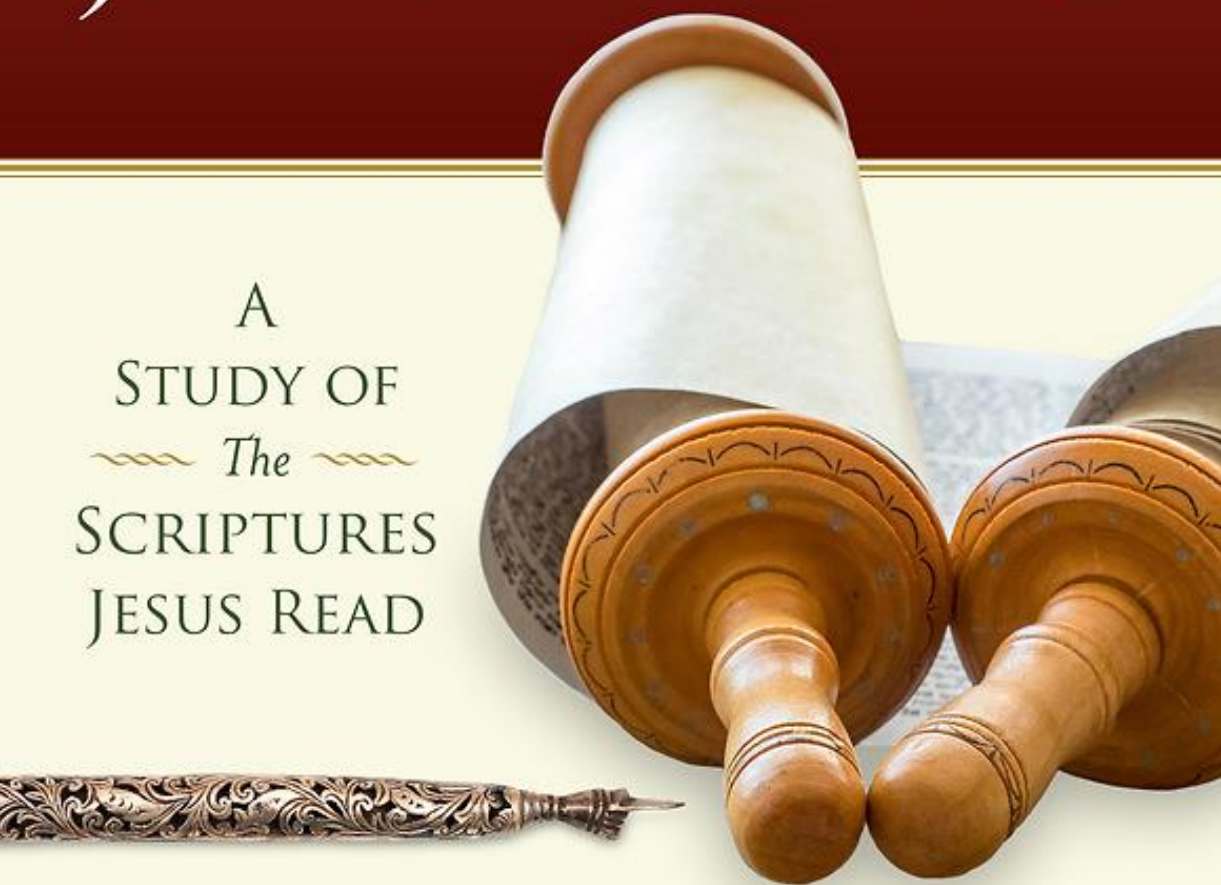


READING THE
OLD TESTAMENT
THROUGH
JEWISH EYES

A
STUDY OF
The
SCRIPTURES
JESUS READ



RABBI EVAN MOFFIC

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CHAPTER 1

THE TORAH

Two years ago I received an unexpected invitation. The president of a prominent Christian seminary told me they had received a Torah scroll as a donation. They planned a ceremony to dedicate it. Would I be willing to deliver a prayer at the ceremony?

I was intrigued. Torah scrolls are usually found only in synagogues or museums. I wondered what the seminary planned to do with the scroll. Was it something they would simply display in the library or a museum? Or did they intend to study and learn from it?

I soon learned the answer. The gift of the scroll was part of a larger project to aid Christians in the study of the Torah. A philanthropist from Minnesota had donated over thirty scrolls to seminaries around the world.

During the dedication ceremony, one of the seminary's professors remarked that "Our roots are much deeper and wider than we thought. Jesus celebrated the festivals. Jesus taught the verses of the Torah. When I

grasped that and read the Torah, it all came to life in a whole new way.”

