) opens the Ark. He takes the Torah from the *chazzan* and replaces it in the Ark. As the Torah is being returned, the congregation recites the continuation of a Biblical passage that is recited when the Torah is taken from the ark and concludes with a passage from *Lamentations*.

## The Torah Blessings and *Aliyot*

The **Torah** portions are divided into sections, called *aliyot* (literally, "ascent"). Originally, two blessings were said during the **Torah** reading: one by the first person before he began to read and one by the last person after he finished. The first blessing emphasized that **God** chose Israel to receive his **Torah** and referred to the giving of the **Torah** at Sinai. The second blessing referred to the Oral **Torah**. The *Borkhu* prayer, which is a call to prayer and an invitation to bless God, preceded the first blessing because it marked the beginning of a new section of the service.

During the Talmudic period, the **rabbis** established that everyone who read a section from the **Torah** would recite both blessings so all the members of the congregation could hear them – even those who had to leave early or come late. In the post-Talmudic period, when the number of people capable of reading the **Torah** declined, it became customary for one person to read on behalf of everyone. That way, one called for an *aliyah* only had to recite the blessings, although those capable of reading from the **Torah** would still do so in a quiet voice along with the reader.

There are certain times that it is traditional for a person to receive an *aliyah*: a bar mitzvah, aufruf (before a man gets married), the naming of a daughter, or before a yahrzeit (anniversary of a parent's death). One can also request an *aliyah* for special occasions. It is the custom not to give consecutive *aliyot* to close relatives. In **Orthodox** congregations, women do not receive *aliyot*. In **Reform** and many **Conservative** congregations, women do.

The first *aliyah* is always reserved for a **kohen** (descendent of the priestly tribe that used to serve in the Temple) and the second for a Levite (descendent of the tribe that used to assist the priests in the Temple). The rest go only to Israelites (descendents of any other tribe). If no **kohen** is present, a Levite or Israelite can be called up with a special phrase of introduction. **Reform** congregations have abolished this distinction between tribes.

On Monday and Thursday mornings, **Shabbat** and Yom Kippur afternoons, **Hanukkah**, Purim, and fast day mornings and afternoons, the **Torah** is divided into three *aliyot*. On **Rosh Chodesh** and chol hamoed (the intermediate days of festivals), there are four *aliyot*, and on festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot, and **Rosh Hashanah**), there are five. On **Yom Kippur** morning, there are six, and on **Shabbat** morning, seven. The number of *aliyot* was decided by **Ezra**. It is forbidden to call up fewer than that number and, except for **Shabbat** and **Simchat Torah** (the last day of Sukkot), one can also not add *aliyot*. On **Shabbat**, some **synagogues** increase the number of *aliyot*, particularly if there is an occasion with many guests in attendance, in order to honor more people.

The procedure of each *aliyah* is the same. The oleh (one who gets an *aliyah*) is called up by his Hebrew name and the name of his father. The reader will point to the word that he is up to. The *oleh* will touch the margin area closest to that point with his **tallit** or the Torah mantle and will touch the **tallit** or mantle lightly to his lips. He should stand directly in front of the scroll with both hands on the handles (each is called an *eitz hayim*) projecting from the bottom. With the **Torah** scroll open, he recites the *borkhu* and the first **Torah** blessing. He then releases the left *eitz hayim* and moves slightly to the right. When the reader completes that portion, the *oleh* again holds both *eitz hayims*, rolls the two sides of the scroll together and recites the second blessing. The next *oleh* is called to the **Torah** and *gabbai* recites a personalized blessing (*mi she'beirakh*) inserting the Hebrew name of the first *oleh*. Sometimes a blessing will be recited for one who is sick as well. The *oleh* should remain on the *bimah* until the following *oleh* completes the second blessing. There is a custom to ascend the *bimah* from the right side and descend from the left. It is also traditional to take the shortest route from one's seat to the *bimah* and a longer route going back, in order

to show respect for the **Torah** by demonstrating excitement at approaching the **Torah** and hesitation at leaving it.

## ***Hagbah and Glilah***

After the **Torah** is read, one person is honored with lifting up the **Torah** (*hagbah*) and another with rolling and dressing it (*glilah*). The custom of *hagbah* dates back to the seventh century. Whoever gets *hagbah* opens the scroll so that at least three columns are visible. With one hand on each *eitz hayim*, he slides the **Torah** down until it is halfway off the table, bends his knees for leverage and lifts the scroll upwards in an upright position as he straightens up. While holding the **Torah** aloft, he should turn to the right and left so that everyone can see the writing, which is the point of the ritual. When the congregation sees the writing, they recite "*v'zot haTorah...*" (this is the **Torah** that **Moses** set before the Children of Israel by the hand of **Moses** according to the command of God). He then sits down on a chair. In **Sephardi** congregations, *hagbah* takes place before the **Torah** reading.

