

TORAH. It is no exaggeration to claim that the term torah is the quintessential symbol in Judaism. The present essay approaches this symbol from a variety of linguistic, historical, and phenomenological points of view. The discussion is divided into nine basic parts. The first of these offers basic etymological orientation to the semantic range of the term torah in classical Hebrew usage. Parts two to four address the problem of the nature and origins of the diverse sorts of writings that have come to be called torah in Judaism. With the literary survey of torah complete, we then move to a survey of the ideological perspectives that Jews in various times and places have used to explain the meaning and the authority of torah. Part eight traces the profound role that the value of Torah study has played in the history of Judaism. The final part addresses the ritual functions of the book of the Torah as physical object.

ETYMOLOGY AND BASIC MEANINGS. The Hebrew noun *torah* is formed from the linguistic stem *y-r-h*. This stem has a complex semantic history, bearing at least three distinct senses: “to throw or shoot,” “to water,” and “to proclaim or instruct.” Some nineteenth-century scholars held that the stem has a primary setting in the context of divination practices, as in the casting of lots (for example, *Joshua* 18:6). Indeed in Akkadian a closely related stem underlies the noun, *tertu*, which refers to an oracular directive or instruction. Nevertheless, in contemporary times, there has been no firm consensus about the linguistic history of the term torah prior to its characteristic usages in the Hebrew Bible and associated ancient Hebrew literature. In these sources, torah bears the primary sense of “teaching” or “instruction.” Depending upon the context, torah can refer to the orally imparted wisdom of parents (*Proverbs* 1:8, 4:2) as well as to the teachings of formal instructors, including sages (*Proverbs* 13:14), priests (*Daniel* 17:11), or prophets (*Daniel* 1:5). Very commonly it refers to messages delivered by the God of Israel to prophetic spokespersons, usually in the form of auditory disclosures of the divine voice (*Isaiah* 30:9). Especially in the biblical book of Deuteronomy, and at key junctures in the historical accounts of the books of Joshua through 2 Kings (for example, *Joshua* 8:31, *2 Kings* 14:6, 23:25), “the book of the Torah of Moses” (*sefer torat mosheh*) refers to a written collection of hortatory teachings and legal instructions. Equivalent terms, apparently referring to a complete document, are “the book of the Torah of YHWH” (*sefer torat yhwh*; for example, *Nehemiah* 9:3) and “the book of the Torah of God” (*sefer torat Elohim*; for example, *Joshua* 24:26). According to Deuteronomy, these teachings were copied by Moses in response to the divine command and deposited for posterity in the ark that housed the stone covenantal tablets received on Sinai/Horeb (*Daniel* 31:24-26). The author of the biblical book of Nehemiah, writing sometime between the fifth and the fourth centuries BCE, assumed that the scroll read by the priestly scribe, Ezra, in the covenant-renewal ceremony described in *Nehemiah* 8:1 and following, was a copy of this very same book of the Torah. It is represented as the written testimony of a covenantal relationship between the Israelite nation and the God of Israel, who redeemed it from slavery in the time of Moses and promises to restore Israel's fortunes in the future in return for full loyalty to the norms contained within the Torah (*Nehemiah* 9:6-10:31).

THE LITERARY FORMAT OF THE CANONICAL TORAH. In the authoritative version known for well over 2000 years, the Torah refers collectively to the first five books in the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Ancient Jewish translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek (that is, the *Septuagint*, c. 250 BCE and later), which form the textual basis of the Christian Old Testament, refer to these five books collectively as the Pentateuch (“the Five Books”). Greek-speaking Jews commonly referred to this collection by the term *ho nomos* (“the Law”; for example, 2 *Maccabees* 15:9, *Romans* 7:1). Through the mediation of Christianity, deeply influenced by the usages of Greek-speaking Jews, it has become common in Western culture to conceive of the Torah as a law code and of *torah* as “law.” More properly, the Torah founded in the Hebrew Bible is an extended narrative that contains law codes. In traditional Jewish usage, the general noun *torah*—without the definite article—refers broadly to any authoritative religious teaching—legal, ethical, or theological.

Neither ancient Hebrew copies of the Torah nor modern scrolls used in Jewish worship identify either the Torah as a whole or its separate books by name. In traditional Jewish usage the title of each book is drawn from Hebrew words that appear in their first sentences: *Bereshit* (“In the beginning”), *Shemot* (“Names”), *Vayiqr’a* (“And he called”), *Bamidbar* (“In the wilderness”), and *Devarim* (“Words”). In Christian usage, the titles are drawn from Latin renderings of the Septuagint’s Greek titles that allude broadly to the theme of each work. These are the origins of the terms routinely used in Christian communities. English translations of the Old Testament, for example, list the titles of the Pentateuchal books as *Genesis* (*Greek Genesis*); *Exodus* (*Greek Exodos*); *Leviticus* (*Greek Leuitikon*); *Numbers* (*Greek Arithmoi*); and *Deuteronomy* (*Greek Deuteronomion*).

Modern readers of the Torah in Hebrew will find it in two forms: as a printed book in the larger collection of a printed Hebrew Bible or as a handwritten scroll used in synagogue rituals which call for reading from the Torah in public. Scholars, perhaps, will have consulted medieval handwritten copies of the Torah that take the form of codices—separate leaves of parchment or other writing material bound together into a book. The format of the scroll is the most ancient and is found in the earliest surviving fragmentary copies of parts of the Torah that have been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. These fragments, over eighty in number, offer evidence of the state of the text as early as the mid-second century BCE. They also show that the books of the Torah, like other writings presently included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible, circulated in a variety of versions, many of which differ from that found in the official scriptural canon. It is not clear how early the five books comprising the Torah were routinely copied together on one scroll. Nevertheless, Jewish and early Christian literary sources from the beginning of the Common Era assume that all five books formed a single literary entity.

THE CONTENTS OF THE CANONICAL TORAH. The canonical version of the Torah is a complex narrative work of extremely sophisticated composition. No simple outline of the plot of the Torah can do justice to its complexity. Major and minor themes and subplots are skillfully woven throughout the five books so that passages in one book are alluded to or even quoted in

others (for example, *Exodus* 16:2-3 and *Numbers* 11:4-6). The thematic unity of the Torah, then, fully justifies the rabbinic view that the books must be copied on a single scroll (Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 60a). The following summary suggests the overall coherence of the Torahs narrative across the five books in which the story is told.

