

The **Torah**, or Jewish Written Law, consists of the five books of the Hebrew Bible - known more commonly to non-Jews as the "**Old Testament**" - that were given by G-d to **Moses** on **Mount Sinai** and include within them all of the biblical laws of Judaism. The Torah is also known as the Chumash, Pentateuch or Five Books of Moses. The word "Torah" has multiple meanings including: A scroll made from kosher animal parchment, with the entire text of the Five Books of Moses written on it; the text of the Five Books of Moses, written in *any* format; and, the term "Torah" can mean the entire corpus of Jewish law. This includes the Written and the **Oral Law**.

## Origin & Preexistence

Jewish tradition holds that "Moses received the Torah from Sinai," yet there is also an **ancient tradition** that the Torah existed in heaven not only before God revealed it to Moses, but even before the world was created. In rabbinic literature, it was taught that the Torah was one of the six or seven things created prior to the creation of the world. According to Eliezer ben Yose the Galilean, for 974 generations before the creation of the world the Torah lay in God's bosom and joined the ministering angels in song. Simeon ben Lakish taught that the Torah preceded the world by 2,000 years and was written in black fire upon white fire. Akiva called the Torah "the precious instrument by which the world was created". Rav said that God created the world by looking into the Torah as an architect builds a palace by looking into blueprints. It was also taught that God took council with the Torah before He created the world. Other Jewish sages, however, disregard the literal belief that the Torah existed before all else. **Saadia Gaon** rejected this belief on the grounds that it contradicts the principle of creation ex nihilo. Judah Barzillai of Barcelona raised the problem of place. Where could God have kept a preexistent Torah? While allowing that God could conceivably have provided an ante-mundane place for a corporeal Torah, he preferred the interpretation that the Torah preexisted only as a thought in the divine mind. Similarly, the **Ibn Ezra** raised the problem of time. He wrote that it is impossible for the Torah to have preceded the world by 2,000 years or even by one moment, since time is an accident of motion, and there was no motion before God created the celestial spheres; rather, he concluded, the teaching about the Torah's preexistence must be a metaphoric riddle. **Judah Halevi** attempts to alleviate the argument by explaining that the Torah precedes the world in terms of teleology; God created the world for the purpose of revealing the Torah; therefore, since, as the philosophers say, "the first of thought is the end of the work," the Torah is said to have existed before the world.

## Nature, Message & Purpose

In the Bible, the Torah is referred to both as the "Torah of the Lord" and as the "Torah of Moses," and is said to be given as an inheritance to the congregation of Jacob- the Jewish people. Its purpose seems to be to make Israel "a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." The Septuagint rendered the Hebrew *torah* by the Greek *nomos* ("law"), probably in the sense of a living network of traditions and customs of a people. The designation of the Torah by *nomos*, and by its Latin successor *lex* (whence, "the Law"), has historically given rise to the misunderstanding that Torah means legalism. It was one of the very few real dogmas of rabbinic theology that the Torah is from heaven; i.e., the Torah in its entirety was revealed by God. According to biblical stories, Moses ascended into heaven to capture the Torah from the angels. In one of the oldest mishnaic statements it is taught that Torah is one of the three things by which the world is sustained. Eleazar ben Shammua said: "Were it not for the Torah, heaven and earth would not continue to exist". The Torah was often compared to fire, water, wine, oil, milk, honey, drugs, manna, the tree of life, and many other things; it was considered the source of freedom, goodness, and life; it was identified both with wisdom and with love. **Hillel** summarized the entire Torah in one sentence: "What is hateful to you, do not to your fellow". Akiva said: "The fundamental principle of the Torah is the commandment, 'Love thy neighbor as thyself' ". The message of the Torah is for all mankind. Before giving the Torah to Israel, God offered it to the other nations, but they refused it; and when He did give the Torah to Israel, He revealed it in the extraterritorial desert and simultaneously in all the 70 languages, so that men of all nations would have a right to it. Alongside this universalism, the rabbis taught the inseparability of Israel and the Torah. One

