

What is Torah? And what does it mean to you?

Daniel Anderson - Limmud Festival 2018

What is Torah?

No word in the Jewish religion is so indefinable and yet so indispensable as the word Torah. Torah is the most comprehensive term for the substance of Judaism. Torah is Teaching. Torah is Law. No one can hope to achieve even a minimal appreciation of the Jewish religion without learning, and then reflecting on, the idea of Torah and its place in the life of the Jew...

Rabbi Maurice Lamm (1930-2016), 'What is Torah?'

<http://www.aish.com/jl/b/bb/48924792.html>

If you are confused by usage of this word, you're probably on the right track.

Grammatically, the word *Torah* should mean any instruction, but in actual usage:

- The title *Torah* often refers specifically to the *Five Books of Moses*, i.e. *The Chumash*.
- Torah can also refer to the entire *Written Torah* [*Torah she-bi-khtav*], meaning the entire canonized scripture [i.e. *Five Books of Moses* [*Chumash*], plus the *Prophets* [*Nevi'im*] and the *Writings* [*Ketuvim*], hence the term *TeNaKh* or *Tenach*;
- Torah can also refer to the above *plus* the *Oral Torah* [*Torah she-be'al peh*], which includes:
 - the compilation of laws and rulings known as *Mishnah* [*compiled 200 CE*], along with other accepted compilations;
 - the discussion and debate of that material, known as *Talmud* or *Gemara* [*of which there are two versions – the Jerusalem and Babylonian - compiled 500-600 CE*];
 - the stories and their lessons that are collected in the *Talmud* and *Midrashic works* [*from 1st C BCE*];
 - any other teaching that has been accepted by a long-term consensus of the observant Jewish community, because it is based firmly on some precedent, or because it has been demonstrated to emerge by accepted means from previous texts and opinions [*An example being Kabbalah*].

Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, 'What is Torah? Beyond Wisdom'

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1426382/jewish/Torah.htm

According to Jewish tradition there are four levels of Torah knowledge.

- The first is called *peshat*, which means the plain or literal meaning of the text...
- The second level is *remez*, which means hint. This refers to interpretations of the Torah that are not stated explicitly but are rather only hinted at in the text...
- The third level of Torah knowledge is *drash*; which can be roughly translated as homiletics. An example of *drash* is the story of Abraham discovering God at the age of three and having his faith tested by being thrown into a fiery furnace by King Nimrod...
- The fourth and highest level of Torah knowledge is *sod*, meaning "secret".
- *Sod* is the esoteric dimension of Torah that deals with matters of a higher world. It is concerned with the deepest questions regarding the Creator, the universe and

What is Torah? And what does it mean to you?

Daniel Anderson - Limmud Festival 2018

the soul of man. It is this section of the Torah that is also known as *Kabbalah*, meaning "received tradition".

Rabbi Dr Naftali Brewer, *The Origins of Kabbalah*, 9th December 2008

<https://www.thejc.com/judaism/books/the-origins-of-kabbalah-1.6753>

Giving of the Torah at Sinai

And the LORD said unto Moses: 'Come up to Me into the mount and be there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, and the Torah [laws], and the Mitzvot [commandments], which I have written, so that thou may teach them.'

Exodus 24:12

All the six hundred and thirteen commandments are implicitly contained in the Ten Commandments and may therefore be regarded as having been written on the tablets.

Rashi (1040-1105) on Exodus 24:12

I believe with perfect faith that the entire Torah that we now have is that which was given to Moses.

Maimonides (1138-1204) 8th Principle of Faith

Moses our teacher wrote...the whole Torah from the mouth of the Holy One, blessed be He. It is likely that he wrote it on Mount Sinai...*The tablets of stone* include the tablets and the writing that are the ten commandments. *The commandment* includes the number of all the commandments, positive and negative. If so, the expression '*and the Torah*' includes the stories from the beginning of Genesis [and is called *Torah* - teaching] because it teaches people the ways of faith. Upon descending from the mount, [Moses] wrote the Torah from the beginning of Genesis to the end of the account of the Tabernacle. He wrote the conclusion of the Torah at the end of the fortieth year of wandering in the desert...However, according to the sage who says that the Torah was given in its entirety, everything was written in the fortieth year...

Nachmanides (1194-1270), Introduction to the book of Genesis

OK so what about the story of Rabbi Akiva and Moses?

Rav Yehuda said in the name of Rav: When Moses ascended to the heavens, he saw God sitting and tying crowns to the letters [of the Torah]. Moses asked, "Why can't you give the Torah as it is?" God replied, "There will be a man in the future, after many generations, named Akiva ben Yosef, who will discover many halachot [laws]." Moses said, "Master of the Universe, show him to me!" God said, "Turn around" Moses went and sat in the eighth row of students in Rabbi Akiva's class and had no idea what they were saying. His strength deflated. The class asked Rabbi Akiva about a certain matter, "From where, do you know this?" He replied, "It is a Law transmitted to Moses at Sinai". Moses's mind was then put at ease...