The Torahs master theme organizes diverse stories and collections of laws into a theologically coherent statement as well as a compelling historical narrative. The Torah is a history of the expressions of divine love for Israel and of Israels inability to accept and respond to that love. The theme is given a universal significance in the first eleven chapters of *Genesis*, a complete literary unit that forms a prologue describing the origins of the world in Gods creative speech (*Genesis* 1:1-2:4) and the early history of humanity. These chapters describe various forms of human rebellion from the time of the primordial man and woman, Adam and Eve (*Genesis* 2:43:24) and continuing through their descendants: Cains murder of his brother, Abel (*Genesis* 4:1-16); the violence of Noah's generation that led to the destruction of nearly all life (*Genesis* 6-9); and the insolence of the generation that sought to invade the heavens by building a tower in Babel (*Genesis* 11:1-10).

This history of human rebellion foreshadows the Torahs depiction of Gods relationship with the family of Abraham and his descendants through his son, Isaac, and grandson, Jacob. Genesis chapters 12 to 36 describe various covenantal promises sealed between God and these Patriarchs (*Genesis* 12:1-4, 15:1-21, 17:1-14, 22:15-19, 26:23-25, 28:10-15). Essential to these is the promise of the Land of Canaan as the eventual dwelling place of the Israelite people. Thematically, this Land recalls the original Garden in which Adam and Eve lived and from which they were expelled due to their rebellion. It is to be the place in which God and his human partners dwell together in harmony. But as the Torahs narrative unfolds, it becomes clear that Israel is no less susceptible than the original humans to the urge to defy God. Each patriarch lives in the Land for a time, and each is tested with various hardships that require him to leave the Land. Ultimately, through a combination of famine and certain intrigues involving a plot by Jacobs eleven sons against their brother Joseph, all of Jacobs descendants migrate to Egypt (*Genesis* 37-50), abandoning entirely the Land promised to them through their ancestor, Abraham.

The book of *Exodus* opens (chapter 1) with a description of the enslavement of Jacobs descendants to the Egyptian Pharaoh. The focus of chapters 2 to 4 is the figure of Moses, a son of Hebrew slaves, spared from death and raised in the royal household, who discovers his true identity and is called upon by God to lead Israel out of slavery into a formal covenant of servitude to God himself. Chapters 5 to 15 trace the negotiations of Moses and his brother, Aaron, with Pharaoh for the release of Israel from slavery. They also describe Israels liberation through the visitation of plagues against Egypt, culminating in the death of firstborn sons. Moses brings the freed slaves to a wilderness mountain chosen by God—Sinai—and there concludes a covenant-making ceremony that includes the revelation to Moses and Israel of the legal terms of covenantal service to God (chapters 19-24). At this point Israel is in full possession of the

covenant revelation and anticipates rapid entry in the Land of Canaan, where its terms are to be fulfilled.

With a few crucial narrative interruptions, the details of these covenantal laws extend from chapter 25 of *Exodus*, through the entire book of *Leviticus*, and into the first ten chapters of *Numbers*. The first narrative interruption in this extensive collection of laws is of great importance to the Torah's overall theme of human rebellion against divine love. *Exodus* chapter 32 describes how Israel, just having seen the saving power of God in his punishment of Egypt, initially rebels against the terms of its covenant at Sinai. The very first divine statement of the covenantal terms was the commandment to avoid worship of any image as a divinity and to devote cultic service exclusively to the God who redeemed Israel from Egyptian servitude (*Exodus* 20:1-4). Nevertheless, when Moses is delayed on Sinai in discourse with God, Israel coerces Aaron to supply a cultic icon in the form of a golden calf to serve as a focus of religious devotion. Although Israel atones for this violation, and God's anger is appeased, a pattern of disloyalty familiar from the first chapters of Genesis has been reestablished.

The book of *Numbers*, from chapter 11, resumes the theme of Israel's inability to be loyal to the terms of the divine covenant. It repeatedly offers stories that illustrate Israel's lack of trust in God's power. The most important illustration comes in chapters 13 and 14. Two years after the liberation from slavery, Moses has led Israel to the border of the Land promised to Abraham. In response to God's word, he sends spies into the Land to help prepare the invasion. But the spies are intimidated by the might of the Canaanite nations living there and convince Israel not to invade. The divine response to this lack of trust is to force Moses to lead Israel on a wilderness journey lasting thirty-eight years, during which the entire generation of adults that refused to enter the Land dies off. Only thereafter is Israel brought again to the Moabite territory adjacent to the Land, with a new generation prepared to take the Land and divide it among the tribal descendants of Jacob's sons (chapters 35-36).

The book of *Deuteronomy* opens with Moses delivering an extended speech to Israel, assembled on the banks of the Jordan River. Moses recounts the history of God's redemptive acts and Israel's ungrateful or rebellious responses, repeating and elaborating on stories told in *Exodus* and *Numbers*. He reviews the covenantal laws delivered on Sinai and elaborates in many cases upon their performance. He repeatedly underscores the fact that Israel's covenant with God entails both a blessing and a curse (for example, *Daniel* 11:26-30, 28:168). If Israel obeys the covenantal laws in the Land it will prosper there; but disobedience will be punished by war and exile from the Land. Finally Moses writes down all God has told him in a document called the Book of the Torah of Moses. *Deuteronomy* closes with final words of dire prediction as well as hopeful blessings placed in Moses' mouth (chapters 32-33). At the end, in chapter 34, Moses dies and passes on the leadership of the people to his disciple Joshua. With this the Torah concludes, its readers fully aware of the eventual fulfillment of Moses' most dire predictions.

THE FORMATION OF THE CANONICAL TORAH. The canonical Torah described above contains many instances of Moses writing down utterances delivered by God. Readers both ancient and modern have wondered about the relation of the Torah-text found in the Hebrew Bible to the various documents that Moses is asserted to have written at divine dictation. Indeed, it is not unusual to read in the Torah that Moses wrote down “*this* Torah” or “*these* words” in response to a divine utterance. But careful readers also note that the antecedent of such expressions can be interpreted plausibly as the immediately preceding divine utterances—or perhaps the book of *Deuteronomy* itself—rather than a series of five books beginning with the creation of the world and ending with the death of Moses. Nevertheless, virtually all Jewish writings known to have been composed during the later Second Temple period (c. 400 BCE-70 CE) assume that the Torah which Moses received and copied is identical to the five books found in Torah scrolls. But in some writings, such as the preamble to the noncanonical book of Jubilees (c. 160 BCE), it is also assumed that the received Torah is incomplete; Moses received other revelations on Sinai as well and wrote them down. These, too, should share the authority of the Torah of Moses. The early rabbinic sages, in traditions formulated from the second through the fourth centuries CE, also believed in the Mosaic origin of the canonical text. But noticing a host of chronological discrepancies and other textual problems, they debated the possibilities that the original revelations were received and transcribed by Moses in an order that is no longer preserved in the canonical version (*Mekh. Yish.*, to *Exodus* 15:9). Others suggested that the last verses of *Deuteronomy* describing the death of Moses were written by his disciple, Joshua (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Bat.* 14b-15a).

