



WHAT IS TORAH?



When your friend says, “I’m studying Torah,” what does that mean? Are they reading the Bible? What does “Torah” refer to?

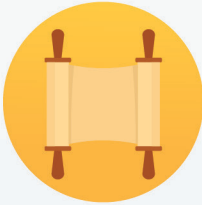
The truth is that the word “Torah” can mean a lot of different things, depending on the context.

Here’s a brief guide that explains the four general categories of Torah.

We’ll see how in every generation, the Jewish people have worked to interpret and apply Jewish law to their lives, helping to connect us to God and the Jewish people as a whole.

Let’s take a journey through the development of Torah from Creation until modern times.

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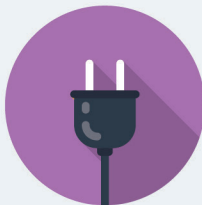
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THE WRITTEN TORAH

Let's begin by focusing on the Written Torah,
also known as "Tanach."

"**TaNaCH**" is an acronym for:

Torah (Bible)
Nevi'im (Prophets)
Ketuvim (Writings)

THE BIBLE

The first part of the Written Torah is the five books of the Bible which were given from God to Moshe on Mount Sinai.

These five volumes are also called "The Five Books of Moses" or "Chumash." ("Chumash" comes from the Hebrew word "chameish," which means "five.")

Every synagogue houses at least one Torah scroll which is used for occasions when the Torah is read in public. This Torah scroll contains the entire Five Books of Moses, handwritten in a special script with ink on parchment.

בראשית

*Sample script
found in a Torah scroll*

Nowadays, for general reading and learning, we typically use copies of the Bible that are printed in book form.

Each book of the Chumash is divided into smaller sections, each called a "parshah" or "parshiyot" in plural.

There are 54 parshiyot in total. One (or sometimes two) parshiyot are read in the synagogue each week so that the entire Chumash is read over the course of the year.



Bereishit begins with creation of the world and details the lives of the individuals who formed the foundation of the Jewish people - primarily Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.



Shemot tells the story of the formation of the Jewish people through their servitude in Egypt, the Exodus, and the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. It also explains the perpetuation of that revelation through the establishment of the Tabernacle (Mishkan).



Vayikra details the laws of sacrifices, purity, and laws relating to the Beit Hamikdash (Temple) in Jerusalem.



Bamidbar discusses the Jewish people's travels in the desert, more Temple Laws, and the Jewish people's plan to enter the Land of Israel.



Devarim recounts the forty years of wandering in the desert and other speeches and blessings that Moshe gave to the Jewish people.

THE PROPHETS

The second part of the Written Torah is called Prophets (Nevi'im).

The Prophets section includes eight books which recount Jewish history during the era of prophecy starting from the year Moshe died through the early years of the Second Temple.



Following the death of Moshe, Yehoshua leads the Jewish people into Israel, conquers the land, and divides it among the tribes.



In the book of Shoftim, the young nation experiences ups and downs as it suffers multiple failures which require special leaders to save them.

The book of Shmuel tells the story of the early Jewish monarchy and rivalry between King Shaul and King David as well as the prophet Shmuel who anointed both of them.



Melachim explains the history of the division of the Jewish people into two kingdoms, as well as their eventual spiritual decay and exile.

The prophet Yeshayahu speaks of the many dangers facing the Jewish people but also of their ultimate salvation.



Yirmiyahu was a lone prophet who tried to prevent the exile of the Jews only to have his warnings fall on deaf ears.

Yechezkel was a prophet who went into exile with the Jewish people after the destruction of the first Beit Hamikdash.



Trei Asar is a compilation of the prophecies of twelve prophets who were active at various points in Jewish history: Hoshea, Yoel, Amos, Ovadiah, Yonah, Micha, Nachum, Chabakuk, Tzefaniah, Chaggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

WRITINGS

Writings (Ketuvim) is the third part of the Written Torah.

It is a mixture of poetry, prophecy, and history.

There are seven books and five megillot (scrolls).





A collection of songs and poetry of King David reflecting themes of love, faith, loss, regret, and suffering.



Words of wisdom attributed to King Solomon, the wisest of all men.



The story of the suffering that Iyov experienced and his struggle to understand why bad things happen to good people.



The story of Daniel and his challenges leading the Jewish people during their exile.



The story of the Jews returning to the land of Israel and building the Second Temple.



Chronicles which review many stories from the rest of Tanach.



An emotional love song said to represent the relationship between God and the Jewish people.



Heart-wrenching lamentations over the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash.



The story of Esther who became the Queen of Persia and saved the Jews from destruction.



