

What It Means to Be a Jew
Chapter Five
Torah: The Lifeblood of our People
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Torah is at the heart and soul of everything we believe and do as Jews. *Torah* of course is a Hebrew word that means “instruction” or learning”, and it is a word that we understand in two distinct ways. In its narrow sense Torah is the first five books of our Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

In the broad sense of the term Torah means all of Jewish learning—all of the accumulated wisdom and teaching which down through the ages our people has contributed to the benefit of all humanity. For Jews, the study of Torah in its broad sense is not just a nice thing to do. It is a commandment. Study is one of the ways that we serve God.

One of the primary sources of Torah in its broad sense is a vast and varied genre of literature we call *Midrash*. For purposes of this essay, it is sufficient to define *Midrash* as stories or commentary which give added—and often essential—meaning or insight to a biblical passage.

For example: Many years ago at an interfaith meeting a Protestant minister offered the opinion that “Abraham was like a lottery winner. He was chosen by a random act of God’s grace.”

Jewish readers of the Torah, though, view Abraham quite differently. Our Midrashic tradition offers examples to show that God’s choice of Abraham was purposefully prompted by Abraham’s youthful inclination to reject idolatry and believe in a single, caring, invisible God.

The most famous of these tells that when Abraham was young his father Terah owned and operated an idol shop. One day Terah went on a trip and left young Abram in charge of the store. When he accidentally broke one of the idols, Abram was understandably frightened that his father would be angry. So instead of cleaning up the mess and trying to hide what had happened (because he knew the missing idol would never escape his father’s attention), Abram left the pieces of the idol on the floor and placed a stick in the hands of the largest idol in the room. When Terah returned and saw the broken image, he demanded to know what had happened. Abram calmly said the idol had misbehaved so the big idol beat him with the stick.

“Fool!” shouted Terah to his son. “Don’t you think I know that idols can’t do anything!?”

“If they cannot do anything, Father,” Abram answered, “why do you worship them as if they were gods?” The story is not, of course, part of the biblical text and had, therefore, understandably escaped the minister’s attention. For Jewish students, though, Midrashic stories such as this are as essential to our ability to understand Torah as corrective lenses are to a very nearsighted person attempting to drive a car.

Another example: Among the online diversions that I have come to enjoy are Bible trivia games, and (if I may say so) I usually do fairly well. Recently, though, I encountered the following True/False question for which the computer said my answer was wrong: “The Ark of the Covenant in the ancient temple contains only the tablets of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mount Sinai.” I immediately answered, “False” because the Midrash asserts (although again there is nothing about this in the biblical text itself) that God commanded Moses to also place in the ark the first set of tablets that he broke. That Midrash teaches us that our mistakes are sacred teaching tools if we learn positive direction for the future from them. Midrash, however, was not on the radar screen of the author of the quiz.

During the course of the year we Jews read from a different portion of the Torah each week beginning with the creation story in Genesis and ending with the death of Moses at the conclusion of Deuteronomy. On the festival known as Simchat Torah, we conclude the book of Deuteronomy and begin immediately thereafter with the opening verses of Genesis. We do this to symbolize the centrality of Torah study to our religious life. Indeed a famous passage in the Talmud (M. Peah 1:1) lists several vital acts of goodness (*Mitzvot*, we call them) that Jews should do: visit the sick, comfort the bereaved, pray with sincerity, make peace when there is strife, but, the passage concludes, “the study of Torah is equal to them all” because it leads to them all.

When we read Torah in the synagogue as part of our service, we read from parchment scrolls which have been lovingly inscribed in Hebrew completely by hand. The scrolls contain no vowels and no punctuation. To read or chant in public from a scroll that has neither vowels nor punctuation requires serious study and preparation. That is exactly the point.

The elevation of study to the status of religious commandment —along with prayer and acts of kindness and compassion as one of the three most important ways that we serve God — has had profound historical implications. Our people’s passion for study and learning has played a major role in helping us overcome the persecutions history has foisted upon us. It is no accident that Jews who represent little more than one-quarter of one per cent of the world’s population have won more than thirty percent of the Nobel Prizes given since the award began in 1901. In the United States, we Jews represent no more than two and one-half per cent of the population. Is it possible to name a single learned profession (save perhaps Christian minister, priest or Muslim Imam) where Jews are not represented out of all proportion to our numbers?

The fact that a highly disproportionate number of doctors, professors, teachers, accountants, scientists, musicians, and social workers are Jewish goes back to the deeply embedded religious ideal that study is one of the vital ways that we serve God. It does not matter that many of these accomplished Jews are not ritually observant. The notion that learning is, as Proverbs (3:18) calls it, “a tree of life” has been deeply implanted in the soul of the Jewish psyche, and it continues to bear rich fruit.

