

Why is Israel on a Different Parsha Track than the Rest of the World?

Since Pesach, Israel has been one Parsha ahead of the rest of the world. This means that if you are traveling to Israel during this time, you will miss a Parsha!

There are two cases where this can happen. The first is on Pesach. Outside the Holy Land, we are obligated to celebrate an eighth day, whereas in Israel, Pesach is seven days. When the eighth day falls on Shabbos, then in Israel, that Shabbos is not Pesach anymore, so they read the next Parsha. Outside Israel, it's still Pesach, so the Torah reading is on the holiday theme. It is only the following week that the next Parsha is read. And so, the Parsha in Israel advances to one week ahead.

The second possible case happens when Shavuot falls on Erev Shabbos (Friday). Outside of Israel, we celebrate Shavuot for two days, but in Israel it is only one day, so the same type of scenario will play out: while the rest of the world will be celebrating Shabbos as the second day of Shavuot, in Israel it will be a regular Shabbos and they will thus be reading the next Parsha. Outside of Israel, we will be reading the holiday Torah reading and therefore only resume the Parsha schedule on the next Shabbos. So we remain off by one Parsha for a number of weeks.

Sometimes after Pesach, the "misalignment" goes on for five weeks, reconnecting two weeks before Shavuot with Parshas Behar-Bechukosai. Outside of Israel they are read together (on the same Shabbos), and inside Israel they are read on separate weeks, so this gets us realigned. Other times it can go on for about four months, until Parshas Matos-Maasei are combined outside of Israel (while in Israel they remain separated), and we are back on the same track.

After Shavuot it always realigns with Parshas Chukas-Balak, which generally takes 4 to 5 weeks.

Between Pesach and Matos-Maasei there are, depending on the year, three or four double Parshas. Between Pesach and Shavuot, there can be as many as three, which could put us on the same track as early as the Shabbos following Pesach. So, why do we wait until either Behar-Bechukosai (5 weeks) or Matos-Maasei (4 months), to become realigned?

The first thing to understand is that the schedule of the Parshas was established outside of the Land of Israel, at a time when in Israel, the Jewish community was small and less educated, and they would complete the Torah readings over a three-year cycle (rather than the current single-year cycle that is now the norm all over).

Later, when Israel once again became a center of Torah, it adopted the system from outside the Land. Every few years, because of the "extra" non-Chag Shabbos, Israel is forced to go on to a different track, while outside of Israel, they remain on the regular track.

Why were these Parshas set up to be read this way outside the Land?

The answer is that when setting up the Parsha system, there were many rules and arrangements established for various reasons. We will look at some of these guidelines and thus be able to see how they factor into both the separation and realignment of the Parshas between Israel and "Chutz la'Aretz" (the rest of the world).

One such rule is that the first Parshas to be doubled up when necessary are the final Parshas in any of the 5 books of the Chumash; therefore, Behar-Bechukosai and Matos-Maasei will be the first to be read together in their respective Chumashim when the need arises.

They also wanted to arrange things so that Parshas Pinchas, whenever possible, would be read during the Three Weeks – i.e., between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av (Tisha B'Av) – the saddest period of time on the Jewish calendar. Pinchas has the holiday sacrifice readings, which

are joyous and thus sweeten the harshness of the time.

It was also established that Parshas Vaeschanan would always be read the Shabbos after Tisha B'Av. This is Shabbos Nachamu, the first of the seven Haftoras of Consolation between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashana.

They also established that Parshas Bechukosai, which has the curses, would be read before Shavuot, so that at least one Parsha (namely, Parshas Bamidbar) would buffer between those curses and Shavuot. This can cause the tracks to align earlier.

Sometimes there is no choice but to have Parshas Naso also read before Shavuot; however, whenever possible, Naso is after Shavuot, since they prefer that the connection between the curses of Parshas Bechukosai and the holiday of Shavuot to be recognized, and if there are two Parshas in between rather than just one, then it is not so recognizable.

In a Jewish leap year, when there is an extra month of Adar added to the calendar, the tracks realign with Parshas Matos-Maasei, since there are four extra weeks and most of the double Parshas have to be split up. So, being that outside of Israel we wait until Matos-Maasei to have a double Parsha, there is no choice but to realign only then.

However, in a regular year, they realign with Parshas Behar-Bechukosai even though in many years there is the possibility of realigning earlier, because there is a long-standing tradition to realign with Parshas Behar-Bechukosai and it is preferred not to break from tradition whenever possible.

When Moshiach comes, The Three Weeks will become a happy time, and it will not be necessary to have Parshas Pinchas read then in order to sweeten the mood. Perhaps then, we will be able to align the tracks earlier, but at that time won't matter much, because we will all be living in Israel.

All of the information above was gleaned from questions I posed to rabbis who visited me. As I am limited to the books that I have on my eye-gaze computer.

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