51 rabbi held that the concept of Israel existed in God's mind even before He created the Torah. Yet, were  
52 it not for its accepting the Torah, Israel would not be "chosen," nor would it be different from all the  
53 idolatrous nations. **Saadia Gaon** expounded a rationalist theory according to which the ethical and  
54 religious-intellectual beliefs imparted by the Torah are all attainable by human reason. He held that the  
55 Torah is divisible into two parts:  
56 (1) commandments which, in addition to being revealed, are demanded by reason (e.g., prohibitions of  
57 murder, fornication, theft, lying); and  
58 (2) commandments whose authority is revelation alone (e.g., Sabbath and dietary laws), but which  
59 generally are understandable in terms of some personal or social benefit attained by their performance.  
60 In the period between **Saadia** and **Maimonides**, most Jewish writers who speculated on the nature of  
61 the Torah continued in this rationalist tradition.  
62 **Judah Halevi**, however, opposed the rationalist interpretation. He allowed that the Torah contains  
63 rational and political laws, but considered them preliminary to the specifically divine laws and teachings  
64 which cannot be comprehended by reason, e.g., the laws of the Sabbath which teach the omnipotence  
65 of God and the creation of the world. The Torah makes it possible to approach God by awe, love, and  
66 joy. It is the essence of wisdom, and the outcome of the will of God to reveal His kingdom on earth as it  
67 is in heaven. While Judah Halevi held that Israel was created to fulfill the Torah, he wrote that there  
68 would be no Torah were there no Israel.  
69 **Maimonides** emphasized that the Torah is the product of the unique prophecy of Moses. He maintained  
70 that the Torah has two purposes:  
71 (1) The welfare of the body, which is a prerequisite of the ultimate purpose, is political, and "consists in  
72 the governance of the city and the well-being of the state of all its people according to their capacity.  
73 (2) The welfare of the soul (intellect), which consists in the true perfection of man, his acquisition of  
74 immortality through intellection of the highest things.  
75 **Maimonides** held that the Torah is similar to other laws in its concern with the welfare of the body; but  
76 its divine nature is reflected in its concern for the welfare of the soul. Maimonides saw the Torah as a  
77 rationalizing force, warring against superstition, imagination, appetite, and idolatry. He cited the  
78 rabbinic dictum, "Everyone who disbelieves in idolatry professes the Torah in its entirety", and taught  
79 that the foundation of the Torah and the pivot around which it turns consists in the effacement of  
80 idolatry. He held that the Torah must be interpreted in the light of reason.  
81 While **Maimonides** generally restricted analysis of the nature of the Torah to questions of its  
82 educational, moral, or political value, the Spanish kabbalists engaged in bold metaphysical speculation  
83 concerning its essence. The kabbalists taught that the Torah is a living organism. Some said the entire  
84 Torah consists of the names of God set in succession or interwoven into a fabric. Ultimately, it was said  
85 that the Torah is God. This identification of the Torah and God was understood to refer to the Torah in  
86 its true primordial essence, and not to its manifestation in the world of creation.  
87 Influenced by Maimonides, **Baruch Spinoza** took the position that the Torah is an exclusively political  
88 law, however he broke radically with all rabbinic tradition by denying its divine nature, by making it an  
89 object of historical-critical investigation, and by maintaining that it was not written by Moses alone but  
90 by various authors living at different times. Moreover, he considered the Torah primitive, unscientific,  
91 and particularistic, and thus subversive to progress, reason, and universal morality. By portraying the  
92 Torah as a product of the Jewish people, he reversed the traditional opinion according to which the  
93 Jewish people are a product of the Torah.  
94 **Moses Mendelssohn** considered the Torah a political law, but he affirmed its divine nature. He explained  
95 that the Torah does not intend to reveal new ideas about deism and morality, but rather, through its  
96 laws and institutions, to arouse men to be mindful of the true ideas attainable by all men through  
97 reason. By identifying the beliefs of the Torah with the truths of reason, Mendelssohn affirmed both its  
98 scientific respectability and its universalistic nature. By defining the Torah as a political law given to  
99 Israel by God, he preserved the traditional view that Israel is a product of the Torah, and not, as Spinoza  
100 claimed, vice versa.

With the rise of the science of Judaism (*Wissenschaft des Judentums*) in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the advance of the historical-critical approach to the Torah, many Jewish intellectuals, including ideologists of Reform like [Abraham Geiger](#), followed Spinoza in seeing the Torah, at least in part, as a product of the primitive history of the Jewish nation.

The increasing intellectualization of the Torah was opposed by [Samuel David Luzzatto](#). He contended that the belief that God revealed the Torah is the starting point of Judaism, and that this belief, with its momentous implications concerning the nature of God and His relation to man, cannot be attained by philosophy. Luzzatto held that the foundation of the whole Torah is compassion.

In their German translation of the Bible, [Martin](#)

[Buber](#) translated *torah* as *Weisung* or *Unterweisung* ("Instruction") and not as *Gesetz* ("Law"). In general, he agreed on the purpose of the Torah - to convert the universe and God from It to Thou - yet differed on several points concerning its nature. Buber saw the Torah as the past dialogue between Israel and God, and the present dialogue between the individual reader, the I, and God, the Thou. He concluded that while one must open himself to the entire teaching of the Torah, he need only accept a particular law of the Torah if he feels that it is being spoken now to him. The secular Zionism of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries gave religious thinkers new cause to define the relationship between the Torah and the Jewish nation. Some defined the Torah in terms of the nation.

Thus, [Mordecai Kaplan](#) translated [Ahad Ha-Am's](#) sociological theory of the evolution of Jewish civilization into a religious, though naturalistic, theory of the Torah as the "religious civilization of the Jews."

Other thinkers defined the nation in terms of the Torah. Thus, [Abraham Isaac Kook](#) taught that the purpose of the Torah is to reveal the living light of the universe, the suprarational spiritual, to Israel and, through Israel, to all mankind. While the Written Torah, which reveals the light in the highest channel of our soul, is the product of God alone, the [Oral Torah](#), which is inseparable from the Written Torah, and which reveals the light in a second channel of our soul, proximate to the life of deeds, derives its personality from the spirit of the nation. The Oral Torah can live in its fullness only when Israel lives in its fullness – in peace and independence in the Land of Israel. Thus, according to Kook, modern Zionism, whatever the intent of its secular ideologists, has universal religious significance, for it is acting in service of the Torah.