Many, many cultures have rites of passage to symbolize that one is at the threshold of adulthood in the communal structure. Typically those cultural rites of passage emphasize the core values that cultural group cherish.

For instance, many of us in junior high school social studies learned that when young men in certain Native American tribes wanted to take their places as young men in the community, they proved their worth by exhibiting the skill of being able to hunt and live off the land, make their own fire and survive on the open plains. Why? Because these are the very skills that the community deemed essential to its vitality and growth.

By contrast, when we Jews celebrate our primary rite of pre-adolescent passage—our Bar and Bat Mitzvah ceremonies—we train our students to learn how to read, present in public, and teach the meaning of a lesson from our Torah and our prophets as well as to lead the congregation in prayer. Why? Because the skills of study, learning, and teaching are vital means by which the Jewish heritage is passed from one generation to another.

Without doubt, then, Torah—in both its narrow and broad senses—is the lifeblood of our people. But how did we get it?

We learn in the book of Exodus that God revealed Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. For our Midrashic Sages, though that straightforward statement cries out for Midrashic interpretation and illumination. Our Sages asked and responded over and over to the questions: Why did our people receive Torah? And what does it mean that we did?

Three different Midrashim with three different lessons offer vital perspectives:

One Midrash teaches that God offered Torah to every nation of the world, but only we would accept it. The point of that Midrash is that it was not just that God chose us to be teachers and examples of Torah to the world, but we chose God as well.

Another Midrash teaches that when we stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, God lifted the mountain, held it over our heads and proclaimed, “Hear O Israel; if you are willing to accept and live by my Torah, well and good. If not, this mountain shall become your tomb.”

In holding the mountain over our heads, “godfather-like”, and making us an offer we could not refuse, the Almighty proclaims our *raison d’être* as a people. That Midrash teaches us the vital lesson that our destiny as Jews—indeed the only purpose for us to remain Jews—is to learn the ideals of Torah, exemplify them in our lives, and by example teach these ideals to the world. If we are not willing to do that, there is absolutely no reason for the Jewish people to continue to exist as a distinct entity.

And yet another Midrash reminds us that God gave Torah on the top of a desert mountain—Sinai—a place not within the borders of any one country to teach us that the ideals of Torah are not restricted to our people alone. They are there for anyone who wants to learn and live by them.

Referring to the centrality of study as a way of serving God, Rabbi Louis Finkelstein, former Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary, once wrote: “When I pray, I speak with God. When I study, God speaks with me.”

Through the study of Torah, we ascertain what God wants from us. It is the lifeblood of our people. We have no reason to survive without it.

A famous Midrash (found in B. Berachot 61 B and other sources) emphasizes that point:

During the time, the Romans forbade Jews to study Torah under penalty of death. Nevertheless, the famous second century Sage Rabbi Akiba continued to hold classes and train his disciples.

A friend asked. “What are you doing? Don’t you know that if the Romans catch you they will torture and kill you? Why don’t you stop!?”

Akiba answered: “Let me tell you a story. Once upon a time there was a school of fish swimming hurriedly to escape the net the fisherman had just cast in the water. A hungry fox seeing the fish race by thought to have himself a good meal and said, ‘Fish, why are you hurrying so?’

‘To escape the net of the fisherman,’ they answered.

‘Do not worry about the fisherman,’ the fox called out. ‘Come up here on the bank with me, I shall protect you.’

‘Hah!’ the fish laughed. ‘Mr. Fox, they say you are the smartest of the animals. In reality you are the dumbest. Because if we fish are in danger here in the water which is the only place that we can hope to survive, how much the more quickly will we die if we come up on the river bank with you?’

“That is how it is with us Jews,” concluded Akiba. “If we are in mortal danger when we study Torah, which is the only atmosphere in which we can live as Jews, how much more quickly will we perish if we abandon it?”

Akiba's story does not end happily. The Romans caught, tortured and executed him. But because of the bravery of his sacrifice and others like him, we Jews are still here. Where by contrast is the glory of ancient Rome?

And so we continue to hold Torah dear. We study it with the hope that we might be in Isaiah's words (49:6), *L'or goyim*—a light to the nations, a worthy example to others.

The book of Proverbs (3:17) refers to Torah when it says: "A good doctrine has been given you; do not forsake it. Its ways are ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace."

Our only reason for being a people is to walk those paths with the hope that our journey can make this world a better place.

Amen.