The issue of the Mosaic authorship of the canonical text of the Torah has been a particular focus of modern literary-historical scholarship since at least the seventeenth century. The fundamental assumption of modern scholarship is that the Torah, like all texts, is an essentially human product composed by authors immersed in specific historical situations. Proper interpretation of the Torah, then, involves critical study of the text, reading it for literary, stylistic, and linguistic clues to the historical setting in which it was composed. This assumption has freed historians from traditional Jewish and Christian claims about the Torahs Mosaic origins, and inspired them to propose a host of theories about the historical setting of the Torahs composition and the persons or groups responsible for its creation. Since the middle of the nineteenth century, the most influential historical reconstructions of the composition of the Torah have been associated with the Documentary Hypothesis proposed, most notably by the German scholar Julius Wellhausen (1844-1918) and refined by generations of later scholars.

As its name indicates, the Documentary Hypothesis holds that the canonical Torah is a composite literary creation composed, in part, of written documents that are more ancient than the final five-volume narrative into which they have been incorporated. These documents may have originated in oral narrative or legal traditions, but for the most part circulated in ancient Israelite priestly and scribal circles as written sources. Most versions of the hypothesis identify four specific sources, each with its own geographical and chronological point of origin, and each

representing a distinct point of view regarding theology, politics, and, most importantly, the early history of Israel as a covenant people. The canonical Torah was created by editors who selected and combined elements from each of these sources in light of their own views about the history of Israel's covenant relationship to its God.

Most versions of the Documentary Hypothesis identify the four documentary sources as follows. The oldest source, often regarded as originating by the ninth century BCE, is a collection of stories reflecting many of the historical interests of the canonical Torah: stories about early humanity, the Israelite patriarchs, and the events surrounding the liberation from Egypt. It is characterized by a preference for the proper name, YHWH, in reference to the God of Israel. It also has a particular interest in events located in the southern part of the Land of Israel. It is called the *J-source*, an indication of its Judean origins and its preference for the divine name (spelled *jhwh* in German). Scholars usually identify its creators as a school of scribes associated with the Davidic dynasty in Jerusalem.

The second major documentary source is identified as the *E-source*. This reflects its tendency to prefer the divine title Elohim (“God”) in reference to the God of Israel, and a greater degree of interest in depicting the Patriarchs as founders of worship sites in the northern part of the Land of Israel, also known as Ephraim. Most scholars regard E as a fragmentary source used to supplement and comment on basic elements of the J-source. Presumably it was composed in the northern part of the Land of Israel prior to the destruction of the Northern Israelite Kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 BCE. When Ephraimite refugees migrated south to the Davidic Kingdom they brought their traditions with them. Over time they were incorporated into the J-source traditions to produce a richer and more complex narrative. Some scholars designate this blended document as JE.

The *Priestly* or *P-source* stems, as its name indicates, from priestly writers associated with the Temple in Jerusalem. Like J and E, P contains narratives that comment on primeval human history, the Patriarchal era, and experience of liberation. But its distinctive contribution is enormous and includes detailed collections of legal codes focusing largely, but hardly exclusively, on cultic rules of sacrifice, matters of cultic purity, sexual and dietary behavior, and other matters concerned with the separation of the Israelite community from various sources of ritual contamination. These are richly represented in Leviticus and Numbers in particular. The P-source was at first thought by scholars to be relatively recent, even postexilic in composition. Most opinion holds that it is probably pre-exilic in origin, although it may incorporate certain revisions and additions stemming from postexilic priestly editors.

The final source of the Torah, according to the Documentary Hypothesis, survives in the Torah largely intact as the book of Deuteronomy. It is called D. Most regard it as having been composed by 621 BCE in order to justify, in terms of Mosaic authority, King Josiah's program for a reform of Israelite cultic practices. Its continual preoccupation is that Israel's tenure on the Land is dependent upon total opposition to idolatry in all its forms and the destruction of non-Israelite

shrines throughout the Land. In its present form, Deuteronomy is the introduction to a larger historical work, called by scholars the Deuteronomic History, extending from the scriptural books of Joshua through 2 Kings. Deuteronomy closes with Moses prediction of Israels failure to heed the covenant, and the Deuteronomic History concludes with a description of the destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of its royal house and priests. Accordingly, most scholars argue that D and the history attached to it are preexilic works completed in the wake of Jerusalem's destruction and the onset of the period of exile.

There remains in the twenty-first century no universal consensus about precisely how to divide the canonical Torah into the constituent four source documents. Debates continue as well regarding the dating and identity of the authors— whether individuals or “schools”—that stand behind the sources. Most contemporary scholars accept the view that the final work of editing the various sources into their present form must have been done sometime between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE and the career of the priest, Ezra (c. 450-398 BCE), depicted in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah as imposing the laws of the Torah of Moses upon the Judean community.

Also in contemporary times, the Documentary Hypothesis has been subject to some heated criticism by historians who regard as implausible the hypothesis's principle scenario: that the Torah was created by an editorial team that took apart and recombined elements of earlier written sources. Many contemporary students of oral tradition in ancient scribal cultures, like those of ancient Israel and early Judaism, acknowledge that written sources may lie behind both narrative and legal parts of the Torah. But they have also observed that the so-called “scissors and paste” method of composition proposed by the Documentary Hypothesis has no parallel in other ancient literary traditions. These depend heavily upon orally transmitted material, much of which undergoes transformation due to numerous public performances. This neglect of the oral-traditional dimension of the Torah, when combined with the failure of documentary critics to reach total consensus on the range of each documentary source, has drawn charges that the method of documentary analysis is too subjective to provide a definitive historical account of the composition of the Torah. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the twenty-first century no other theory of the Torahs origins and composition has won a consensus among contemporary academic historians of ancient Israels literature.

