

A Guide to Reading Nevi'im and Ketuvim

Introduction

What purpose did the divisions serve?
They let Moses pause to reflect
between sections and between topics.

The matter may be inferred:
If a person who heard the Torah directly from the Holy One, Blessed be He,
who spoke with the Holy Spirit,
must pause to reflect between sections and between topics,
then this is true all the more so for an ordinary person
who hears it from another ordinary person.

(On the *parashiyot petuhot* and *setumot*. From *Dibbura de-Nedava* at the beginning of *Sifra*.)

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 books I was unfamiliar with. It was even hard for me to review the books that I had once studied seriously. 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 book 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 the next day. And should it need to be divided, I didn't know where to stop, i.e. the point that would least interrupt the flow of the text.

Why not just read “a *perek* a day”? There already are, in fact, programs for reading *Nakh* based on the simple idea of reading one or two chapters a day.¹ So why didn't they work for me?

The problem with the chapter divisions – besides their non-Jewish origin – is that they are 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 says nothing about what the chapter contains, nor about its local context between “*perek aleph*” and “*perek gimmel*,” nor what its place is within the global 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 a one or two words will do!

A Practical Solution

So for my own study and review, I began to create a new division of the books of *Nakh* that would at once be (a) faithful to the natural flow of the books and (b) practical as a means of dividing the texts into sections for daily reading.

I experimented with several options for organizing all the books of *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* into an overall reading schedule. In the end, I settled on what seems to me the most sensible plan for a flexible, ongoing system of study and review.

Then I worked on dividing the individual books into smaller sections and subsections. After that I began creating individual sheets (usually one page per book) to guide myself in reading and review. I hope that others will find them useful as well.

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 study 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 single *sefer* of particular interest to you and review it as many times as you like, month after month, until you know it well.

¹A schedule for the most common two-*perek*-a-day study-cycle for *Nakh* has been published for many years in both the *Lu'ah Dinim u-Minhagim* published by Heikhal Shlomoh and in the similar *Lu'ah* distributed by the IDF Rabbinate.

The basic idea is: Choose the *sefer* you want to study before *Rosh Hodesh*. Then 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.

The Twelve Month-Units

Nevi'im and *Ketuvim* are divided into 12 month-units. Each month-unit is devoted to one average-length *sefer* (or two or more shorter books), as follows:²

- 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 ha-Yamim & Ezra-Nehemia (3 pages)

Tehillim

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

By focusing on just *one mizmor* each day (as opposed to the common practice of reading a string of *mizmorim* all at once), this system makes it likely that one will read that *mizmor* with understanding and *kavvanah*. 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 Guide Sheets:

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 the contents of each book thematically, according to organizational signals present 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 form of the *sefer*. All of this is presented with selective and

²For the considerations that led me to organize the books this way, see "Notes on the Overall Reading Schedule" in "Sources and Notes."

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 both of these goals at once. I've done the best I can to reach 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 books in *Nakh*, this system for reading and review 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 verses, but I tried to keep the “standard deviation” as low as I could.

For my own study, I find it best to sit and read a daily section out loud to myself with the *te'amim* (“trope”), which helps me absorb the material much better than a “dry” reading (without *te'amim*). This usually takes under 20 minutes a day. Other people with different learning styles or less proficiency in *laining* may prefer a “dry” narration³ (which takes even less time). Obviously, quiet reading and study with commentaries are also good options.

My initial reading of books whose language unusually hard (such as *Iyyov*, *Mishlei*, *Yeshayahu*) often took significantly longer than 20 minutes. But subsequent readings took less time. If one sees this as a long-term project of continual review, then my estimate of less than 20 minutes per day is quite fair, even for non-narrative texts.

Also note that the quantity can easily be halved: Simply divide each daily unit in two, on your own.⁴ The result is that the amount to be read each day is quite small, and yet you still read or review an entire *sefer* once every second month. This option is especially important for initial readings of the hardest *sefarim*.

Remember that the best way to learn 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* every week for a number of years, preferably with *te'amim*. In fact, for those who have not read *shenayim mikra* in the past, I suggest they do that alone for a

³For a recording of a “dry” narration of Tanakh (i.e. without *te'amim*) by a professional narrator, see <http://www.solomonstreasurechest.com/HebrewBible.html>. The narration (in MP3) is by Shlomo Bertonov, whose was broadcast over the course of decades on “Kol Yisrael.”

⁴The simplest way to do this is to take the Guide Sheet and mark “aleph – bet” at the beginning of the line for the first daily unit. At the beginning of the line for the second unit, mark “gimel – dalet,” etc. At the 15th unit you will have reached “kaf-tet – lamed.” Then at the 16th unit start the second month again with “aleph – bet,” etc.