The ceremony included a reading from the Torah and a discussion of its message. I was the concluding speaker, with two minutes to say a prayer. The prayer I wrote brought the assembly back to the creation of that particular scroll, which happened in a small town in Poland in the 1700s. The man who wrote it, I said, would never have imagined that the words he slowly inked onto the parchment would be studied three hundred years later—in Chicago, Illinois—by Christian seminary students.

It was, I said, another reminder of what we all know. God’s power and vision are greater and wider than we can ever imagine.

This book began that day. Before that experience, I saw Torah as synonymous with Jews and Judaism. This view seemed to make sense. The great teachers of Torah wrote and spoke primarily in Hebrew. Jewish worship centers around the reading and study of the Torah. And over much of its history, Christianity for its part saw the Torah as simply the precursor to the New Testament. Its teachings, many Christians believed, fit better in a museum than a seminary.

But this view no longer makes sense. Hundreds of thousands of Christians have visited Israel and seen the place where Torah lived and from where Jesus emerged. They have experienced the sights, sounds, and places described in Torah and realize the view of life taught in Torah permeated Jesus’s teachings.

As I saw in the seminary that day, we also live in a time of yearning for a deeper and wider faith. The wisdom and practices of Torah draw us closer together and closer to the one God of us all. Indeed, putting Torah in the hands of all people was God's purpose all along. The Torah itself makes clear that it is not meant for Jews only. God's words speak to everyone. In a beautiful passage in Deuteronomy, God says to Moses,

Surely, this Instruction which I enjoy upon you this day is not too baffling for you, nor is it beyond reach. It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, "Who among us can cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?" No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it

Deuteronomy 30:11-14

The Torah's message waits for us in its scrolls.

This book invites you into the world of Torah. It is not the Torah of endless laws and rituals. It is the Torah of truth, wisdom, and transformation. It is the Torah received by Moses, studied by Jesus, and carried in the arms of the Jewish people to this day. As you read this book, *the Torah* will become *your Torah*. You will see your life, struggles, questions, and history captured in its stories and characters. You will drink more deeply

from the rich reservoir from which billions of people have found the deepest truths and insights about God and life. This book will be your guide in taking the Torah out of the ark where it is kept and bringing it into your life.

As we take hold of Torah, we will also be guided by some of its greatest teachers from the last two thousand years. The teachings of these sages help us see the depth and breadth of God's word. These teachers are like a wise friend who sits next to us at a concert. They know the music backward and forward. They have spent their life studying it. They notice things we do not notice and give us information about the author, composer, melodies, notes, and tempo we would never know. Some of these teachers may even have been alive with Jesus. They knew him, studied with him. God's word was like the air they breathed. They help us appreciate and live it. You will hear their words throughout this book.

WHAT IS TORAH?

The word *Torah* means "teaching" or "process." The phrase "*the Torah*" refers to the first five books of the Bible. This distinction is important. Sometimes Jews use the phrase word "Torah" by itself to refer to all Jewish sacred texts. For example, someone could say "I'm studying Torah this afternoon," but he or she could mean the study of rabbinic writings or prayers.

But if someone says I'm studying "the Torah" this afternoon, they are referring to the five books of Moses.

This book is about *the Torah*, which consists of the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—the first five books of the Bible for both Jews and Christians. In addition to its division into five books, the Torah is also divided into fifty-four sections known in Hebrew as *parashiyot*, which means "Torah portions." Jews read one Torah portion in the synagogue every week, with occasional changes because of holidays. Most synagogues read through the entire Torah over the course of one year.

Reading the Torah is a sacred responsibility. Sometimes the rabbi will read from the Torah. Sometimes it is a devout member of the community. Sometimes a young man or woman who is undergoing a rite of passage called a bar or bat mitzvah will read from the Torah. This responsibility demands preparation because the reader does not simply read the English translation of the Torah portion from a book. He or she will usually chant the Hebrew text in a melody developed thousands of years ago. This melody is called *nusach*, and it developed in ancient Persia and Babylonia as a way of remembering the words of the Torah text. Few Torah scrolls existed at the time, so scribes and other religious scholars would memorize the text according to a melody, and then chant from the text every week. That melody carries on today when we read every week from the Torah. This connection with history is part of what makes Torah sacred and

meaningful. It is the word of God cherished, sung, and celebrated by Jews for over two thousand years.

LETTERS IN THE TORAH

The Torah is not only chanted in an ancient, particular way. It is also written in a sacred style that is twenty-five hundred years old. Every Torah scroll is handwritten by a scribe or team of scribes. They spend between twelve and eighteen months writing it. The Hebrew word for scribe is *sofer*. The same Hebrew word also means “count.” The scribe traditionally counts all the letters of Torah as he or she writes them.