The story of Rut, an earnest convert who became the ancestress of the Davidic dynasty.



The philosophical musings of King Solomon on the meaning of life.

COMMENTARIES ON TANACH

The words of the Written Torah hold many levels of meaning. Throughout the ages, numerous great sages have written commentaries on Tanach which elucidate the different layers of meaning on each verse.

Famous commentaries on Tanach include:

Targum Onkelos

A prominent Roman nobleman in the times of the Mishna who converted to Judaism. He translated the Bible into Aramaic. Every translation is also a commentary, and many later commentators use the commentary of Onkelos to try and decipher cryptic passages.

Rashi

Acronym for Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki. Rashi (11th century France) is considered the most important commentary on Chumash and is usually the first one learned by children in school. His commentary is printed in a unique Hebrew script.

Siftei Chachamim

Rashi's commentary on Chumash was so important that many rabbis wrote commentaries on it, trying to figure out exactly why Rashi said everything he did. In the 17th century, Rabbi Shabtai Bass gathered the best of these supercommentaries into one collection, called Siftei Chachamim.

Ramban (Nachmanides)

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194–1270) was a Spanish Rabbi who famously defended Judaism from Christian attacks. His philosophical remarks in this commentary are some of the most important and foundational in Jewish thought.

Ohr Hachaim

Chayim Ibn Attar (1696-1743) was a Moroccan rabbi and mystic. His commentary demonstrates a keen textual sensitivity as well as a staggering grasp of both mystical and more down-to-earth modes of thought.

Sample Rashi

"God said to Kayin, 'Where is Hevel, your brother?'" (Genesis 4:9)

Why did God ask this question? Isn't God Omniscient, meaning that He is all-knowing and nothing is hidden from Him? Certainly God already knew where Hevel was. So why did God need to ask?

Rashi explains: God asked this question for the purpose of engaging Kayin in calm conversation, so that Kayin might repent and admit, "I killed him and have sinned."



THE ORAL TORAH

Aside from the Written Torah, there is an additional component of the Torah which was given at Mount Sinai and not written down until much later.

The Oral Torah refers to the full body of Jewish laws and ideas, some of which were passed down *orally* from generation to generation.

It also includes the interpretations of every generation of rabbis - how they understood and applied Jewish law to the unique circumstances encountered by their generations.

MISHNA

The ideas contained in the Oral Law were passed down orally from generation to generation until the rabbis began to fear that there was a risk of the laws becoming forgotten or getting accidentally changed over time.

Therefore, around 200 CE, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi wrote down the basics of the Oral Law in a six-volume compilation called the Mishna.

One famous section of the Mishna is called Pirkei Avot (Ethics of the Fathers) which offers pearls of wisdom and guidance for life. Pirkei Avot is part of the Nezikin volume of the Mishna.

Sample Mishna (Berachot 1:2)

מאימתי קורין את שמע בשחרית?
משיכיר בין תכלת ללבן.
רבי אליעזר אומר: בין תכלת לכרתי.

(וגומרה) עד הנץ החמה.
רבי יהושע אומר: עד שלש שעות,
שכן דרך בני מלכים לעמוד בשלש שעות.

הקורא מכאן ואילך לא הפסיד, כאדם הקורא בתורה.

When is the earliest time you can begin to read the Shema prayer in the morning?

From the time when [it is light enough for] a person to be able to differentiate between blue and white.

Rabbi Eliezer says: Between blue and green.

He must finish the Shema by sunrise.

Rabbi Yehoshua says: [No, he can finish it] until three hours into the day, since it's the way of princes to wake up three hours into the day.

Someone who reads the Shema later in the day does not lose anything, for he is like a person who is just reading any other part of the Torah.

The Mishna is organized into six volumes.
Each volume is called a "Seder" ("order").

All six volumes are called "*Shisha Sidrei Mishna - The Six Orders of the Mishna*" (or "Shas" for short).

The six volumes are subdivided into smaller *Masechtot* (Tractates).



Zeraim is about the laws of agriculture.

11 Masechtot

Berachot ▪ Pe'ah ▪ Demai
Kil'ayim ▪ Shevi'it ▪ Terumot
Ma'aserot ▪ Ma'aser Sheni
Challah ▪ Orlah ▪ Bikkurim



Mo'ed includes the laws of the Sabbath, festivals, and fasts.

12 Masechtot

Shabbat ▪ Eruvin ▪ Pesachim
Shekalim ▪ Rosh Hashanah ▪
Yoma ▪ Sukkah ▪ Beitzah ▪ Ta'anit
Megillah ▪ Mo'ed Katan ▪ Chagigah



Nashim includes the laws of marriage and family life.