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 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 just one or two books a number of times, instead of trying to read all of *Nakh* the first year. Those who have limited experience reading Tanakh in Hebrew may want to begin by 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).

Melodies

If you sing *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* with the *te'amim*, what melodies can you use? Perhaps the most natural thing is to read *Nevi'im* with the melody for *haftarot*, and *Ketuvim* with the melody for the *megillot*.⁵ This is what I do, and it seems to fit well with an established tradition to reserve one special melody for Torah, another for *Nevi'im*, and a third for *Ketuvim*.⁶ There are many good recordings available today for Torah, *haftarot*, and *megillot*.⁷

However, *Sifrei Emet* – *Tehillim*, *Mishei*, and *Iyyov* – still pose a real problem. These three poetic books share a unique system of *te'amim* – called *Ta'amei Emet* – which is not found in the other books of Tanakh. There is no Ashkenazic musical tradition for *Ta'amei Emet*.⁸

There are, however, many Eastern musical traditions for *Ta'amei Emet*. Numerous recordings are available for *Tehillim* sung with the *te'amim*, and some of them are strikingly beautiful.⁹ There is also a very good recording of *Mishlei*.¹⁰ Unfortunately, I have not found any recordings of *Iyyov*.¹¹

⁵Specifically, this means using the melody of the three *megillot* read on the *shalosh regalim* (*Shir ha-Shirim*, *Ruth*, *Kohelet*) for the books at the end of *Ketuvim* (*Daniel*, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, and *Divrei ha-Yamim*). It is reasonable to consider the melody for the three *megillot* as the general melody for *Ketuvim*, as opposed to the special tunes for *Esther* (joy) and *Eikhah* (sorrow).

⁶See *Sefer Hasidim* 302; this seems to be reflected in the Ashkenazic musical tradition. Nevertheless, there is no halakhic obligation to use three separate melodies.

⁷For the common Ashkenazic melody I heartily recommend the CD-ROM produced by Rabbi Jeremy Wieder (Ashkenazic pronunciation; see www.shiur.net for details). For Israeli pronunciation with the common Ashkenazic melody, see <http://bible.ort.org> (no *megillot*). For Sepharadi *Yerushalmi*, Moroccan and Yemenite readings, see www.kolkore.com (no *megillot*).

For two interesting computer programs that “read” with the *te'amim* in an artificial (synthesized) voice, see *Trope Trainer* <http://www.kinnor.com/> and <http://www.maxsynagogue.com/>.

⁸There is a common Ashkenazic *nusach* (chant) for reciting *Tehillim*, but it has no systematic connection to the *te'amim*.

⁹Numerous *hazzanim* from a variety of Eastern traditions (Yemenite, Iraqi, Syrian, Moroccan, Tunisian, etc.) have recorded *Sefer Tehillim*; these recordings are very popular among *Sefaradim* in Israel today. The various recordings have different levels of musical quality, accuracy in pronunciation, and fidelity to the *te'amim*. The following are some of the Three quality recordings I have found:

Schools:

Typical daily study 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” (*Hagigah* 9b). This is certainly true of Tanakh, which is supposed to be chanted regularly by individuals from a very young age: *Ben hamesh la-mikra* (*Avot* 5:21).

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 self-motivated 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 *Nevi'im Rishonim*. I suspect that if this system were combined with a well-done set of questions on each daily unit, it could prove valuable both inside the classroom and out.

(1) Tehillim read by R. Ziyon Palah with instrumentation (5757, on 8 CDs). The hazzan is a student of Rabbi Meir Mazouz of Yeshivat Kissei Rahamim in Bnei Brak, and so the tradition is apparently Tunisian. This is the most strikingly beautiful and extraordinarily accurate reading of Tehillim I have found. He makes the words of the *mizmorim* come alive. Available from Tishbi, Rehov Hevron 7, Bnei Brak; Tel. (03) 578-1927. Also available on cassettes for NIS 40. Audio samples recently became available on the internet at www.tehillim.net, and the CDs can now be ordered from “Aron Hasfarim” at tel. 1-700-700-692; www.aron-hasfarim.co.il.

(2) Tehillim read by Hazzan Ezra Mazri with instrumentation (5754, on 6 cassettes). Iraqi (Bavli) tradition, also beautiful and accurate. Call (03) 570-2403 for orders.

(3) “Tehillim on CD-Rom” by TES; <http://www.jewishsoftware.com/products/333.asp>. A beautiful reading according to the *te'amim* by Rabbi Shimon Alouf. (Samples can be heard online at <http://torahtogo.com/tehillim.asp>.)