TORAH AS REVELATION. As much as the term Torah is etymologically linked to the idea of teaching, it is in all forms of Judaism linked rhetorically to the idea of revelation, i.e., teaching that stems from a transmundane source. Like the other monotheistic religions originating in the Middle East (that is, Christianity and Islam), Judaism is grounded in claims to possess revealed texts or doctrines. Since at least the early Second Temple period, the text of the Torah of Moses has served as the paradigmatic revelation. Specifically, the document inscribed on the scroll of the Torah stems from a disclosure of God's love and will to Moses. But this is not to say that Judaism in all times and places has had a single conception of revelation or of how the Torah

found in the canon of Scripture and in other more recent writings is related to the actual words disclosed to Moses.

The writings of Palestinian Jewish scribes from the Second Temple period, whose pens produced dozens of books represented as revelations disclosed to ancient prophets and sages from Abraham to Ezra, commonly accepted a stenographic model of revelation derived from the depictions of Moses found throughout the Torah itself (for example, 4 *Ezra* 14:37-48). Just as ancient authors commonly dictated their books to scribal copyists, so God dictated his teachings to his prophetic scribe, Moses. Some Second Temple scribal circles, however, asserted that Moses had written down more of the divine revelation than was contained in the scroll anchoring the growing collection of scriptural literature. Both the book of *Jubilees*, many copies of which were found among the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the singular *Temple Scroll*, represent themselves as records of revelation to Moses. Presumably, the authors or groups promoting these works as revelation affirmed that they, no less than the canonical Torah, constituted authoritative, divinely authorized teaching.

Despite the popularity of the stenographic model of revelation in Palestinian scribal circles, there is at least one Jewish source from the late Second Temple period that suggests a rather different view. In the opinion of Philo (15 BCE–45 CE), a philosophically trained Jew who thrived in the Greco-Roman culture of Alexandria, Egypt, Moses was more than the copyist of the Torah. Rather, in Philo's view, Moses was the author of the Torah (for example, *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*, 12, 94). He wrote his book in a state of philosophical closeness to God that constituted prophetic illumination. In Philo's view, Moses' narratives and laws are the external form that concealed the deeper philosophical truths taught long after Moses' death by Socrates and Plato. Only by application of allegorical methods of interpretation, Philo held, could the philosophical content of the Torah be recovered. This content, only alluded to allegorically in the concrete text of the Torah's stories and laws, constituted for Philo the true revelation to Moses.

The revelation of the Torah was the perception of philosophical truth disclosed to the human mind in a state of prophetic ecstasy (for example, *On the Sacrifices of Abel and Cain*, 78).

Medieval Jewish thinkers, entirely independently of Philo, would revive the idea of the Torah as an allegory whose truths had to be decoded through appropriate interpretive systems. But they would do so in a way deeply influenced by Rabbinic Judaism, the form of Judaism that grew to dominate Mediterranean and Middle Eastern Jews from the second century CE until the rise of Islam in the seventh century. In its classical form, as found in the later Talmudic literature of Late Antiquity, the rabbinic theory of revelation is grounded in three basic conceptions.

The first is that "Torah is from Heaven" (M. *Sanhedrin* 10:1)—that is, the God of Israel is the exclusive source of the Torah. In holding this view, the rabbinic sages shared the views of generations of Palestinian Jewish scribes before them, who regarded Moses as a kind of stenographer taking dictation from the God of Israel. The sages also accepted another element of Second Temple Jewish thought, the idea that certain writings produced after the time of Moses

were disclosed to religious teachers—prophets in the line of Mosaic authority but subordinate to him in status—whose writings were the result of inspiration by the “holy spirit” (*ruah haqodesh*, for example, Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah*, 7a). Rabbinic discussion of the extent of the canon of the Hebrew Bible revolved in part around the criterion of inspiration (*Talmud Yadayim* 2:14). Thus the relatively recent book of Daniel, composed around 167 BCE, is included within the rabbinic scriptural canon on the basis of its attribution to an ancient seer from the Exilic period. But an older work, a collection of wise sayings from the pen of the Temple Scribe Yeshua ben Sirach (included in Christian collections of the Apocrypha as the *Wisdom of ben Sira*, c. 180 BCE), was not included in the rabbinic canon, despite its popularity among rabbinic sages as a source of wisdom.

The third key element in the rabbinic conception of revelation is that the Sinaitic revelation to Moses included two intertwined but discrete bodies of teaching. One of these, the actual scroll of the Torah of Moses (and by extension, later books included in the rabbinic scriptural canon), was called the written Torah (for example, *Tanh.-Bub.*, to Exodus 19:1). But in addition, God had disclosed an unwritten body of knowledge which alone could unlock the secrets of the written Torah. This unwritten revelation is called the oral Torah (for example, *Avot Nat.*, A:15). Other Jewish groups of the Second Temple period had asserted the existence of books of revelations that were not contained in the Torah of Moses. But the rabbinic claim is unique in insisting that this revelation was not found in books, but only available as oral tradition learned at the feet of rabbinic sages themselves. Indeed, in rabbinic terminology, the “study of Torah” (*talmud torah*) refers specifically to the study of the written and oral Torah, for Torah had become the comprehensive term denoting the entirety of teachings recognized by rabbinic tradition as authoritative. By early medieval times, rabbinic scribes and teachers had come to preserve oral Torah in discrete written compilations, most importantly, the Mishnah and its Talmudic commentaries. These were routinely memorized by rabbinic disciples, whose discussions and inquiries into the texts of oral Torah continued the oral tradition despite the use of writing in its preservation.

TORAH AS LAW AND ONTOLOGICAL PRINCIPLE. The term *torah*, in addition to its specific sense of “teaching” and the more comprehensive suggestion of “revealed teaching,” has also served to convey the concept of “legal rule.” This meaning is already well attested in the Hebrew Bible (for example, *Numbers* 19:14). It is confirmed as well in the penchant of Greek-speaking Jews and early Christians to refer to their collection of scriptures as “the Law” (*ho nomos*; *Matthew* 5:17). Within classical rabbinic Judaism, the written Torah served as a fundamental source of civil and ritual law. Rabbinic sages, functioning as jurists, interpreted and applied the law within the traditional framework of the oral Torah.