Why do such details matter? Because every part of God’s word contains truth and meaning. If we miss a letter or detail, our perspective is incomplete. Our view of God’s word is potentially distorted. The importance of getting every letter of Torah properly written is the basis for beautiful teachings about the importance of every human being. One eighteenth-century rabbi said that every human being is like a letter in the Torah scroll. If one is missing, the story is incomplete. Every human being is part of God’s story, and our birth and entry into the world is part of God’s story.

The scribe also uses a special ink mixture made from a two-thousand-year-old recipe found in the Talmud. That recipe involved boiling oils, tar, and wax, and collecting the vapors. Then the scribe would add tree sap and honey, let it dry, and store it. According to a leading modern scribe, “The ink needs to be durable,

but not indelible.... Today, most [scribes] make ink by boiling crushed gallnuts together with gum arabic and copper sulfate. Carbon is also added at times, allowing the ink to dry to a deep shiny black. The shiny black ink on the white parchment alludes to the Torah being given as ‘black fire on white fire.’”¹

A special quill is used for writing. It is usually made from a turkey feather. The scribe typically uses a different special quill when writing the name of God. The parchment must be from the skin of a kosher animal, often a lamb or a goat. The parchments are sewn together and wrapped around wooden rollers. No metal is used in the creation of a Torah scroll, because metal is used to make instruments of war, whereas the Torah’s ultimate value is shalom, *peace*. In addition, no tree may be cut down to make wood for the Torah rollers. The tree must have died naturally. Scribes devote years to studying the practice of writing a scroll.

Handling a Torah scroll also requires careful attention. We avoid placing our hands or fingers directly on the parchment because the oils and bacteria from our hands can erode it. When reading from the scroll, the Torah reader typically uses a pointer called a *yad*, which means “hand” in Hebrew. Artists have created *yads* reflecting the style and values of their communities. My first confirmation class at the synagogue where I taught when I was a student gave me a *yad* to celebrate my ordination as a rabbi. Every time I read from the Torah, I am reminded of my sacred responsibility to live and share its truths.

The construction and method for reading from the Torah are so precise because, as it is often pointed out about many topics, God is in the details. Our human actions serve a divine purpose. Indeed, we enact God's will and observe Torah values in the very way we construct a Torah. Using a special quill for God, for example, illustrates the sanctity we attach to the divine name. Writing that name requires special focus and intention. Not using base metals reminds us of the ultimate purpose of a life of Torah: bringing about a world of peace. Even the process of disposing of a Torah reflects Torah values. When a Torah scroll is no longer usable—this status usually results from wear and tear or damage—it is buried. A Torah scroll can never be destroyed. We lovingly say goodbye and bury a Torah scroll as a sign of our sacred relationship to its words and Author.

This respect given to God's word exerts so much influence on Jewish life that it has inspired people of other faiths. Consider what happened at a New Orleans synagogue, 114 years old, named Congregation Beth Israel. In 2005, in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the rabbis and members of the congregation had no access to their building. It was four blocks from the biggest water canal breach in the city. The synagogue was flooded with eight feet of water. They had left their seven Torah scrolls, most of which were over 100 years old, in the sanctuary ark before the storm because they figured it would pass over in two or three days. When the storm did not relent and the synagogue members scattered around the country, they concluded the Torah

scrolls were ruined. But two weeks after the storm, they learned that the scrolls had been rescued. The scrolls, however, had largely melted and “disintegrated into formless goo.”² The man who rescued them wanted to take them to a synagogue in Baton Rouge, but the leaders of the Temple Beth Israel believed they needed to be buried immediately near their previous home. They put out a call for help in burying the scrolls, and a Christian woman who lived nearby—and who had worked at the synagogue for 8 years—volunteered. She retrieved them, cleaned and preserved all the crowns and yads, placed what remained of the scrolls in a vinyl tablecloth so that they would not touch the ground, dug a six-by-six hole in her backyard, and placed the scrolls in it. In its death, as in life, a Torah scroll promotes the best within us.