7 Masechtot

Yevamot ▪ Ketubot
Nedarim ▪ Nazir
Sotah ▪ Gittin
Kiddushin



Nezikin contains laws related to injuries, business, and financial matters.

10 Masechtot

Bava Kamma ▪ Bava Metzia
Bava Batra ▪ Sanhedrin
Makkot ▪ Shevu'ot
Eduyot ▪ Avodah Zarah
Pirkei Avot ▪ Horayot



Kodashim discusses the laws of sacrifices and the Temple.

11 Masechtot

Zevachim ▪ Menachot
Chullin ▪ Bechorot
Arachin ▪ Temurah
Keritot ▪ Me'ilah ▪ Tamid
Middot ▪ Kinnim



Taharot explains the laws of purity and impurity.

12 Masechtot

Keilim ▪ Oholot ▪ Nega'im
Parah ▪ Tohorot ▪ Mikva'ot
Niddah ▪ Machshirin
Zavim ▪ Tevul Yom
Yadayim ▪ Uktzin

THE TALMUD

While it was a drastic step to write down the Oral Law in the form of the Mishna, there were still many layers of explanations that had to be added lest they become forgotten, too.

Therefore, two Babylonian sages named Ravina and Rav Ashi wrote down these explanations and saved them for posterity in a compilation called the Babylonian Talmud (Gemara).

The Talmud was written in Aramaic around the year 500 CE and explains what is written in the Mishna and adds more commentaries and stories.

There is a famous program called "Daf Yomi" in which program participants study one page of Talmud per day. By following this schedule, people are able to finish learning the entire Talmud over the course of every 7.5 years.

Sample passage from the Talmud:

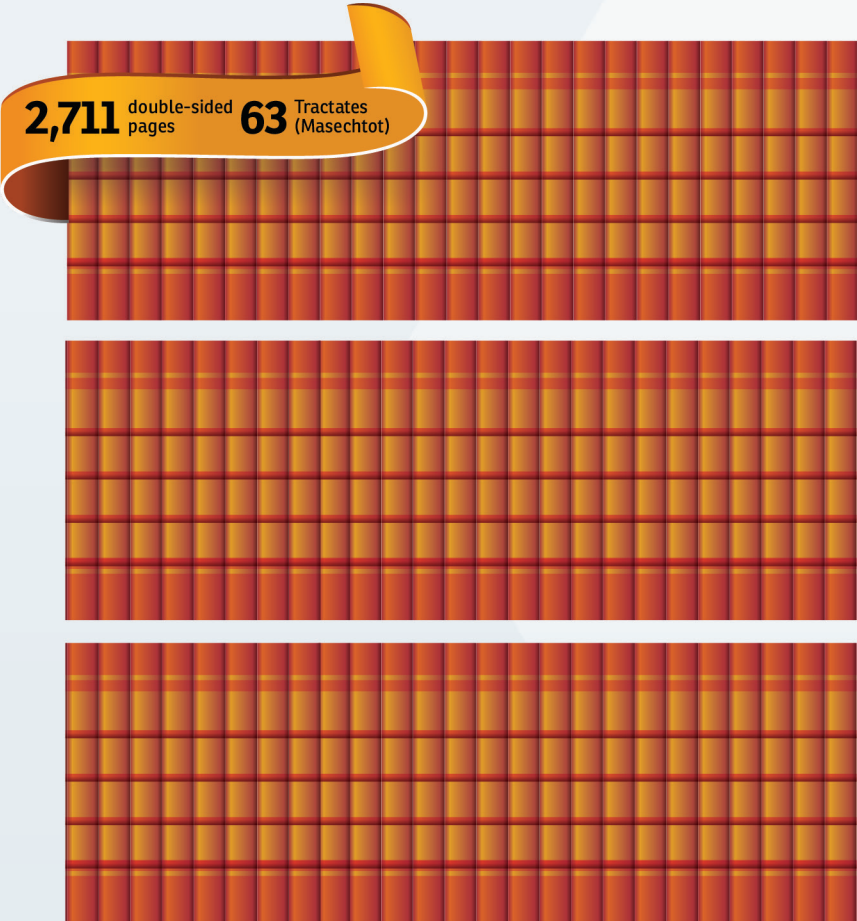
The first Mishna (Berachot 1:1) asks:
When do we recite the evening Shema prayer?

The Mishna goes on to present three different opinions as to when to recite the Shema prayer.

The Talmud explaining this Mishna begins with asking: ***Before we discuss when, how do we even know that we need to say Shema in the first place?***

The Talmud is all about great questions.