A homiletic passage of the Babylonian Talmud (Babylonian Talmud) (*Makkot* 24a) asserts that God had revealed in the written Torah no less than 613 specific commandments (*mitsvot*; singular *mitzvah*). The Talmud nowhere lists these commandments, a task that would be taken up by many medieval legal codifiers. Nevertheless, the conceptual tools and interpretive

principles for identifying these commandments and applying them in practical affairs were transmitted in the oral Torah tradition (for example, the Bar. Yish.). These yielded the authoritative procedures (*halakhot*; singular *halakhah*) for embodying the commandments in the covenant life of Israel. In practice, the legal force of a commandment in the written Torah was delimited exclusively by the meaning ascribed to it in the halakhic tradition of the oral Torah, regardless of what the semantic meaning of the commandment might suggest. Thus, to take a famous example, the written Torah's commandment to take "an eye for an eye" in the case of damages caused by negligence (*Exodus* 21:23) is defined halakhically to mean that the responsible party must compensate the victim financially for his or her loss (for example, *Mek. Yish.* to *Exodus* 21:23).

The most decisive development in rabbinic conceptions of Torah as a legal system was the emergence of various attempts to systematically organize the vast legal discussions of the Talmudic literature into manageable codes that could serve the needs of rabbinic courts and educated laity. First in the Islamic world, and then in Latin Christendom, rabbinic scholars produced a series of influential halakhic collections. These experimented with a variety of organizational formats. The *She'iltot* of Rabbi Aha (c. 750), for example, organized halakhic norms in tandem with the rabbinically prescribed Torah readings for the Sabbath which served as their sources. Others, such as the halakhic digest of Rabbi Isaac Al-Fasi (1013-1103), followed the traditional sequence of Talmudic tractates, extracting essential halakhic conclusions from the give-and-take of the debates within which the Talmud had preserved them. The most innovative and encyclopedic attempt at codification was the *Mishneh Torah*, composed by Moses ben Maimon ("Maimonides," 1135-1204). He organized all of rabbinic halakhah within the framework of fourteen major topical headings, each of which included several subheadings, all arranged in scrupulous logical sequence. Subsequent codes, such as Rabbi Jacob ben Ashers' *'Arb'a Turim* (fourteenth century) and Rabbi Joseph Caro's *Shulhan 'Arukh* (sixteenth century) revised Maimonides's comprehensive organizational categories. They also narrowed Maimonides's scope, focusing only upon halakhic norms that governed the daily life of individuals and the community as a corporate entity. Thus, vast halakhic topics that depended upon the existence of the Jerusalem Temple were excluded, despite their extensive treatment by Maimonides. The primary categories developed in the *'Arb'a Turim* have become conventional in later rabbinic halakhic thinking until contemporary times. They are *'Orakh Hayyim* (laws governing the liturgical cycle of the day, week, and year); *Yoreh De'ah* (ritual laws, such as the dietary restrictions, which signify the holiness of the Jewish community); *Hoshen Mishpat* (the topics of civil and criminal law); and *'Even Ha'ezer* (*halakhot* governing the contraction, duration, and dissolution of marriage).

In addition to this halakhic-jurisprudential development of the meaning of Torah as "law," classical rabbinic tradition also suggested that Torah constituted a kind of law of being, "a precious instrument through which the world was created" (*M. Avot* 3:14). The thought was driven home vividly in midrashic settings, in which the Torah was likened to an architect's

blueprint that proved indispensable to the builder of a palace (*Berakhot Rabbah* 1:1) or claimed to have existed for 947 generations prior to the creation of the world (Babylonian Talmud, *Zevahim* 116a). Such suggestions that the Torah in some sense preceded the creation of the world entailed, of course, a radical disassociation of Torah, conceived as a principle of being, from the specific writings found in books. Torah, in the context of such discussions, now denoted an ontological principle that transcended the existence of the historical Torah of Moses, even as the latter pointed toward and symbolized that ontological reality.

The jurisprudential and ontological developments of the idea of Torah among the sages of Late Antiquity provided the foundations upon which medieval rabbinic intellectuals, responding to larger movements in Islamic and Christian thought and piety, created fresh formulations of these themes. Many of these formulations were inspired by polemical interactions. The pioneering figure in the Jewish philosophical tradition, Rabbi Sa'adia ben Joseph (882-942) produced his masterpiece, *The Book of Opinions and Beliefs*, in part as an effort to demonstrate to rationalist critics the rationality of the Torah as a legal system stemming from God and disclosed in its complete and final form to Israel's prophets. Deeply influenced by the rationalist Islamic school known as the Mut'azilite Kalam, Sa'adia hoped to use the Kalam's own rigorous methodology to demonstrate the intellectual sufficiency of Torah as a comprehensive source of divine knowledge. Building upon traditional Talmudic distinctions between pragmatic rules (*mishpatim*) and inscrutable divine decrees (*huqqim*), Sa'adia argued that both were absolutely essential in the context of the Torah as revelation. Laws self-evidently necessary for social order, such as the prohibition against murder (*Exodus* 20:13), were entirely susceptible to rational explanation. Apparently absurd requirements, such as the injunction against certain types of foods (for example *Leviticus* 11:1ff.), on the other hand, required revelation because unaided reason would never discover them as the will of God. In this sense, the rational laws of the Torah are a crucial part of revelation because they inspire confidence in the inscrutable divine will that commands as well the nonrational prohibitions and injunctions of the Torah (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, III.3–5).

Reflection on the rationality of the Torah as a source of law, a characteristic leitmotif of the Jewish philosophical tradition since the time of Sa'adia, reached its high point in the work of Maimonides. An Aristotelian critic of the Kalam, Maimonides argued for the complete rational intelligibility of all of the laws of the Torah. He did so both by philosophical argument and jurisprudential demonstration. Maimonides' great codification of the *halakhah*, discussed above, demonstrated the rational integrity and complete harmony of the entire body of written and oral Torah. By contrast, Maimonides' principal philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*, offered a powerful defense of the rationality of the Torah as a guide to the perfection of human beings as creatures of God. He rejected earlier distinctions, such as those of Sa'adia, between rational and nonrational commandments, arguing instead for the conceptual cogency of the entire system of revealed law as developed in the oral Torah. Acknowledging that the rationality of some commandments was more immediately clear than others, he insisted that the Torah's law

remains the most complete and incomparable disclosure of the divine will in human language (*Guide of the Perplexed* III:26-28).

When thinking about the ontological dimension of the Torah, thinkers such as SaDadia and Maimonides hesitated to subscribe to the idea of the Torah as a pre-existent ontological principle that pervaded creation. In their view, to speak of the Torah pre-existing the world was tantamount to questioning the fundamental belief that God created the world from nothing. Torah could reflect, as law, the mind and will of God, but it could not be conceived as something co-eternal with God. This type of ontological thinking about Torah, in fact, became characteristic of the qabbalistic tradition, a distinctly anti-philosophical movement of Spanish and southern French pietists that began to take shape in the eleventh through thirteenth centuries.