When the Torah is not being read, it typically rests in a receptacle in the synagogue known as an ark. The ark is enclosed in or connected to the eastern wall of the sanctuary of the synagogue, as a way of pointing toward Jerusalem. The ark holding the scrolls echoes the portable ark carried through the Sinai desert on the journey from Egypt to the land of Israel. It is considered the most sacred place in the synagogue. The various Hebrew names for the ark illustrate this belief. One way of referring to the ark is the *aron hakodesh*, which means “the holy ark.” The word *kadosh* means both “holy” and “set apart,” indicating the ark’s sacred status. Other Jewish texts refer to the ark as the *teva*, which is the same Hebrew used to refer to Noah’s ark in the Bible. Like Noah’s ark, the words of Torah are

the *teva* sustaining human life. The final name used is *heikhal*, which means “palace.” In the Jerusalem Temple, the first of which stood from about 940 to 586 BCE, and the second of which from 531 BCE to 70 CE, the *heikhal* was the inner sanctum of the sanctuary where the menorah, altar of incense, and table of the showbread stood.

The ark of contemporary synagogues echoes this inner sanctum of the Jerusalem Temple. The belief behind this linguistic and architectural connection is that when the Temple stood, God lived in the Temple. When the Temple was destroyed, God’s presence went with the Jewish people wherever they set up communities. The Torah scroll is evidence of God within the midst of the Jewish people. Thus, the Torah scroll rests in the *heikhal*, a symbol of the place where God once resided. As one poet put it, the Torah is the “portable homeland of the Jewish people.” Some Holocaust survivors had scraps of Torah scrolls with them. They brought it with them as a source of comfort, strength, and hope.

This belief illustrates another critical role Torah plays for the Jewish community. The Torah represents God on earth. God is found not in the parchment or the ink. God rests in the words and letters we read. In Christianity, God became flesh. In Judaism, God becomes Torah. Now, the Torah itself is not a living, breathing entity, but its words make God present. This truth is one of the reasons a Torah reader has to prepare so extensively. Making a mistake distorts God’s name itself. That’s why another sacred task is the *gabbai*, who stands next to the Torah reader and follows along as he

or she is reading and corrects any mistakes made. Of course, readers make mistakes, but the gabbai is there to make an immediate correction so that worshippers are not misled. This act of correcting is not intended to shame or embarrass the reader. It is considered an act of kindness because everyone in the sanctuary wants to hear the text accurately.

This focus on a perfect reading may seem strange and perhaps overly legalistic. Doesn't the spirit of the reader count more than the precise accuracy of what they are reading? Yes, it does, and that's why the Jewish sages made a distinction between major mistakes and minor mistakes. A minor mistake is a mispronunciation of a word. This happens easily because the Torah text in a scroll does not contain vowels. The vowels—known in Hebrew as *nikudot*—are included only in printed versions of the Torah, not the Torah scrolls written by scribes. The Torah reader studies those printed versions before reading publicly from the scroll. Still, using the wrong vowelizing while reading from the scroll happens easily and frequently. In these cases, if the Torah reader makes a pronunciation error and it does not confuse the meaning of the word, it is considered a minor mistake. Minor mistakes also include placing emphasis on the wrong syllable in a word, or temporarily losing the proper melody for chanting.

A major mistake—one that requires correction—is one that changes the meaning of a word. Even in these cases, however, Jewish law allows for an exception. The exception is that if correcting the mistake might embarrass the Torah reader, the gabbai should refrain

from doing so. Embarrassing someone in public is a grievous sin in Jewish law. Some rabbis compare it to murder, arguing the reddening of a face when someone feels shame is like the spilling of blood. This focus on the feelings of the Torah reader illustrates the underlying purpose of Torah. It is not a rote legal requirement. It is a sacred act meant to ennoble, inspire, and guide human beings. Any practice around the reading of the Torah that detracts from these values—even if it is done out of respect for God’s word—is not permitted.

HOW TORAH IS READ

The Torah reading does not include just the reader and the gabbai. It involves other participants, including those who are listening to the chanting. The involvement of the entire community in the reading of the Torah echoes the original reading and revelation of the Torah by Moses to the Israelites at Mount Sinai. The weekly reading of the Torah on the Sabbath in the synagogue reenacts this sacred moment. We are to experience the words of Torah just as the ancient Israelites did in the wilderness.

Aside from the Torah reader (known in Hebrew as the *baal korei*) and the *gabbai*, the other main participants are the those who are called to say a blessing over the Torah known as an *aliyah*. The word *aliyah* means “ascent.” We ascend to a new spiritual plane when we bless the Torah. This belief explains why

the Torah is often read from an elevated area of the sanctuary. It is both a physical and a spiritual ascent.

The word *aliyah*, is also used to refer to immigrating to Israel. Again, moving to the Holy Land is both a physical and a spiritual ascent. Physically, we are closer to the sacred space of the Jerusalem Temple. Spiritually, we are closer to God.

