
How to Read This Book

Of all the texts of Jewish tradition none is more frequently read and discussed than the weekly Torah portion, the *parashat hashavua*, as it's known in Hebrew. The volume of material commenting on and analyzing the 54 slices of the Five Books of Moses is immense and, happily, continues to proliferate.

But abundant as this interpretative material is, there is a surprising paucity of books that attempt to provide a methodology of **how** to read the weekly Torah portions. This book aims to begin to address that deficiency. It is a "how to" book, not an interpretive or an exegetical one. It is not a commentary on each week's parashah, nor does it seek to advance novel readings of them. I have conceived of it as an instruction manual on how to approach the 54 weekly Torah portions, how to read and hear them. It is offered to all who would like to upgrade the nature and quality of their experience with the Torah, that is, the Five Books of Moses.

Specifically, I have in mind three kinds of readers:

- Synagogue-goers who want to sit in synagogue during the Torah reading, not in boredom or in a less wakeful state of consciousness, but as involved listeners in what for 15 centuries has become the centerpiece of the *Shabbat* morning service: the millennial reenactment of the Sinai experience through the public reading from the Torah scroll.
- Jewish readers for whom synagogue services are not the focal point of their Jewish life but who, nevertheless, whether in the

privacy of their homes or in study groups, want a better understanding of how the five books work together to make the Torah or, to put it somewhat differently, the core text of the Jewish narrative.

- Non-Jews who want to attain deeper insight into how Jews read the Five Books of Moses and relate to it as Torah. A note to Christian readers follows below.¹

The movement of the five parts of this book is from the theoretical to the operational, from a discussion of some of the ideas and principles that underlie our reading of the Five Books to a presentation of a methodology of working through a weekly Torah portion.²

- Part I sets out the context. It explains some basic terms and outlines the overall structure of the Hebrew Bible into which a weekly Torah portion fits.
- Parts II and III identify some key issues and approaches that inform our reading of a weekly portion.
- Parts IV and V present an operational guide to reading a weekly portion and commentaries.

The five parts do not have to be read sequentially. Nor do they have to be read together or all in the same year. Readers in each of the three constituencies for whom this book is intended will approach and handle it differently at different seasons of life, as they will the Torah itself. A “one size fits all” approach to the following pages is, therefore, not indicated; an individualized and longitudinal one is. In the Jewish scheme of things, reading Torah is a lifelong project. If you cycle through the 54 weekly Torah portions year after year, you will see that your understanding of each of them will steadily deepen.

- **If you regard yourself as a novice** at reading the Five Books, Parts I and IV may suffice for now, and maybe Part V, too. You can always pick up the parts you skip at some future point, after you have taken your first steps in engaging with a weekly portion.

- **If you have had some experience in reading the Bible**, you could safely skip Part I and begin at Part II. Or, again, you could read the remaining four parts in any order you choose.
- **If your level of biblical literacy is high** and you are experienced at handling biblical text, this book may not teach you anything you don't already know. But it might give you some ideas to think about, offer you some new ways to delve into the text you haven't tried before, ways that you can share with your study partners or your students. And it may help you situate yourself more precisely on the interpretive map.

Regardless of the readership you belong to and where you are in your spiritual life, my hope is that this book will help you chart your own path as you develop your skills in meeting the piece of Torah that awaits your presence each week.