The Talmud is organized into the same six volumes as the Mishna. Each sub-section (Masechta) of the Talmud is usually purchased as a separate book because there are so many pages and commentaries.



2,711 double-sided pages **63** Tractates (Masechtot)

COMMENTARIES ON THE TALMUD

Famous commentaries on the Talmud include:

Rashi

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105)
(Same sage who commented on the Bible)

Tosafot

A collection of Talmudic commentaries written by
a school of rabbis mostly centered in France
(with Ashkenazic traditions)

There are also some indices printed on the
pages of the Talmud, including:

Mesoret Hashas

Provides cross-references to similar passages
found elsewhere in the Talmud

Ein Mishpat Ner Mitzvah

Tells you where this passage from the Talmud is discussed
in the writings of the codified Jewish law

Torah Ohr Hashaleim

Gives you the full Biblical verses that are sometimes
quoted in part in the text of the Talmud



THE CODIFIERS

Several centuries after the Talmud, some great rabbis started to codify Jewish law - to make one set of law that all Jews could follow.

This was necessary because the Talmud and Talmudic commentaries contain many different opinions on each topic and it is not always clear which opinion we are supposed to follow.

THE TUR

In the 1200s, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher wrote a four-volume work called the "Arba'ah Turim" (lit. "four rows") known in short as "the Tur."

On each topic of Jewish law, the Tur cites and compares the opinions of earlier Talmudic commentators, especially those of his father the Rosh, the Rif, the Rambam, and Tosafot.

He was able to write this comprehensive work because he lived the early part of his life in Germany and the latter part of his life in Spain, enabling familiarity with both Ashkenazic and Sefardic practices.

The Tur will often quote multiple positions on a subject without definitively deciding between them.



The Tur wrote his commentary based on the writings of earlier Talmudic commentators: the Rif, the Rambam, and the Rosh.



The Rif

R' Isaac ben Jacob Alfasi (11th century)

The Rif wrote a running commentary on the Talmud that explains which opinion we should follow out of all the opinions mentioned in the Talmud.



The Rambam

R' Moses ben Maimon also known as Maimonides (12th century)

The Rambam wrote a code of law (detached from the Talmud) citing the authoritative opinion on each topic, covering all of Jewish law. This work is known as the Mishneh Torah.



The Rosh

R' Asher ben Yechiel (13th century)

Similar to the Rif, the Rosh wrote a running commentary on the Talmud but he also incorporated many Ashkenazic traditions from Germany, where he lived initially. (This is in contrast to Rif who lived in Morocco and had Sephardic customs.)



THE TUR



ORACH CHAIM
LAWS OF DAILY PRACTICE

YOREH DE'AH
LAWS OF KASHRUT AND ADDITIONAL TOPICS

CHOSHEN MISHPAT
LAWS OF FINANCE AND COURTS

EVEN HA'EZER
LAWS OF MARRIAGE

THE SHULCHAN ARUCH

In the 16th century, Rabbi Joseph Karo summarized and condensed the Tur into a more concise work called the "Shulchan Aruch" (lit. "Set Table").

The Shulchan Aruch (also known as the "Code of Jewish Law") is the most widely accepted compilation of Jewish Law ever written.

Today, we reference the Shulchan Aruch whenever we want to know the accepted Jewish law.

The Shulchan Aruch is divided into the same four volumes as the Tur.



COMMENTARIES ON THE SHULCHAN ARUCH

There are many commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch which provide key insights into the work. Some of the most prominent ones are printed on the same page as the Shulchan Aruch itself, including:

Rema

Rabbi Moshe Isserles (16th century) wrote glosses which are spliced into the Shulchan Aruch itself. The Rema's commentary points out where Ashkenazic rulings and customs differ from Sephardic rulings and customs.

Turei Zahav (Taz)

Rabbi David Halevi Segal (1586-1667) commented on all four volumes.

Siftei Kohen (Shach)

Rabbi Shabtai Kohen (1622-1662) commented on Yoreh De'ah and Choshen Mishpat only.

Magen Avraham

Rabbi Avraham Abbale Gombiner (1637-1682) commented on Orach Chaim only.

Ba'er Heitev

Rabbi Yehudah ben Shimon Ashkenazi (1730-1770) and Rabbi Zechariah Mendel ben Aryeh Leib (17th-18th century) commented on all four volumes.



CONTEMPORARY BOOKS

As society confronted the explosion of technology and modernity that reshaped the world in later centuries, there was a pressing need for even more concise compendiums of Jewish law as well as new volumes of Jewish law that would explain how to apply Jewish law to modern situations (e.g., electric ovens, light bulbs, and toasters which never existed in earlier times).