Referring to the blessing over the Torah as an aliyah reflects the role the Torah came to play in Jewish life after Jews were exiled from Israel by the Romans in 70 CE. At that time, as the poet Heinrich Heine pointed out, the Torah became the Jews' "portable homeland." Whenever a person came to bless the Torah, they ascended into the Holy Land.

The aliyah blessing begins the way every standard Jewish blessing begins: "Blessed are You, Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who commands us to..." The phrase after "to" is what makes the blessing unique. It refers to God as the One who "chose us from all the peoples of the earth and gave us the Torah." In other words, we are thanking God for giving us the gift of the Torah. I see this blessing as a reminder not to take the Torah for granted. We did not write it. We did not even deserve it. Rather, God gave it to us as a gift. It is an act of grace. It is unmerited, and it illustrates God's love.

Some Jewish theologians criticize the idea of Jews as God's chosen people as stated in this blessing. They say it smacks of ethnic chauvinism and a feeling of superiority. It is as if, they argue, Jews are saying that God chose us for the gift of Torah because we were the most worthy of all the nations of the earth. But some

of the most respected rabbis in Jewish tradition argued that God made the Torah available to all peoples, and it was only Moses and the Israelites who accepted it. In any case, even if God chose to give the Torah to the Jews, God did not say that the Torah's teachings are for Jews only. As God says to Abraham in Genesis 12, "All the families of the earth Shall bless themselves by you." The Torah is the vehicle through which the Jewish people bring blessings to the world.

After the blessing, the Torah reader chants a section from the Torah. Then the same person who said the opening aliyah blessings says a closing blessing. It begins with the same words and concludes by describing God as the "One who has given us a Torah of truth and implanted eternal life within us." This blessing sees the Torah as the key means to the eternal life of the Jewish people. So long as we read and follow the words of the Torah, God will keep us alive.

A typical Torah reading contains between three and seven aliyah blessings. The person called to say an aliyah often has a connection to the Torah reader or is someone honored for a particular reason. At my synagogue, for example, when a young man or woman who is becoming a bar or bat mitzvah (a child becomes a bar or bat mitzvah through a coming-of-age ceremony that involves reading from the Torah), parents or grandparents and other relatives are invited for an aliyah. I also invite visitors to the synagogue if they are open to it, volunteers for the community, or other rabbis and community leaders. In the nineteenth century, a common practice was to offer the aliyah

blessings to people who made donations to the synagogue. That practice changed because many people thought it crass, and that it undermined the purpose of the ritual, which is to elevate our moral behavior and not simply honor the wealthy. Synagogue financial practices also changed so that worshippers supported the synagogue by making annual contributions rather than a gift for a particular ritual.

HAGBA

After the final Torah reading, there is space for several communal prayers. These are prayers of both petition and gratitude, reflecting a view that the presence of Torah adds a sacred dimension to their recitation. Somehow God feels more present while the Torah is out.

After the reading of the Torah portion is complete, the Torah is lifted in a ritual called *hagba*. The person performing *hagba* takes hold of the two rollers of the Torah with each hand and gently lifts the scroll and turns around with his or her back to the congregation. The purpose is to show the community the scroll and the words of Torah written on it. Some scholars suggest the practice began twenty-five hundred years ago when community leaders feared some synagogues were reading from false or corrupt Torah scrolls. They feared the people would be confused if they heard teachings supposedly from the Torah that were not there. Therefore, they mandated that the Torah reader

or another person lift the Torah scroll and show it to the community to prove to them that he or she was reading from a proper Torah scroll.

After *hagba*, another person or group of people dress the Torah in its ornamental ritual items. The first is a piece of protective fabric known as the “mantle of the law.” Sometimes it is made of silk, and quite often it serves as a work of art with a quotation from the Torah on it. Then over the mantle we place the priestly breastplate. This breastplate has many potential meanings. It echoes the breastplate worn by the high priest in the Jerusalem Temple. The Book of Exodus describes it in detail. It included twelve stones representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The priestly breastplate also held two stones known as the *urim* and *thumim*. These stones were meant as a way for the high priest to discern the future. In practice, scholars believe they served as an oracle and a tool for interpreting dreams, though later books of the Bible cast doubt on their ability to predict the future. They are one of the Bible’s enduring mysteries.

The use of a priestly breastplate on the Torah scroll illustrates a key reason Torah emerged as central to Judaism. When the Temple existed in Jerusalem and the Levitical priests oversaw the offerings of sacrifices as described in the Book of Leviticus, Torah’s role was secondary to sacrifices. Offering an animal sacrifice was the primary way of growing closer to God. Even the Hebrew word for sacrifice—*korban*—means “closeness.” Torah was part of Jewish life, and small groups of Jews led by teachers known as Pharisees

would learn Torah, but priestly offerings defined proper worship.

