

Introduction

"What purpose was served by the divisions? They let Moses pause to reflect between one section and another, or between one topic and another. The matter may be inferred: If a person who heard the Torah directly from the Holy One, Blessed be He, and who spoke in the Holy Spirit, must pause to reflect between one section and another, or between one topic and another, then this is true all the more so for an ordinary person who hears it from another ordinary person." (Sifra 2, explaining the parashiyot petuhot and setumot)

A Basic Problem with Reading Tanakh

Knowing *where* to stop to pause and reflect is not a trivial detail when it comes to reading Tanakh. In my own study, simply not knowing where to start reading and where to stop kept me, for many years, from picking up a Tanakh and reading the sefarim I was unfamiliar with. I even found it hard to review the sefarim that I had once learned. Numerous commentaries were easily available, but they were of little help when it came to deciding exactly what to try to read at one sitting. In fact, the availability of so many commentaries only compounded the problem by making the first-time study of even a short section seem like a huge endeavor.

But the other extreme - to pick up a standard Tanakh without commentaries and just read - was also daunting. Language wasn't the main problem, because I have a good background in that, and because it is always easy enough to glance at a commentary or translation when necessary. Rather, the problem was twofold: Firstly, that I didn't know what I was about to read, nor did I know how it fit into the overall scheme of the sefer I was reading. Second, I didn't know how much of it to read. In other words, at the outset I didn't know how long a particular narrative or nevu'ah was, nor where it ended. I didn't know whether I should try to read it in its entirety in one sitting, or divide it and leave some for tomorrow. And should it need to be divided, I didn't know where to stop in the middle in order to least interrupt the flow of the text.

Why not just read "a perek a day"? There already are, in fact, a number of reading programs based on the simple idea of a perek (or two) a day - so why didn't they work for me?

The answer is partly because the chapter divisions, besides being of non-Jewish origin, are also notorious for breaking up the text at inappropriate points. Worse, they are also extremely uneven in length, sometimes for legitimate textual reasons, but very often for no good reason at all. Worst of all, the chapter numbers by themselves tell us nothing at all about the content of the text. What all this means is that since the chapter divisions are notoriously poor, it is quite likely that "perek bet" does not delineate a single independent unit of the text. But even when we are lucky and it does, turning to "perek bet" still tells me nothing about what the chapter contains, nor how it relates to its position between "perek aleph" and "perek gimmel," nor what its place is within the context of the entire book.

This last point is especially important, because if you know something in advance about the context and content of what you are about to read in Tanakh, that already contributes enormously to your comprehension during reading. Even short titles of one or two words will do.

A Practical Solution

So for my own learning and hazarah, I began to create a new division of the books of Nakh that would at once be (a) faithful to the natural divisions of the books and (b) practical as a means of dividing the texts into sections for daily reading. I played around with numerous options for dividing all the books of Nakh on the "macro" scale, and for subdividing the individual books into smaller sections on the "micro" scale. In the end, I settled on what seems to me to be the most practical plan for an ongoing system of study and review. Then I began creating individual pages (usually one page per sefer) to guide myself in reading and review. I hope that others will find them useful as well.

Currently, I am looking for are people who would like to try to use my completed drafts to actually learn some of the sefarim. This would allow them to learn Torah, and it would allow me to benefit from their suggestions on how to correct the pages or otherwise make them more useful.

A Flexible System

The system I developed relies on the idea that each month is independent, i.e. that in any given month you can learn or review any sefer you want. Each Rosh Hodesh is a fresh start, so what you learn is extremely flexible: You can read all of Nakh in a year, or review Nevi'im Rishonim four times, or Nevi'im Aharonim three times. Or you can choose any sefer you want at the beginning of each month, without binding yourself to any preset order. You can also focus on a sefer of particular interest to you and review it as many times as you like, month after month, until you know it well. The basic idea is to choose which sefer to study, print out the guide sheet, fold it in half (or in quarters), and keep it in your Tanakh for guidance as you make progress throughout the month.

Nevi'im and Ketuvim are divided into 12 month-units, each month-unit being devoted to one particular sefer (or two or more shorter sefarim), as follows:

- Month 1: Yehoshua & Shofetim (2 pages)
- Month 2: Shemuel
- Month 3: Melakhim
- Month 4: Yeshayahu
- Month 5: Yirmiyahu (2 pages)
- Month 6: Yehezkel
- Month 7: Trei Asar (2 pages)
- Month 8: Iyyov
- Month 9: Mishlei & Kohelet
- Month 10: Megillot (except Kohelet) & Daniel

Months 11-12: Divrei HaYamim & Ezra-Nehemia (3 pages)

Tehillim is kept separate: Its reading is governed by a separate chart for a 6-month cycle of reading *just one* average-length mizmor per day. Longer mizmorim are subdivided.