In the [State of Israel](#), most writers and educators have maintained the secularist position of the early Zionists, namely, that the Torah was not revealed by God, in the traditional sense, but is the product of the national life of ancient Israel. Those who have discussed the Torah and its relation to the state from a religious point of view have mostly followed Kook or Buber. However, a radically rationalist approach to the nature of the Torah has been taught by Yeshayahu Leibowitz who emphasizes that the Torah is a law for the worship of God and for the consequent obliteration of the worship of men and things; in this connection, he condemns the subordination of the Torah to nationalism or to religious sentimentalism or to any ideology or institution.

### **Eternity (Non-Abrogability)**

In the Bible there is no text unanimously understood to affirm explicitly the eternity or nonabrogability of the Torah; however, many laws of the Torah are accompanied by phrases such as, "an everlasting injunction through your generations."

Whereas the rabbis understood the preexistence of the Torah in terms of its prerevelation existence in heaven, they understood the eternity or nonabrogability of the Torah in terms of its postrevelation existence, not in heaven; i.e., the whole Torah was given to Moses and no part of it remained in heaven. When Eliezer ben Hyrcanus and Joshua ben Hananiah were debating a point of Torah and a voice from heaven dramatically announced that Eliezer's position was correct, Joshua refused to recognize its testimony, for the Torah "is not in heaven", and must be interpreted by men, unaided by the supernatural. It was a principle that "a prophet is henceforth not permitted to innovate a thing." The rabbis taught that the Torah would continue to exist in the world to come, although some of them were of the opinion that innovations would be made in the messianic era.

With the rise to political power of Christianity and Islam, two religions which sought to convert Jews and which argued that particular injunctions of the Torah had been abrogated, the question of the eternity or "nonabrogability" of the Torah became urgent.

Saadia Gaon stated that the children of Israel have a clear tradition from the prophets that the laws of the Torah are not subject to abrogation. Presenting scriptural corroboration for this tradition, he appealed to phrases appended to certain commandments, e.g., "throughout their generations, for a perpetual covenant." According to one novel argument of his, the Jewish nation is a nation only by virtue of its laws, namely, the Torah; God has stated that the Jewish nation will endure as long as the heaven and earth; therefore, the Torah will last as long as heaven and earth. He interpreted the verses, "Remember ye the Torah of Moses... Behold, I will send you Elijah..." , as teaching that the Torah will hold valid until the prophet Elijah returns to herald the resurrection.

Maimonides listed the belief in the eternity of the Torah as the ninth of his 13 principles of Judaism, and connected it with the belief that no prophet will surpass Moses, the only man to give people laws through prophecy. He contended that the eternity of the Torah is stated clearly in the Bible, particularly in the passages "thou shalt not add thereto, nor diminish from it" and "the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children for ever, that we may do all the words of this Torah". He offered the following explanation of the Torah's eternity, based on its perfection and on the theory of the mean: "The Torah of the Lord is perfect" (Ps. 19:8) in that its statutes are just, i.e., that they are equibalanced between the burdensome and the indulgent; and "when a thing is perfect as it is possible to be within its species, it is impossible that within that species there should be found another thing that does not fall short of the perfection either because of excess or deficiency."

Joseph Albo criticized Maimonides for listing the belief in the eternity of the Torah as an independent fundamental belief of Judaism. In a long discussion he contended that nonabrogation is not a fundamental principle of the Torah, and that moreover, no text can be found in the Bible to establish it. Ironically, his ultimate position turned out to be closer to Maimonides' for he concluded that the belief in the nonabrogation of the Torah is a branch of the doctrine that no prophet will surpass the excellence of Moses.

After Albo, the question of the eternity of the Torah became routine in Jewish philosophical literature. However, in the Kabbalah it was never routine. In the 13<sup>th</sup>-century *Sefer ha-Temunah* a doctrine of cosmic cycles (or *shemittot*; cf. Deut. 15) was expounded, according to which creation is renewed every 7,000 years, at which times the letters of the Torah reassemble, and the Torah enters the new cycle bearing different words and meanings. Thus, while eternal in its unrevealed state, the Torah, in its manifestation in creation, is destined to be abrogated. This doctrine became popular in later kabbalistic and ḥasidic literature, and was exploited by the heretic Shabbetai Ẓevi and his followers, who claimed that a new cycle had begun, and in consequence he was able to teach that "the abrogation of the Torah is its fulfillment!"

Jewish philosophers of modern times have not concentrated on the question of the eternity or nonabrogability of the Torah. Nevertheless, it is not entirely untenable that the main distinction between Orthodox Judaism and non-Orthodox Judaism is that the latter rejects the literal interpretation of the ninth principle of Maimonides' Creed that there will be no change in the Torah.