In 70 CE, the Romans destroyed the Temple. The priestly system had no place in Jewish life. The only ongoing practice within the Jewish community was the study of Torah. The only group with the influence and organization to lead the Jewish community was the Pharisees. There were competing groups like former priests, but the Pharisees—who eventually became known as “the Rabbis”—had the political skill to negotiate with their Roman rulers and built institutions that helped sustain Judaism after the destruction of the Temple.

Torah was central to the Pharisaic worldview. They saw Torah as God’s unmediated word—study of Torah and practice of Torah laws replaced sacrificial offerings. They argued that replacing sacrifices with study of Torah had been God’s intent all along, as illustrated in Exodus, “you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests.” Study and practice of Torah were offerings from all Israelites, not just Levitical priests. In fact, the priesthood had deterred some from closeness to God because it built up an elite class. Torah, however, was democratic and accessible to all. The rabbis implemented public education, creating a literate population of nearly 100 percent of adult males. They added two weekly Torah readings in addition to the Sabbath—Mondays and Thursdays. They chose these days because they were market days when farmers and merchants would gather in a town square or public area. The rabbis understood they needed to bring Torah

to where the people were, and Torah readings became a thrice-weekly event.

They traced the importance of public reading of the Torah back to the prophet Ezra. Like the Pharisees, Ezra led the people during a time of loss and confusion. He lived the first part of his life as a Jew in Babylonia, which was then ruled by the Persians. The Persians had conquered much of the ancient Near East, including the land of Israel and Judah, which the Babylonians had controlled decades earlier. In the middle of the fifth century BCE, Ezra returned to his homeland, to Jerusalem. According to the Bible, he found the people straying from Torah. They had intermingled with other ethnic groups and, in both public and private, they were violating core laws and practices of the Torah. He feared for the survival of the Jewish people.

He sent out word that in three days, the people should gather in Jerusalem. There he read the entire Torah scroll to the people. They began observing the holidays again. They returned to following the Torah. According to the rabbinic sages, they returned to Torah with the same fervor as the generation after Moses, which was led by Joshua.

Ezra pioneered the public reading of Torah as a means of religious cohesion and renewal. In time of trouble, we turn to the Torah for guidance. This pattern has recurred throughout history. In Germany in the 1930s, as Hitler and the Nazis rose to power, synagogue attendance soared. New schools of Jewish learning began even as persecution of Jews increased. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, as the massive

Jewish population of Spain was expelled and the people searched for new homes, a new school of Torah study known as Kabbalah arose. The mystical and esoteric teachers of the Kabbalah studied the Torah to find guidance, to make sense of and cope with their suffering and exile. They ultimately developed a new method of Torah study called Lurianic Kabbalah.

The foundation of this method of study is the belief that God initially created two worlds. The first was the world of *tohu v'vohu*. That is a phrase appearing in the second verse of the Book of Genesis usually translated “as empty and full of chaos.” Most interpretations of the Torah picture the creation of the universe as God bringing order to this chaos. The mystics, however, interpret it as a separate world of chaos. It was the result of God’s first experiment with creation. God created the first universe filled with vessels of light, but the light of God’s presence was so overwhelming that the vessels shattered and the universe imploded. The mystics call this phenomenon *shevirat hakelim* (the shattering of the vessels).

In creating the next universe, God limited the divine light evident in the world so as not to overwhelm and shatter its vessels of light. This dimming of God’s light helped the mystics explain why tragedies occur. Since we cannot see all of God’s light, God’s ways are not clear. We do not always understand why bad things happen to good people, or why God’s creation unfolds the way it does. Yet, this limited perspective is not our ultimate fate. We have the ability to gather more light and make God’s presence shine brighter, because the

shards of light from the first universe are embedded throughout our universe. According to the mystics, when we study Torah and observe its laws, we are gathering those original sparks of light. The more sparks we gather, the closer we come to God. When all the sparks are gathered, the Messiah will arrive and the world will be redeemed.

This mystical perspective spread throughout the Jewish community in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It helps us see why Torah study is so central to Jewish life. The more we study and follow it, the closer we come to redemption.

Redemption in Judaism, however, is not simply something new. While there are different perspectives on what redemption means, one prominent thread sees redemption as a return to an earlier perfection. It is a return to either the peace of the garden of Eden or the time of biblical Israel in which King David sat on the throne. This view of redemption as a return rather than something new helps us understand the last part of the Torah reading service.