By focusing on just *one* mizmor with a single theme each day (as opposed to reading a string of mizmorim at once), this system makes it likely that one will read that mizmor with understanding and kavvana. Plus, reviewing Tehillim in its entirety twice a year, with understanding, can help to greatly improve one's language skills for reading Tanakh in general.

Purposes of the Nakh Pages:

1) To show a clear outline of the contents of the sefer, or (better yet) to be a sort of textual "snapshot" of the entire book. In this outline/snapshot I've done my very best to arrange each sefer thematically, according to organizational signals in the text itself. In creating this new arrangement I ignore the chapter divisions entirely (except as parenthetical aids for reference). On the other hand, I do rely heavily (but not slavishly) on the parashiyot petuhot and setumot. Wherever possible, I try to provide titles that help the reader see how what he is about to read fits into the overall scheme of the sefer. All of this is presented with extensive and careful use of text formatting (fonts, spacing, nikkud, etc.) so that a glance at a single page gives you a clear picture of the organization of the entire book at hand.

2) To divide the sefer into sections for daily reading. As far as possible, these daily readings should (a) be of reasonable length; (b) begin and end at appropriate points, but *not* where they interrupt the flow of the text. It is obviously impossible to fully achieve these two goals at once, but I've done the best I can to achieve a reasonable balance between them, and I hope others can offer me specific suggestions as to where the division of the text (as well as the titles) can be improved.

How long does it take, and who should try to do it?

In general, for most of the sefarim in Nakh, the bekiut system described here requires one to read roughly 40-50 pesukim a day. Sometimes, for unavoidable reasons connected to dividing the texts, it was necessary for these sections to be shorter or longer than 40-50 pesukim, but I tried to keep the "standard deviation" as low as possible.

For my own study, I find it best to sit and read a daily section out loud to myself with the te'amim. This usually takes about 20 minutes a day. During my initial reading of books whose language is very hard (e.g. Iyyov, Mishlei, Yeshayahu), it often took significantly longer. But subsequent readings took much less time. So if one sees this as a long-term project of continual review, then my estimate of 20 minutes per day is quite fair, even for non-narrative texts.

(Also note that the quantity can easily be halved: Each daily reading can simply be divided in two. The result is that the amount to be read each day is very small, and yet you still read or review an entire sefer once every two months. This option is especially important for initial readings of difficult sefarim.)

Remember that the best way to become familiar with biblical Hebrew is to read lots of it! Therefore, a system like this will probably work best for people who have been reading "shenayim mikra" for parashat ha-shavua each week for a number of years, especially if they read it aloud with the te'amim. In fact, for those who have not read "shenayim mikra" in the past, I suggest they do that alone for a couple of years instead of trying to read Nakh. (Shenayim mikra is, after all, a mitzvah!) Only afterwards should they try to supplement it, perhaps first with a few cycles of Tehillim, and then later with the rest of Nevi'im and Ketuvim.

Even those with long experience reading "shenayim mikra" may want to adopt this Nakh system slowly, initially reading and reviewing one or several selected books a number of times, instead of trying to read all of Nakh the first year. Furthermore, those who have limited experience reading Tanakh in Hebrew may want to begin reading a daily section of Nakh in translation. Better yet, they can try using a Hebrew-English text in parallel columns (like the new JPS edition) or parallel pages (as in the Artscroll Tanakh).

Schools:

Most typical daily bekiut programs (Daf Yomi, Mishnah Yomit, Halakhah Yomit, Rambam Yomi, etc.) are largely meant for self-motivated individuals committed to Torah study, who take the importance of regular review very seriously: "One who has studied a section a hundred times cannot be compared to another who has studied it a hundred and one times" (Hagiga 9b). This is certainly true of mikra, which is supposed to be chanted regularly by individuals from a very young age. ("Ben hamesh la-mikra.")

Sometimes such bekiut programs are appropriate for group study (as in a Daf Yomi shiur). And though they are primarily meant for individual study, at times they can be adapted to schools, and even to the formal classroom. This Nakh system is mostly meant for individuals, but it may have certain classroom uses. I offered it to my students as a review technique in preparation for the 10th grade Israeli bagrut exam on Bekiut in Tanakh. I suspect that if this system were combined with a well-done set of questions on each daily unit, it could prove valuable both in the classroom and out.

Feedback

I'd be happy to answer correspondence about these Nakh pages, as well as to get suggestions for improvement and technical corrections.

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