The one who does *glilah* takes the handles and rolls the scroll together. He then takes a sash (called a *gartl*) and wraps it around the scroll, about two-thirds of the way up. He places the mantle on the **Torah**, and then the breastplate, if there is one. Finally, he will put the *yad* over one handle, and then a crown or any other decorations that the synagogue uses.

## ***The Maftir and Haftorah***

The only *aliyah* that is different is the *maftir*, the last *aliyah* at *shacharit* on **Shabbat** and holidays, and at *mincha* on fast days. This *aliyah* is not counted as part of the official number of *aliyot*. The *maftir* is usually the last few verses of that week's **Torah** portion. On **festivals** and certain special **Shabbatot**, the *maftir* is a different reading from another part of the **Torah**. Unlike the other *aliyot*, a boy under thirteen years old can be called to read the *maftir*. However, it is generally considered a significant honor to receive this *aliyah*, and it is often given to someone important in the synagogue or one who is celebrating a special event. The person who receives the *maftir* generally also recites the *haftorah* (literally "concluding portion", meaning a reading from the Prophets said on **Shabbat** and **holidays**) and the blessings that go with it. The *haftorah* and *maftir* are connected to show that the books of the Prophets are rooted in the **Torah** and cannot be learned independently from the **Torah**.

The custom of reading the *haftorah* predates the Talmudic period. Some date it back to the time of King Antiochus, a 2nd century **BCE** Syrian-Greek who forbade the Jews to read from the **Torah** but did not extend this ban to the Prophets. The *haftorah* is selected because of a thematic relationship to the weekly **Torah** reading or to that day or time period. A boy often reads the *haftorah* at his **bar mitzvah**. In non-**Orthodox** synagogues, a girl reads the *haftorah* at her **bat mitzvah**.

There is a single blessing before the *haftorah* that praises the prophets of Israel and affirms the truth of their message. There are four blessings after the *haftorah*. The first emphasizes God's truthfulness and his faithfulness in fulfilling His prophecies. The second is a prayer for the return of the Jewish people to **Jerusalem**, a message that all the later prophets conveyed. The third is a prayer for the fulfillment of the prophecy that **Elijah** should bring us the news of the Messiah and the restoration of the House of **David**. The final blessing is one of thanksgiving for the **Torah**, for the privilege of worshiping God, for the prophets, and for the Sabbath. It mentions the hope that all of humanity will one day bless God's name. One theory for the reason behind these blessings is that they were instituted in reaction to the Samaritans, a sect that rejected the sanctity of the Books of the Prophets, and the blessings affirm that our beliefs are different from those of the Samaritans.

## Additions

There are additions made to the **Torah** service at various times. When one completes the reading of one of the five books of **Moses**, the congregation stands and says the phrase "*Hazak, hazak, v'nithazek*" (Be strong, be strong and let us be strengthened). This is encouragement to continue with the reading of the next book and to return again to the previous one. When a boy has a **bar mitzvah**, after he recites the second **Torah** blessing of his *aliyah*, his father says a special blessing. If a person undergoes a dangerous situation such as a serious illness, an accident, time in prison, or a journey, he or she recites "*birkhat ha'gomel*," a blessing of thanksgiving to God.

Just as a *Mi she'beirakh* is said after a person is called to an *aliyah* or for a sick person, a variation of the *Mi she'beirakh* is also said the **Shabbat** before a couple is **married**, when a child is born, and after a **bar mitzvah** boy is called to the **Torah**. Often, other *Mi she'beirakh* prayers, for the welfare of the community, are said after the **Torah** reading on **Shabbat** and **festivals**. Many synagogues say a prayer for the government of their home country. This custom of praying for the welfare of the government started around the 14th century, but is based on ancient traditions written about in the prophets. Today, many synagogues also insert a prayer composed by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel for the welfare of the **State of Israel** and another for the soldiers in the **Israeli Defense Forces** as part of a series of prayers immediately following the **Torah** reading.

Finally, a prayer for the dead called "*Kel malei rachamim*" (God, who is full of mercy...) is recited on **Shabbat** afternoons on behalf of anyone in the synagogue who will be commemorating a *yahrzeit* in the coming week. The prayer asks God to protect and exalt the soul of the relative who has passed on.

## Order of the Readings

NAME OF PORTION	VERSES	HAFTARAH PORTION
GENESIS		
<b><u>Bereshit</u></b>	1:1–6:8	Isa. 42:5–43:11 (42:5–21) <sup>1</sup>
<b>No'ah</b>	6:9–11:32	Isa. 54:1–55:5 (54:1–10)
<b>Lekh Lekha</b>	12:1–17:27	Isa. 40:27–41:16
<b>Va-Yera</b>	18:1–22:24	II Kings 4:1–37 (4:1–23)
<b>Hayyei Sarah</b>	23:1–25:18	I Kings 1:1–31
<b>Toledot</b>	25:19–28:9	Mal. 1:1–2:7