Before we discuss that, however, I need to make an important point. While this mystical perspective on the importance of Torah does motivate some Jews to study, many others study Torah for different reasons. One ancient rabbi taught that the Torah has seventy faces. Each face might represent a reason we study it. For example, I teach a weekly Torah study class at my synagogue. About forty people attend regularly. While a couple of people in the class see their study as a religious obligation—one that brings us closer

to God—many others simply enjoy the intellectual discussion. They like looking at the ideas and stories of the Torah. They enjoy discussing ways the truths and commandments of the Torah help us understand modern political, moral, and social challenges. Other participants study Torah because they see it as their story. It is like a family history we cherish and seek to understand. Others simply enjoy coming together as a community. Study of Torah is an excuse to gather together and share ideas. These and many other reasons help us see why Torah defines modern Jewish life.

The last part of the Torah service returns the Torah to the ark. The person who lifted the Torah—*hagba*—has usually been holding it since the conclusion of the reading. After the prayers mentioned earlier in the chapter are recited, the congregation stands and the *hagba* approaches the ark. We then recite another set of prayers accompanying the return of the Torah to the ark. These prayers consist mainly of verses from the biblical books of Psalms and Proverbs. Two verses exemplify the theme of this concluding part of the Torah reading. The first is a verse from the Book of Proverbs. We recite it as we hold the Torah, saying, “It is a tree of life to those who hold fast to it. Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.”

Describing the Torah as a “tree of life” echoes the exact phrase from Genesis 2, where the “tree of life” stood in middle of the garden of Eden. The message is that if we truly lived and followed the words of Torah, we would be restored to the condition of paradise found in the garden. The Jewish sages also interpreted

the verse to mean that a good life is the fruit that comes from the Torah, the tree of life. We experience pleasantness and peace when we till and tend to it.

The other verse we sing at the very end of the Torah service. It conveys a seemingly paradoxical message. We ask God to *chadesh yameinu k'kedem*, which means “to renew our days as of old.” Another potential translation is “Make our days new as they were in the past.” On the surface, this verse does not make sense. If something happened in the past, then it is not new. And if something is new, it did not happen in the past.

The answer to this paradox lies in the purpose of a life of Torah. When we live a life of Torah, we find new qualities of character and commitment in ourselves. Torah refines the human character. We find that we are capable and understanding of much more about our closeness to God and human experience. At the same time, we are returning to a message God revealed long ago. Torah returns us to a self that was implanted within us by God millions of years ago. This belief is captured in another Hebrew word, *teshuvah*. It is often translated into English as “repentance.” But it really means “return.” *Teshuvah* is a return to our highest selves. Torah is the path of that return.

OTHER PRACTICES

After we place the Torah in the ark, we carefully try not to turn our backs to the Torah. While this custom is not ordained in Jewish law, it reflects a feeling of respect

toward the Torah. At my synagogue, approaching and walking away from our ark requires navigating a short set of stairs. Walking backward from the ark is tricky, but I've developed the muscle memory so that my steps feel automatic, and it demonstrates to the congregation the love and honor we give to Torah.

Some of the practices around handling and reading from the Torah differ based on the type of Jewish community. In modern Judaism, we have three primary denominations: Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox. Reform tends to balance traditional Jewish practices with modern life. Conservative Judaism, like Reform, seeks a balance between tradition and change, but it tends to err more on the side of tradition than Reform. Orthodoxy seeks to adhere as closely as possible to Jewish tradition as practiced in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, though even Orthodoxy has various denominations that follow different traditions.

For the purpose of understanding the role of Torah, however, the three denominations generally follow the same practice of reading through the entire scroll over one year and studying it regularly at least once a week. One key difference, however, is the way they view the authorship of the Torah. Orthodox Jews tend to see the Torah as the unmediated word of God. Its verses are open to interpretation, but they cannot be amended or seen as reflecting any human biases. The Torah is God's word given on Mount Sinai to Moses.

Reform and Conservative Jews tend to see the Torah as the work of divinely inspired human beings. These beings felt God's presence, and the stories and laws they

wrote down captured the story of their people and what God commanded the Jewish people to do. They also included legends, traditions, and genealogies inherent in both their and surrounding cultures. For Reform and Conservative Jews, human authorship does not make the Torah less important. Rather, we recognize the importance of Torah comes from the meaning we assign to it. We choose, as our ancestors throughout history have chosen, to endow the words of Torah with sacred meaning. Viewing the Torah as the work of divinely inspired humans opens up the path for more comprehensive understanding as well. For example, since we recognize the words of Torah as originating in different times and places, we can examine archaeology and history to better understand the stories and ideas its authors sought to convey. Since we recognize that the human beings who wrote the Torah encountered some of the same emotional and social challenges we do today, we can examine and seek guidance in the ways they responded. The Torah has sustained the Jewish people for thousands of years because it speaks to and guides us in our deepest human needs and possibilities. This book will guide you in seeing and applying this Torah wisdom in your life.