Qabbalists such as Rabbi Todros Abulafia (1220-1298, writing in *'Otsar Hakavod*, to *Shabbat* 28b), tended to reject as hubris the Maimonidean idea that the human mind could justify divine commandments through the exercise of reason. All of the 613 commandments—the reasonable as well the absurd—were profound mysteries fulfilling some hidden purpose in the economy of creation. In qabbalistic thought, which reprised certain neo-Platonic themes that had originally inspired Jewish philosophers as well, thinking about the Torah as law and ontological principle was, in fact, elegantly combined. The pioneering Talmudist, biblical interpreter, and qabbalist Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (“Nahmanides,” 1194-1270), asserted in the introduction to his commentary on the Torah that the Torah is nothing less than the being of God in linguistic form, a series of divine names. Reflecting such conceptions, writers such as Azriel of Gerona (early thirteenth century) conceived the 613 commandments of the halakhic tradition metaphorically as the “limbs” of God, each limb corresponding to an appropriate human limb for which that commandment was destined (*Per. Ag.*, 37). On this view, the “reason” for the commandments had nothing to do with rational justification of the divine will. Rather, a Jew's performance of commandments according to their halakhic prescriptions effected a communication of being between God and his creatures (for example, *Zohar* II: 165b). The *Zohar*, a canonical expression of thirteenth-century Qabbalah, expressed this principle as a kind of axiom: “Three dimensions of being are bound up with each other—the Blessed Holy One, Torah, and Israel” (*Zohar* III:73a). That is to say, Torah is at one and the same time a system of law and the root of all existence. By enacting the law, Israel unifies the limbs of God into their ideal configuration, thus bringing blessing to the world (*Zohar* II:85b).

The qabbalistic unification of Torah as law with Torah as a principle of being proved immensely influential. The Jewish philosophical tradition, which had never engaged more than a relatively small minority of Jews, would essentially die out by the sixteenth century. But from the thirteenth century onward, qabbalistic ideas transmitted in the *Zohar* and by its exegetical interpreters came to dominate much of the rabbinic intellectual leadership. Indeed, one of the last great Jewish philosophers, Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410), was himself deeply sympathetic to the Qabbalah's insistence that the Torah could not be comprehended by human rationality. Qabbalistic perspectives on Torah are also represented in the writings of later intellectual leaders,

such as Rabbi Isaac Abarbanel (1437-1508), Rabbi Moses Alshekh (c. 1590), Rabbi Haim Vital (1542-1620), the Maharal of Prague (Rabbi Judah Loewe ben Betsalel: 1525-1609) and the Vilna Gaon (Rabbi Elijah ben Solomon: 1720-1797). The writings of Rabbi Haim Vital and the Maharal were particularly influential in the development of Eastern European Hasidism, a revivalist movement founded in the eighteenth century. The idea of Torah as an ontological principle of being is richly represented in the early Hasidic writings of such influential masters as Rabbi Shne'ur Zalman of Liady (1745-1813), author of *Tanya*, and Rabbi Menahem Nahum of Chernobyl (1730-1797), the author of MeDor *'Enayim*.

TORAH AS A RECORD OF JEWISH MORAL AND HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE. In the contemporary world it is still possible to find communities of Jews remaining ideologically committed to stenographic conceptions of the revelation of the Torah. For the most part, such Jews structure their behavior exclusively in light of the oral Torah's halakhic tradition as defined in the *Shulhan 'Arukh*, and regard the Torah as a creative principle at the heart of reality. But they consider themselves—and are so considered by most other Jews—as ultraorthodox rejectionists, opposed to all influences of Western civilization upon Judaism. Accordingly, their intellectual impact upon the thought of Jews more accepting of modern civilization has tended to be minimal. Of far greater influence in most forms of contemporary Jewish thinking about the Torah are intellectual traditions that emerged in the context of modern European Protestant religious thought and went on to shape much of the intellectual style of modernity. These include in particular an ethical universalism associated with the philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), a romantic focus on personal religious experience stemming from the work of the theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), and an idealist search for the patterns of historical development that achieved influential formulation in the philosophy of G. W. F. Hegel (1770-1831).

These traditions stand behind three fundamental shifts in Jewish thinking about the Torah in the past two centuries. The first, inspired by Kant, is the shift from conceiving Torah as a legal instrument requiring absolute obedience to conceiving it as a source of eternal moral values and ethical norms. Thinkers following in this tradition include, among others, Moritz Lazarus (1824-1903), Hermann Cohen (1842-1918), and Leo Baeck (1873-1956), all of whom found the essence of Judaism to be in the Torah as the first historical expression of ethical monotheism. The Torah remains essential, in this view, as an ongoing inspiration to moral seriousness and universal ethical concern on the part of the Jewish people. The ritual and civil laws of the Torah are no longer literally binding upon Jews, although the ethical values informing them abide.

The second shift, inspired by Schleiermacher, moves the traditional notion of revelation in the direction of personal subjectivity, transforming the giving of the Torah from an historical event to a moral and psychological experience. For much of modern Jewish religious thought, the Torah is conceived as a written record of the profound personal religious

experiences enjoyed by Israel's prophets and still retrievable for the modern reader through the proper interpretation of the text. A brilliant and influential exponent of this view was Abraham Geiger (1810-1874), the founder of Reform Judaism. In the middle of the twentieth century, the existentially oriented philosophical and hermeneutical writings of Martin Buber (1878-1965) brought this theme to the attention of a wide audience. Buber focused upon revelation as the matrix of an I-Thou relationship with God as the Eternal Thou. He was famous for insisting that the laws of the Torah could only constitute revelation if they were subjectively experienced as commandments by the individual.

Finally, the third shift involves a revision of the relationship of the Torah to historical and cultural processes. Classically, the Torah is transhuman and originates with God. For most modern Jewish thinkers, the Torah—both as a collection of texts and as a system of values—is a tradition that developed in accord with historical processes and under a variety of cultural influences. This shift can ultimately be traced back to the influence of Hegel's notion of history as the temporal unfolding of an eternal Absolute Spirit that would eventually come, through the dialectical patterns intrinsic to the logic of its own being, to a complete self-consciousness of itself. This conception was first applied to the history of Judaism by Nahman Krochmal (1785-1840). He viewed the Torah in dialectical terms as both the product of historical Jewish experience and the eternal, ideal structure of that experience. The influential writings of the twentieth-century philosopher Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) take issue with much of Hegelian idealism, but remain deeply committed to the concept of the eternity of the Torah as a unique structure of Jewish being and consciousness. Rosenzweig's interchange of letters with Buber over the nature of the Torah's commandments as revelation remains a crucial signpost in the history of modern Jewish thinking about the Torah.