Many rabbis also wrote responsa known as “teshuvot” which are written in question-and-answer format. These responsa explain how to apply the laws and philosophy of Judaism to the wide variety of issues encountered in contemporary Jewish life.

FAMOUS CONTEMPORARY LEGAL WORKS

The following is a very small slice of the thousands of contemporary legal works we have today. But of all the works that have shaped contemporary Jewish life, these five definitely stand out.



Mishna Berurah

A running commentary on the first section of Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim) by Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan (1838–1933), also known as the Chofetz Chaim.

- *Can you use tea bags on Shabbat?* (Mishna Berurah 318:39)
- *Can you drink coffee before Shacharit?* (Mishna Berurah 89:22)



The Chazon Ish

Insights into the Shulchan Aruch and the Talmud by Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (1878 – 1953).

- *Can you plant vegetables in a hothouse during shemittah?* (Chazon Ish, Shevi'is 26:4)



Igrot Moshe

A classic work of Halachic responsa (9 volumes) by Rabbi Moshe Feinstein (1895–1986).

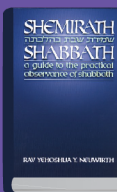
- *Is a person who is brain dead but still breathing through a respirator considered alive according to Jewish law?* (Igrot Moshe: Yoreh De'ah 3:132)



Yalkut Yosef

Detailed explanation of parts of the Shulchan Aruch based on the Sephardic rulings of Rav Ovadia Yosef (1920–2013). Written by Rabbi Yitzhak Yosef, his son.

- *How does the International Date Line affect halacha?* (Yalkut Yosef Orach Chaim 37:10)
- *Is ice cream a food or a beverage?* (Yalkut Yosef OC 207:8)



Shemirat Shabbat K'Hilchata

A practical guide to the modern observance of Shabbat by Rabbi Yehoshua Neuwirth (1927 – 2013).

- *In a medical emergency, can one do a blood test on Shabbat?* (Shemirat Shabbat K'hilchata 30:27)
- *Can one place dishes into a dishwasher on Shabbat that uses a timer to turn on?* (Shmirat Shabbat K'Hilchata 12:35)

RECOMMENDED READING

Until now, we have really only discussed legal works, but there is a whole additional section of contemporary Torah books that explore Jewish thought and self-growth. Below are some recommended titles:

**All for the Boss:
The Life and Impact of
R' Yaakov Yosef Herman,
a Torah Pioneer in America**
Ruchoma Shain

**Beyond the Instant: Jewish Wisdom
for Lasting Happiness in a
Fast-Paced, Social Media World**
Rabbi Mark Wildes

**Consulting the Wise:
Simulated Interviews with Great Torah
Scholars of Previous Generations**
Rabbi Zelig Pliskin

Gateway to Judaism
Rabbi Mordechai Becher

How Free Will Works
Dovid Lieberman, PhD

If You Were God
Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan

Life is a Test
Rebbitzen Esther Jungreis

Living Inspired
Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz

**Nefesh Shimshon, Shabbos Kodesh:
Making the Most of Shabbos**
Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus

New Studies in the Weekly Parasha
Nehama Leibowitz

Permission to Believe
Rabbi Lawrence Kelemen

Praying With Fire for Teens
Rabbi Heshy Kleinman

Rav Schwab on Prayer
Rabbi Shimon Schwab

**Stop Surviving, Start Living:
The Shmuz on Life**
Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafir

The Choice to Be
Jeremy Kagan

**The Koren NCSY Siddur:
A Weekday and Shabbat Siddur
for Reflection, Connection
and Learning**
Debbie Stone and Daniel Rose

**The Kuzari:
In Defense of the Despised Faith**
Rabbi Yehuda Halevi

The Oral Law
Chaim Schimmel

**The Thinking Jewish Teenager's
Guide to Life**
Rabbi Dr. Akiva Tatz

The Way of God: Derech Hashem
Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto

Understanding Judaism
Rabbi Mordechai Katz

**What the Angel Taught You:
Seven Keys to Life
Fulfillment**
Rabbi Noah Weinberg

Photos courtesy of Wikipedia and Feldheim Publishers

YOU

No matter what century or geographic location we are in, Torah study provides daily guidance and connects us to our Jewish heritage. Our learning connects us to previous generations across all continents, from all over the world.

When we study Torah, we are all coming together in preserving, interpreting, and learning Jewish ideas which bring meaning and holiness into our lives.

Every individual who learns Torah is part of this ongoing collective story of the Jewish people.



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