STRUCTURE

Together, the five books of the Torah tell the story of the emergence of the Jewish people and their journey from slavery to freedom. Yet, each book also

has a distinctive theme. Genesis is about family and the relationships within them. From Cain and Abel to Joseph and his brothers, Genesis reveals truths and guidance about the way we struggle to build meaningful relationships with our family. The first chapter will examine key verses from the Book of Genesis focused on this theme.

In chapter 2 we will unpack the Book of Exodus. Exodus tells the story of the emergence of the Jewish people as a nation and faith. We will examine key verses from Exodus that help us understand how we form groups and cultures in the modern world and find our place of belonging in them. In an increasingly divided world brimming with religious and ethnic conflict, returning to the Torah's wisdom can help each of us do what we can to bring about greater peace and harmony.

The Book of Leviticus challenges modern readers in its focus on the seemingly archaic details of the Jerusalem Temple. In my Torah study class, I often hear a sigh when we arrive at Leviticus. It seems thoroughly disconnected from modern life.

When read through a certain perspective, however, Leviticus may be the most practical book of the Torah. Leviticus teaches us the power of ritual. It shows the way habits and routines can influence us far more than beliefs and dogma. Leviticus also helps us understand the meaning of sacrifice. On the surface, the sacrificial offerings described in Leviticus are about what we must sacrifice for God. God requires our offering as part of sovereignty over us. When we read Leviticus closely,

however, we see that it is not about sacrifices for God. It teaches us about sacrifices to God. The distinction may seem unimportant, but it suggests a different kind of relationship between human beings and God. We sacrifice to God because we are in a relationship with God. We make sacrifices for God out of love, just like we make sacrifices—time, money, emotional energy, and much more—for the people we love. This framework for understanding the role of sacrifices helps us uncover insights in Leviticus on ways to use and understand the meaningful rituals in our religious practices.

The Book of Numbers is all about the journey through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land. In the Torah, this journey is a physical one. The Israelites remain there for forty years. But it is not only a physical journey. It is also a spiritual one. Slavery does not trap only the body. It captures the mind and heart. It took a journey of forty years to turn the Israelites from forced slaves of Pharaoh to willing followers of God. One of my rabbinic mentors captured this truth in a quip: It took four days, he said, to get the Israelites out of Egypt. It took forty years to get the spirit of Egypt out of the Israelites.

Many of us undergo a similar spiritual journey. We may grow up with a narrow view of our own possibilities. We may feel trapped in a secular or religious worldview imposed by others. We may even become slaves to addictions. The Hebrew word for Egypt is *mitzrayim*. The same word also means “narrow places.” The journey of the Book of Numbers

guides us in our journey to a deep and wide faith and self-understanding.

The final book of the Torah is Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy does not add much to the narrative story of the Torah. It consists primarily of a recollection by Moses of the journey of the Israelites through the wilderness. Moses is preparing the Jewish people for their arrival and survival in the Promised Land. He will no longer be with them. His words, therefore, constitute his legacy. He is teaching the Israelites how to preserve the sacred message God revealed to them.

Are we leaving a meaningful legacy? All of us leave a legacy. Our lives are remembered by those who come after us. Having conducted almost a thousand funerals as a rabbi, I know the legacies we leave can feel painful, extraordinary, and everything in between. I have also learned that we can be conscious about the kind of legacy we seek to leave. Deuteronomy guides us in doing so. We will look at key verses where Moses conveys to the Israelites what matters most in carrying on the message God revealed to them. Given that Judaism survives to this day—and that it provided the context and foundation in which Christianity emerged—we can say Moses was successful in doing so.

By reading this book, you will find new ways to bring Torah wisdom into your life. You will also experience the Torah not simply as the Old Testament and the preamble to the New Testament, but as something far greater. For many centuries, the Old Testament was seen that way. Even among the many church groups where I have spoken, it is still sometimes

seen in that way. It is perceived as the opening act for a main speaker and message.

I don't begrudge those who hold this view. Yet, in my experience, it minimizes the depth of our faith and the closeness we can feel with the God who created us all. Our understanding of God's word is incomplete without knowledge and study of the Torah. This book is your walk through the Torah. May its uncovering of our shared heritage bless us with wisdom.