Throughout the twentieth century, modern Jewish religious thought in the United States, Europe, and the State of Israel has elaborated upon the Torah as a source of Jewish ethics, a record of Jewish religious insight, and a product of Jewish historical and cultural experience. For the most part, this conversation has proceeded without the contribution of those Jews, mostly of Eastern European and Middle Eastern origin, who for a variety of reasons have rejected modern culture in principle. A singular exception is Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik (1903-1992), descendant of a prestigious family of Lithuanian Talmudists, and the principal mid-twentieth-century exponent of modern Orthodox Judaism. Fully conversant with the Kantian, Scheiermachiian, and Hegelian foundations of modern theology, Soloveitchik devoted himself to constructing a workable theory of the continued authority of the halakhic tradition of written and oral Torah over Jewish life. For Soloveitchik, the halakhic tradition embodies an historically given and existentially grounded mode of human consciousness. Intellectual mastery and scrupulous observance of Torah—paradigmatically, the tradition of received halakhic norms—enables Jews to transform their broken human existence in accordance with the ideal construct of human personhood imagined for all humanity at the time of creation.

At the beginning of the twentieth-first century, Torah continues to occupy a central place in Jewish religious discourse. All of the traditional themes of modern Jewish conceptions of the Torah—the ethical, the personalist, and the historicist—have their exponents and these conceptions continue to be refined in both popular and academic writings. A potentially significant development in more recent decades is the emergence of an explicitly “postmodernist” style of Jewish thought inspired by developments in European philosophy and literary studies associated with a movement known as “Deconstruction.” Emanuel Levinas (1905-1995), the French author of both philosophical works and Talmudic commentaries, has been influential in this trend, particularly among American thinkers. The principle tendency of Jewish postmodernism is to expose the ideological underpinnings of the primary pillars of modern thought in general—its claim to ethical ultimacy and historically comprehensive vision. By depriving modern thought of its absolute authority over values and visions of the past, Jewish postmodernists have begun to experiment with new ways of engaging the texts of Torah—broadly conceived now as the entire sum of texts that disclose dimensions of Jewish existence. It remains to be seen how these new ways of reading will influence Jewish conceptions of Torah in coming decades.

TORAH STUDY AS A FORM OF JUDAIC PIETY. A famous rabbinic text included in the rabbinic ritual for daily morning blessings concludes its list of praiseworthy acts with the phrase “and the study of Torah overrides all of them” (*talmud torah keneged kulam*: P.T., *Pe’ah* 1:1). This phrase summarizes the centrality of Torah study in rabbinic Judaism. To a certain degree the study of the Torah of Moses is given a high evaluation in a variety of Second Temple-period Jewish settings (compare *Psalms* 119, Preface to the *Wisdom of ben Sira*, and *Rule of the Community*, QS 6:6-8). But in rabbinic Judaism, which coalesced over a century after the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 CE, Torah study came to occupy a new role. It was conceived as a form of piety which, on a par with formal public worship, substituted for the vanished sacrificial service performed in ancient times by the Jerusalem priesthood (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 16b). Both activities were regarded by sages as world-sustaining acts which, like sacrifice itself, drew divine energy into the world and ensured its being (for example, M. *Avot* 1:2). Indeed, it is not uncommon for rabbinic sages to suggest that Torah study may be even more important than prayer and performance of other commandments as a form of sacrificial worship (for example, Babylonian Talmud, *Qiddushin* 40b). Like public prayer, however, *talmud torah* was conceived by rabbinic sages as a paradigmatically male form of divine service (Babylonian Talmud, *Qiddushin* 29a). Accordingly, for most of the history of rabbinic Judaism, Torah study has been primarily a male activity, deemed crucial in the shaping of masculine Jewish identity.

The character of Torah study in classical rabbinic times can be inferred from careful study of the surviving rabbinic literature. It is clear, first of all, from the remarkable facility of midrashic literature in finding the most obscure biblical texts to make an exegetical point, that many rabbinic sages had full recall of virtually the entire canon of the written Torah. Indeed, a

common form of Palestinian rabbinic entertainment included competitions in stringing the most impressive list of biblical verses under specific themes (P.T., *Hagigah* 2:2). The disciples of sages were also expected to master the emerging tradition of oral Torah. Whereas written versions of such crucial texts as the Mishnah may have circulated as early as the third century, the preferred way to study oral Torah was by hearing the text recited by a teacher or an official text-memorizer (Babylonian Talmud, *Gittin* 60b). Disciples would rehearse their oral texts prior to examination by a master, often using distinctive tunes (T. *Oh.* 16:8) or other mnemonic techniques (Babylonian Talmud, *Horayot* 12a) as an aid to memorization. The master would then review not only the orally-memorized text (Babylonian Talmud, *Eruv.* 54b), but engage the student in extemporaneous analysis of the text in comparison with other texts on connected themes (Babylonian Talmud, *Bava Qam.* 117a).

The rabbinic disciple-communities of late antiquity were rather small circles associated with individual sages. Torah study in this setting was, therefore, part of an evolving relationship between teacher and student. In medieval times the expansion of the rabbinic community and the consequent production of written compendia of the Talmudic tradition engendered important changes in the character of Torah study. Large institutionalized schools of rabbinic education (*yeshivot*; singular *yeshivah*) were created and the study of a fixed text, often encountered primarily in written form, began to replace the process of oral memorization. By the tenth century, written commentaries by especially influential masters (for example, Rabbi Hanan'el ben Hushi'el of Kairouan, Rashi of Troyes) began to circulate in manuscript copies as part of the Torah curriculum and came as well to be regarded as part of the oral Torah.

The emergence of print technology in the late fifteenth century was embraced by rabbinic authorities as providential, for it enabled the wide dissemination of both the written and the oral Torah in uniform formats that transcended local textual differences and scribal practices. The expansion of profound Talmudic scholarship in sixteenth- through seventeenth-century Eastern Europe was in part enabled by the production of printed copies of rabbinic literature for use in the great yeshivot. Thanks to printers, the prodigious memories encouraged by Talmudic learning were aided by the production of text editions in which identical, clearly printed words could be found on the exact same page of hundreds of copies of a given rabbinic work throughout the Jewish world. Whereas this premium on memorization led at times to a rather arid academicism, various educational reforms renewed rigorous conceptual analysis of Talmudic discourse under various pedagogical theories until well into the nineteenth century.