Babylonian Talmud, Menachot 29b

The Torah and creation

When God created the universe, He looked into the Torah and created [based on what is written in it]. It was through the Torah that the world was created.

Zohar, Terumah 161a

What is Torah? And what does it mean to you?

Daniel Anderson - Limmud Festival 2018

What does this all mean? According to Kabbalistic wisdom, the book of the Zohar is telling us that the world is a copy of a Torah scroll, the world is as it is because of what is written in the Torah. The deeper wisdom of the Zohar teaches that if we want to really understand the world we should study the Torah and its commentaries. **Zohar Book**

<http://www.zoharebook.com/the-zohar-gods-sefer-torah-and-the-creation-of-the-world/>

Ok, but who wrote the Zohar?

According to traditional Jewish belief, the Zohar was revealed by God to Moses at Sinai, and passed down orally until it was written down in the second century by Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai (known as the "Rashbi). From a historical-critical perspective, the authorship of the Zohar has been a matter of debate for centuries.

Scholars now agree that it was written in 13th-century Spain, likely by the Castilian kabbalist Rabbi Moshe (Moses) de Leon and multiple other authors. The text was apparently written in Aramaic, not a widely used language at the time, in order to create the appearance of having been authored centuries earlier.

<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-zohar/>

But what about our forefathers keeping the Torah before it was given?

Midrashim frequently express the idea that our patriarchs kept the Torah as we know it. Jacob kept the six hundred and thirteen *mitzvot* despite the difficult environment in Laban's house [Rashi Bereishit 32:5], Lot apparently learned from Abraham to serve matzah on Passover [Rashi Bereishit 19:2]...and Joseph observed Shabbat [Beresihit Rabba 92:4]. This position presents several difficulties. Could Jews celebrate Passover before the exodus actually occurred?

Furthermore...the patriarchs violate principles of Jewish law; e.g. Jacob marries two sisters...

Rabbi Yitzchak Blu, 'Did the Patriarchs keep the Torah?'

http://etzion.org.il/en/shiur-03-did-patriarchs-keep-torah#_ftn4

...Rabbi Yeshaya Horowitz (1560-1630) discusses this in his classic work, *Shnei Luchot HaBrit*. He gives the following answer, based on the words of Nachmanides (1194-1270): ...[T]he Torah is not just G-d's knowledge and wisdom - it is His will and inner desire. How that desire meets this world depends on many things... If, for example, the spies had have come back from their tour of Canaan and discussed matters with Moses and let him make the report, we would have walked into the land with Moses himself at the lead and the Era of Moshiach would have begun right then and there - with Moses starring as the final redeemer. But the Jewish people chose a different way to channel the Divine Will...

So what Adam, Noah, Abraham, etc. knew, contemplated and studied was the Divine Will and Wisdom. They knew it, they taught it and they conducted their lives accordingly. What they didn't know - and Moses did - was how that Divine Will and Wisdom would be actualized in the material plane because that hadn't happened yet...

Rabbi Tzvi Freeman, 'How Did the Torah Exist Before it Happened?'

https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/110124/jewish/How-Did-the-Torah-Exist-Before-it-Happened.htm

What is Torah? And what does it mean to you?

Daniel Anderson - Limmud Festival 2018

Torah on one leg?

A certain non-Jewish “wise-guy” came to scoff at the Torah, first to the home of Shammai, then to the home of Hillel. He said, *“Teach me the Torah while I am standing on one foot.”* Shammai, sensing his true intention, had him thrown out forthwith...When the individual came to the home of Hillel with the same request, Hillel responded. *“No problem! The main idea of the Torah is ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Everything else is commentary. Now, if you’re really interested, go and study the commentary.”*

OU Staff, Hillel, 5th February 2014, from the Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a

<https://www.ou.org/judaism-101/bios/leaders-in-the-talmudic-period/hillel/>

The difference between giving and receiving

The Kotzker Rebbe was asked: “Why is Shavuot called ‘The Time of the giving of the Torah,’ rather than ‘The time the Torah was Received?’” He answered: *“The giving took place on one day, but the receiving takes place at all times.”*

Martin Buber (1878-1965), *Tales of Hasidim*

How then do we understand the term ‘The Torah’?

The Torah is not in my opinion intended as a scientific journal. It is a book of spirit, tradition and law. A guide for imperfect humans. Its narrative is a poetic expression of moral guidance. It places humans in the natural world demanding interaction based on responsibility and custodianship. It argues against selfish exploitation. It explains how originally laws were not thought necessary. Only human frailty clearly needed rules. The Torah has to be understood, in context and intention. We rely on the Oral tradition for law and we rely on Midrash for a variety of different interpretations of the narrative. Many of them contradictory or supplementary. Some rational, some mystical and some fanciful...It is amazing poetry, language that is not meant to be understood at face value or like prose. Indeed, the Torah itself calls it a song. It instructs but it inspires. In a language they would have understood in those days, and that anyone can understand on some level. But also, one that is so deep and complex there is no end to its ongoing inspiration and relevance.

Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, *‘Do we take the Torah literally?’*

<http://jeremyrosen.com/2017/07/do-we-take-the-torah-literally.html>