(4) There is a recording available on cassettes using the common “Sepharadi Yerushalmi” Kabbalat Shabbat tune for the entire Sefer Tehillim. It is very pleasant to listen to, but does not seem to me to follow the *te'amim*.

(5) The Moroccan hazzan Rabbi Haim Louk recorded Sefer Tehillim on 4 CDs, and his reading is very pleasant to the ear. The reading is a bit too fast, however, and does not really emphasize the *te'amim*. Produced by Azulai Bros., Raziell 29, Jaffa. Tel: (03) 683-2370.

¹⁰For Mishlei, there is 4-cassette album called “Emet Kenah” by Rabbi Meir Mazouz, Rosh Yeshiva of the Tunisian Yeshivat Kisse Rahamim in Bnei Brak, and produced by the yeshiva’s “Makhon Lev Masliah” foundation (5757). Mishlei is read responsively (verse by verse) by Rabbi Mazouz and his students. The album begins with an introduction to *Ta'amei Emet* by Rabbi Mazouz, the reading of Mishlei is interspersed with his *divrei Torah* on Mishlei (especially on grammar and *te'amim*), and concludes with samples of the *te'amim* for Tehillim and Iyyov. Highly worthwhile. Yeshivat Kisse Rahamim, Rehov Harav Uziel 26, Bnei Brak. Tel. (03) 676-7163/4.

¹¹Rabbi Yosef Alnakaveh (Moroccan tradition) informed me that Iyyov has three separate melodies: One for the opening in regular *te'amim*, a second for *ta'amei emet* in the *ma'anot*, and a third for the regular *te'amim* at the end.

For exceptionally motivated students, the Guide Sheets may also prove valuable in promoting *bekiut* knowledge early on, knowledge that could eventually allow them to prepare for the international *Hiddon ha-Tanakh*.

Torah

The yearly cycle of *Parashat ha-Shavua* is an extraordinary pedagogical device. There is no need at all to create a new reading cycle for the Torah.

Nevertheless, there is still a mild need to present the overall structure of each *Humash* clearly, as well as for a detailed outline of each week's *parashah*. Such pages are currently being prepared.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rabbi Dr. Shalom Berger for hosting the initial version of the Guide Sheets on LookJed, and to Mrs. Chana Honig German for her patient, helpful efforts in the not-so-simple task of converting, arranging, and uploading the *Nakh* pages correctly at the LookJed site. Thanks to their help, the initial version may be viewed at <http://www.lookstein.org/tanakh/>. The current corrected version appears at Erel Segal's wonderful [Tanakh website](#); Erel helped improve the Guide vastly in terms of user-friendliness, and I am very grateful to him for his help and goodwill.

Feedback

Feel free to correspond with me about this Guide, as well as (and especially) to offer technical suggestions on how the titles, the division of the text, or the format of the pages can be improved. I would love to know if you make modifications, so that I can learn from what you've done. Remember that as they now stand, the Guide Sheets are imperfect drafts, with many rough spots that need to be smoothed out.¹²

Personal

To my wife Sheri: Everything I have been able to do during our years in Israel (including this small project) has only been in the *zekhut* of your love, patience, and encouragement. Thank you.

This Tanakh project was done during the years when our two sons were born, and when they were small children. Its completion marks David Zvi's fifth year and Ezra Shmuel's second one. May God bless us to guide them through Mikra, Mishnah, and

¹²Numerous small details may need to be corrected. But please be aware of one serious thing that remains incomplete: Each page is only formatted for a short Hebrew month (*hodesh haser*) of 29 days. Ideally, the Guide should include a device to "fit" each book into 30 daily units for a full Hebrew month (*hodesh malei*), or even a second version of each page. For now, simply divide one of the longer units on your own, or take advantage of the "spare" day for review, or in case you miss a day.

Talmud – and then on to *huppah* and and a life of good deeds! – in health, prosperity and peace. May they grow to be bnei Torah and fine human beings.

Seth (Avi) Kadish
Rosh Hodesh Nissan 5764
Karmiel, Israel
skadish@012.net.il

Copyright Note: A Guide to Reading Nevi'im and Ketuvim is copyright © 5764 (2004) by Seth (Avi) Kadish. It may be copied and modified freely according to the terms of the GFDL license.

Copyright Explanation: This means you may use, modify and distribute the Guide as you see fit, as long as you allow others to do the same with your own work. If the Guide is used within a larger work (e.g. a Tanakh or a commentary) then this restriction covers only what is based upon the textual outlines contained here and not the larger work. Any modified version (even within a larger work) must cite the linked Copyright Note above.