The premium on memorized mastery of the written text and its commentaries, in conjunction with distinct methodological approaches derived from nineteenth- and twentieth century innovators, continues to be the distinguishing trait of *yeshivah*-grounded Torah study in contemporary Orthodox and Hasidic centers of Torah study throughout the world. Curricula vary depending upon the specific ideological commitments of distinct communities. For example classical Hasidic sources are not commonly taught in yeshivot founded by anti-Hasidic authorities. Nevertheless, the core of contemporary Torah study remains the Babylonian Talmud

and the commentaries printed on its margins and in the appendices to each printed volume. Closely associated with study of the Talmud is careful analysis of the traditional medieval codes, particularly those of Maimonides, Rabbi Jacob ben Asher, and Rabbi Joseph Caro, with their panoply of associated commentaries and supercommentaries. A recent innovation in many contemporary *yeshivot* is the inclusion within the curriculum of explicitly theological studies (*hashqafah*). Examples might include the more philosophical passages of Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah*, works of classical Qabbalah, or works of ethical self-scrutiny stemming from the nineteenth-century Musar movement founded by Rabbi Israel Salanter (1786-1866).

Among contemporary Jews, the primacy of Torah study as a Judaic religious value is felt even beyond the circles of traditional yeshivot. The explosion of electronic media and an ongoing industry in the translation of classical Judaica into a variety of languages has enabled the creation of novel settings for popular as well as advanced Torah study. Similarly, the revolutionary achievements of feminism in Western culture have affected most Jewish communities. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, Torah study was made widely available to women in the more liberal religious denominations. Most recently, certain Orthodox communities in both the United States and the State of Israel have experimented with opening advanced Torah study to women.

Contemporary Jewish communities of any size will have multiple outlets for the study of Jewish history and tradition at diverse levels in synagogues or community centers. Many of these, based upon Western educational models, take the form of classes for children and adults on various themes and include the study of the written and oral Torah in the original languages and in accessible translations. Whereas such contexts do not yet provide the comprehensive technical mastery and ideological *élan* of Orthodox *yeshivot*, they testify to the continued significance of Torah study as a form of Jewish identification.

TORAH SCROLL AS AN OBJECT OF RITUAL DEVOTION. The Torah in Judaism is more than a subject of study. The scroll of the Torah, read aloud in the synagogue liturgies of the Sabbath, holy days, and at other prescribed occasions, is Judaism's most important ritual object. It is invested with a numinous quality—*qedushah* ("holiness")—which, like other ritual objects described in the anthropological studies of tribal cultures around the world, is conceived both as a source of charisma and as something deeply vulnerable to violation. The *qedushah* invested in the scroll must therefore be protected. This protection is afforded by ritual activities that surround all aspects of its handling.

The ritualization of the scroll begins even prior to its first use in public synagogue worship. Complex halakhic requirements surround every stage of its creation. These govern the preparation of the hides and inks used by the scribe, the shapes of the letters used in writing, the spellings of the words in the text, and the paragraphing of textual units. The scribe, who must copy the text letter-by-letter from another suitable scroll, will have rinsed his hands prior to setting to work to ensure the requisite degree of bodily purity. Women whose menstrual cycles

render them ritually unclean for certain periods of each month may not serve as scribes for this reason.

Once it is ready for use, a Torah scroll must still be protected from defilement through contact with sources of impurity, including the hands of synagogue worshipers. The means of protecting the scroll also serve a second function of drawing attention to and beautifying it. It is wrapped in a finely made, embroidered sheath or case. Often it will be adorned as well with finely wrought silver crowns and breastplates. Thus protected from random touching, the scroll is stored in a specially designed, ornate cabinet at the very front of the synagogue. This cabinet is normally called the *'aron haqodesh* ("the holy ark") and recalls the box in which Moses placed the stone tablets that represented the covenant between Israel and God.

The formal liturgy of reading the Torah in public is also deeply enmeshed in ritual performances. These call to mind the charismatic *qedushah* of the scroll and, at the same time, assimilate the empirical, existing scroll in the synagogue to the Torah of Moses revealed on Sinai and stored in the original holy ark. When, at the appropriate liturgical moment, the ark is opened, the entire congregation must rise to attention, as if royalty had entered the room. At this point the worshippers recite in unison a verse from the Torah: "And when the Ark began to move, Moses said: Arise, O Lord, and scatter your enemies, and may those who hate you flee from before you" (*Numbers* 10:35). The scroll is then borne around the synagogue in a solemn procession accompanied by the singing of texts from the book of Psalms. During this procession, worshippers engage in formal acts of adoration— particularly, touching the sheath with a prayer shawl or prayer book, and kissing the place on the shawl or book that touched the Torah. At the end of the procession, the scroll is brought to a reading table, usually in the front of the congregation or in its very midst. It is carefully removed from its sheath and placed on the table, covered by a protecting cloth.

The actual reading of the Torah, commencing at this point, is equally surrounded by ritual performances. Depending upon the occasion, anywhere from three to seven congregants will be honored with an "ascent" (*'aliyah*) to the Torah. The term ascent intentionally recalls Moses ascent to Sinai. During these ascents a preselected passage will be read aloud, normally by a professional reader. Each person who ascends to the Torah recites, before and after the reading, a benediction of thanks to God for the privilege of having received the Torah. During the reading, the reader keeps track of the text with a silver or wood pointer (*yad*), so as to avoid touching the scroll. At the conclusion of the final ascent, the Torah, now unfurled to expose a minimum of three columns of its text, is raised high in the hands of a designated congregant. At this the congregation points to the scroll and intones the following formula from the Torah itself (*Daniel* 4:44): "This is the Torah which Moses placed before the children of Israel at Gods command, by Moses hand." The scroll is then rolled, returned to its sheath, and carried in a second adoration procession back to its storage place in the ark.

Like all sacred objects, Torah scrolls can become defiled and disqualified for liturgical use (*pasul*). For example, constant use over the years may cause ink to chip from the scroll, rendering a word illegible. This is sufficient to prevent the scroll from being read until the ink is restored by a duly qualified scribe. Tears in the parchment and other minor repairs may also be made to restore the scroll to service. But if a scroll suffers massive irreparable damage—as in a fire or other disaster—the scroll is retired from use. In some communities, a defiled scroll is afforded the honor due to a human corpse and buried. In others it is stored in a special storage area (*Genizah*) with other damaged books that contain the divine name and, therefore, cannot be intentionally destroyed.

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