

REFORM SHABBAT TORAH READINGS FOR, AND FOLLOWING, THE “SECOND DAY” OF FESTIVALS IN THE DIASPORA

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As early as 1846, the Reform rabbis in the German states, assembled in conference in Breslau, had declared that the Diaspora “second-day” observance of the Festivals (*yom tov sheni shel galuyyot*), that is, observance of the second and eighth days of Pesach and the second day of Shavuot, Sukkot, and Shemini Atzeret, “have lost their meaning for our time. Congregations are therefore fully justified in abolishing the second-day holidays if they are inclined to do so” (cited in *CCAR Yearbook* 1 [1890], p. 96). (The original rationale for the two-day observance of Festivals outside the land of Israel was the slowness of communication between the Diaspora and the land of Israel, where the Festivals were officially proclaimed by the rabbinical court. A two-day observance in the Diaspora thereby obviated any doubt as to which day was the actual Festival. Later, when the calendar came to be fixed by mathematical principles and the original rationale evaporated, the second-day observance persisted in the Diaspora simply as a matter of tradition.) North American Reform congregations routinely have chosen not to observe the second Festival day (except for the second Seder!). In those years when the eighth day of Pesach or the second day of Shavuot falls on a Shabbat, they are treated in Reform congregations as ordinary Shabbatot, and the Torah readings are those for the next regular Shabbat (usually Parashat Shemini or Acharei Mot after Pesach and Parashat Naso after Shavuot).

In the land of Israel, the additional days of the Festivals are not (and never were) observed, by either traditional or Reform Jews. There, too, the Shabbat that happens to fall on the day after the seventh day of Pesach or the day of Shavuot is simply a regular Shabbat, and the Torah reading is the next one in the annual cycle (again, usually Shemini or Aharei Mot, and Naso).

So far, so good. Now here is the point where customs diverge. Traditional congregations in the Diaspora will resume the annual cycle of Shabbat Torah readings a week later than is done in the land of Israel. The two communities will then be out of sync in their weekly *parashiyyot* for anywhere between six and fifteen weeks, depending upon the length and type of the year (for a full account and illustration, see Arthur Spier, *The Comprehensive Hebrew Calendar*, third revised edition, 1986, p. 12).

Reform congregations in the Diaspora follow a Festival calendar that is similar to that of the land of Israel (although the second day of Rosh Hashanah continues to be observed in Israel; its rationale is different from that of the other Festivals). Should the cycle of Reform Shabbat Torah readings after a Festival also follow that of the land of Israel and be out of sync with our the rest of our local Jewish communities for six to fifteen weeks, or should local Jewish community custom prevail?

If the latter option is chosen, there is an easy way to realign the Reform cycle of Shabbat Torah readings with those in the neighborhood: since no Reform congregation

reads the entire Torah portion each week, one simply splits the first Torah and Haftarah readings after the Festival in half, reading the first part the first week (when non-Reform congregations in the Diaspora are still observing the Festival) and the second part the second week (when that full Torah portion with its Haftarah is being read in non-Reform congregations in the Diaspora), and---voilà!---you are back in sync with the local community after a week.

While there is no uniform Reform custom in this regard (and in principle, there never can be, since local congregations ultimately set their own policies, taking under advisement the suggestions that are made by the CCAR Responsa Committee and the URJ Department of Worship), the WRJ calendar for many years has followed the latter custom and is more and more treated as the unofficial "official" calendar of the North American Reform movement. The question also has been posed numerous times over at least the past forty years (!) to the CCAR Responsa Committee, which has consistently endorsed the latter custom:

1) Solomon B. Freehof, *Current Reform Responsa* (1969), pp. 42-43, writes, "This question has been asked a number of times, and answered by the writer as Chairman of the CCAR Committee on Responsa, so the answer may be deemed official, or as nearly official as any Conference responsum is. That is to say, it is meant for guidance and not for strict governance. Yet in general, it represents a fairly universal practice among our congregations . . . But the problem remains in the relationship between Reform and non-Reform congregations in America, England, etc. Here we are in the *same* country, **and it is not convenient that for a number of weeks we should be in dislocation as to Torah reading with the rest of American Jewry.** We have therefore arrived at the following practical solution: We simply reread on that Sabbath the special reading of the holiday that we read the day before [sic!], and take a Psalm as the supplementary reading, but the service that day is a regular Sabbath service. **In this way, on the very next Sabbath we are in accord with all the Jews of our environment.** The list of Torah readings at the back of the *Union Prayer Book Newly Revised* follows this solution of the problem."

2) A. Stanley Dreyfus, in the Table of Scriptural Readings for *Gates of Prayer* (1975) (*Gates of Understanding* 1:271; *Gates of the House* 283):
"When, in the Diaspora, the eighth day of Pesach or the second day of Shavuot falls on Shabbat, Reform congregations read the sidra assigned to the following week in the standard religious calendars. **However, in order to preserve uniformity in the reading of the Torah throughout the entire community, it is suggested that on these occasions, the sidra be spread over two weeks, one portion to be read while traditional congregations are observing the festival, and another portion to be read the following Shabbat.**

3) Walter Jacob, *Contemporary American Reform Responsa* (1987), 276:
Samuel E. Karff poses the question, concluding, "How should we handle this situation **so as to bring a minimum confusion to the Jewish community?**"
Rabbi Jacob discusses both the Israeli solution and the solution proposed above in the *Gates of Prayer* table, then concludes:
"This solution [the one in GOP] has the advantage of not separating us from the remainder of the Diaspora Jewish community. The Israeli solution is fine, but there the entire community, Orthodox and Liberal, follows the same pattern. We would recommend a division of the Torah portion for most congregations, and therefore, **maintain the same cycle as the rest of the Diaspora community.** For congregations which read the entire portion, the other solution is equally appropriate." (August, 1986)

4) Chaim Stern, *On the Doorposts of Your House* (1994), 364, reproduces verbatim the note in *Gates of Understanding* and *Gates of the House* (#2 above).

This writer concurs with these Reform authorities, while acknowledging that there is no single “correct” approach to this issue, and that each congregation ultimately will make its own decisions. What is decisive for me is the length of time during which the two customs will be out of sync: six to fifteen weeks can create a lot of confusion within a Jewish congregation that sees itself as part of *klal yisra'el*, the larger Jewish community--and that indeed is my orientation as a Reform Jew and a rabbi.