<b>NAME OF PORTION</b>	<b>VERSES</b>	<b><i>HAFTARAH</i> PORTION</b>
<b>Va-Yeze</b>	28:10–32:3	Hos. 12:13–14:10 (11:7–12:12)
<b>Va-Yishlah</b>	32:4–36:43	Hos. 11:7–12:12 (Obad. 1:1–21)
<b>Va-Yeshev</b>	37:1–40:23	Amos 2:6–3:8
<b>Mi-Kez</b>	41:1–44:17	I Kings 3:15–4:1
<b>Va-Yiggash</b>	44:18–47:27	Ezek. 37:15–28
<b>Va-Yehi</b>	47:28–50:26	I Kings 2:1–12
<b><u>EXODUS</u></b>		
<b><u>Shemot</u></b>	1:1–6:1	Isa. 27:6–28:13; 29:22, 23 (Jer. 1:1–2:3)
<b>Va-Era</b>	6:2–9:35	Ezek. 28:25–29:21
<b>Bo</b>	10:1–13:16	Jer. 46:13–28
<b>Be-Shallah</b>	13:17–17:16	Judg. 4:4–5:31 (5:1–31)
<b>Yitro</b>	18:1–20:23	Isa. 6:1–7:6; 9:5 (6:1–13)
<b>Mishpatim</b>	21:1–24:18	Jer. 34:8–22; 33:25, 26
<b><sup>2</sup> Terumah</b>	25:1–27:19	I Kings 5:26–6:13
<b>Tezavveh</b>	27:20–30:10	Ezek. 43:10–27
<b>Ki Tissa</b>	30:11–34:35	I Kings 18:1–39 (18:20–39)
<b>Va-Yakhel</b>	35:1–38:20	I Kings 7:40–50 (7:13–26)
<b>Pekudei</b>	38:21–40:38	I Kings 7:51–8:21 (7:40–50)
<b><u>LEVITICUS</u></b>		

<b>NAME OF PORTION</b>	<b>VERSES</b>	<b><i>HAFTARAH</i> PORTION</b>
<b>Va-Yikra</b>	1:1–5:26	Isa. 43:21–44:23
<b>Zav</b>	6:1–8:36	Jer. 7:21–8:3; 9:22, 23
<b>Shemini</b>	9:1–11:47	II Sam. 6:1–7:17 (6:1–19)
<b><sup>2</sup> Tazri'a</b>	12:1–13:59	II Kings 4:42–5:19
<b>Mezora</b>	14:1–15:33	II Kings 7:3–20
<b>Aḥarei Mot</b>	16:1–18:30	Ezek. 22:1–19 (22:1–16)
<b>Kedoshim</b>	19:1–20:27	Amos 9:7–15 (Ezek. 20:2–20)
<b>Emor</b>	21:1–24:23	Ezek. 44:15–31
<b>Be-Har</b>	25:1–26:2	Jer. 32:6–27
<b>Be-Ḥukkotai</b>	26:3–27:34	Jer. 16:19–17:14
<b>NUMBERS</b>		
<b>Be-Midbar</b>	1:1–4:20	Hos. 2:1–22
<b>Naso</b>	4:21–7:89	Judg. 13:2–25
<b>Be-Ha'alotkha</b>	8:1–12:16	Zech. 2:14–4:7
<b>Shelaḥ Lekha</b>	13:1–15:41	Josh. 2:1–24
<b>Koraḥ</b>	16:1–18:32	I Sam. 11:14–12:22
<b>Ḥukkat</b>	19:1–22:1	Judg. 11:1–33
<b>Balak</b>	22:2–25:9	Micah 5:6–6:8
<b>Pinḥas</b>	25:10–30:1	I Kings 18:46–19:21
<b>Mattot</b>	30:2–32:42	Jer. 1:1–2:3

NAME OF PORTION	VERSES	<i>HAFTARAH</i> PORTION
Masei	33:1–36:13	Jer. 2:4–28; 3:4 (2:4–28; 4:1, 2)
<b>DEUTERONOMY</b>		
<u>Devarim</u>	1:1–3:22	Isa. 1:1–27
Va-Ethannan	3:23–7:11	Isa. 40:1–26
Ekev	7:12–11:25	Isa. 49:14–51:3
Re'eh	11:26–16:17	Isa. 54:11–55:5
Shofetim	16:18–21:9	Isa. 51:12–52:12
Ki Teze	21:10–25:19	Isa. 54:1–10
Ki Tavo	26:1–29:8	Isa. 60:1–22
Nizzavim	29:9–30:20	Isa. 61:10–63:9
Va-Yelekh	31:1–30	Isa. 55:6–56:8
Ha'azinu	32:1–52	II Sam. 22:1–51
Ve-Zot ha-Berakhah <sup>3</sup>	33:1–34:12	Josh. 1:1–18 (1:1–9)

<sup>1</sup> Parentheses indicate Sephardi ritual.

<sup>2</sup> Brackets indicate portions that are sometimes combined.

<sup>3</sup> This portion is not read on Sabbath but on Simḥat Torah.

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