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GUIDE TO TEXTS

The World Union of Jewish Students (WUJS)

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The Guide To Texts

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Jewish Students.**

From the Chairperson

Dear Reader

Welcome to the *Guide to Texts*. This introductory guide to Jewish texts is written for students who want to know the difference between the Midrash and Mishna, Shulchan Aruch and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch. By taking a systematic approach to the obvious questions that students might ask, the *Guide to Texts* hopes to quickly and clearly give students the information they are after.

Unfortunately, many Jewish students feel alienated from traditional texts due to unfamiliarity and a feeling that Jewish sources don't 'belong' to them. We feel that Jewish texts ought to be accessible to all of us. We ought to be able to talk about them, to grapple with them, and to engage with them. Jewish texts are our heritage, and we can't afford to give it up.

Jewish leaders ought to have certain skills, and ethical values, but they also need a certain commitment to obtaining the knowledge necessary to ensure that they aren't just leaders, but *Jewish* leaders. This *Guide* will ensure that this is the case.

Learning, and then leading, are the keys to Jewish student leadership. Lead on!

Peleg Reshef

WUJS Chairperson

How to Use *The Guide to Jewish Texts*

Many Jewish students, and even Jewish student leaders, don't know the basics of Judaism and Jewish texts. This *Guide* is a simple and accessible attempt to allow those who want to learn some of these basics to start finding answers.

The Guide to Jewish Texts is divided into nine parts. Each part asks the same questions about one Jewish text or other, be it Torah, Mishnah, or Midrash. These questions include: What is it? Where does it come from? Who wrote it down? What do we *do* with it? What language is it in? What does it look like? Finally, for English language readers, 'How can I read a copy?' These questions, answered simply and systematically, allow readers to quickly find out the basic facts about the major Jewish texts. *The Guide to Jewish Texts* won't teach anybody Talmud, but it will teach them what the Talmud is.

The Guide to Jewish Texts was originally written in England, for AJ6. Our hearty thanks go to them for allowing us to spread this resource worldwide. Because *The Guide* was written elsewhere, sometimes the approach isn't exactly as it would be at WUJS. This tends to be minimal, and we sincerely hope it won't prevent enjoyment of this top-quality resource.

The idea of "*WUJS Activate*" is to provide resource materials and activities to assist Jewish students worldwide. This edition of *Activate* is designed to allow students to learn some of the basics of Jewish literacy that will give them the confidence to become better teachers, and happier Jews. At present, it has only been made available online.

As with all the other WUJS "Activates," this issue is also available on the WUJS web site: www.wujs.org.il, both as a printable file and as separate files.

Please contact us with any feedback, suggestions and ideas that you may have.

Good luck.

Joby Blume

WUJS

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Why this Guide?

Jewish texts are the lifeblood of the Jewish people. Jewish life cannot be understood without understanding the texts which are the basis for all that we do as Jews. Prayer, study, debate - all of these are based around our texts. Today, we live in a time when many of us do not know the basics of our own cultural heritage. We do not know what the books of Jewish life are, what they look like, or how to read them. Hillel and Shammai are strangers to us - we have not met them. When we sit in synagogue we may feel embarrassed or alienated. We do not know where to turn to ask the questions that people all seem to know the answers to.

We feel intimidated and afraid by our own lack of knowledge.

Many of us have been involved in Jewish education for years. Yet we manage to avoid asking the fundamental questions. We become expert on Jewish history, on Israel, on Jewish politics. Yet still we do not know what the Talmud is, what Rabbi Akiva is life, and (most importantly) where to go to start becoming knowledgeable about texts. We are upset when we meet children who can read what we can't read, who know what we don't know.

As Jews, we have not yet learnt to read and write.

SHOULD YOU WISH TO KNOW THE SOURCE - CHAIM NACHMAN BIALIK

Should you wish to know the Source,
From which your brothers drew...
Their strength of soul...
Their comfort, courage, patience, trust,
And iron might to bear their hardships
And suffer without end or measure?

And should you wish to see the Fort
Wherein your fathers refuge sought.
And all their sacred treasures hid,
The refuge that has still preserved
Your nation's soul intact and pure
And when despised, and scorned, and scoffed,
Their faith they did not shame?

And should you wish to see and know
Their Mother, faithful, loving, kind
Who...sheltered them and shielded them.
And lulled them on her lap to sleep?

If you, my brother, know not
Then enter now the House of God,
The House of study, old and gray,
Throughout the scorching summer days
Throughout the gloomy winter nights,
At morning midday or at eve...
And there you may still behold,
A group of Jews from the exile who bore the yoke of its burden
who forget their toil,
through a worn out page of the *Talmud*.

And then your heart shall guess the truth,
That you have touched the sacred ground
Of a great people's house of life.
And that your eyes do gaze upon
The treasure of a nation's soul.

MIDRASH RABBAH VEYIKRA, 19:2

What does the unwise person say? "Who can learn the *Torah*? The section *Nezikin* [Damages] by itself is thirty chapters long! The section *Kelim* [Vessels] by itself is thirty chapters long!" What does the wise person say? "I will study two laws today and another two tomorrow until I have learned the entire *Torah*"

Tanach

The *Tanach* is what many would call the Bible (or Christians would call the Old Testament). Don't confuse the *Tanach* with the *Torah*, which is a constituent part of the *Tanach*.

The word *Tanach* is an acronym based on its three constituent parts: *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings). The *Torah*, *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings) are separate compilations of works (24 in number) that are often published together (i.e. as the *Tanach*)

The *Torah*, *Nevi'im* and *Ketuvim* are detailed below.

Torah

What is it?

Torah literally means "Teaching". The *Torah* is the central 'teaching' of Judaism. The *Torah* consists of the 'Five Books of Moses':

Bereshit (Genesis)

Shemot (Exodus)

Vayikra (Leviticus)

Bamidbar (Numbers)

Devarim (Deuteronomy)

The *Torah* is printed as the first part of the *Tanach*. The *Torah* is often called the *Chumash*. This comes from the Hebrew word for five, '*chamesh*'; because there are five books of *Torah*. Similarly, the English term for the *Chumash*, Pentateuch, is derived from the Greek '*penta*' (meaning 'five') and '*teuch*' (meaning 'book'). A *Torah* scroll in synagogue - the *Sefer Torah* - contains the text of the *Torah* (or Five Books of Moses).

All Jews acknowledge the *Torah* as the most important writing that we have. The word *Torah* is in fact often used to refer to the whole body of Jewish religious texts and teachings - from the earliest writings to a book written today. This dual usage can be confusing, but it is usually easy enough to tell if somebody is referring to the book/scroll, or to the whole of Jewish teachings.

What is it about?

As a narrative, it starts with the story of Creation and ends with the death of Moses, just before the entry to the Land of Israel. However, it is important straight away to say two things:

1. that the *Torah* doesn't just contain narrative. Whole sections (especially in the book *Vayikra*) deal with laws and commandments;
2. that every single letter is considered important, and has meaning beyond the narrative.

Bereshit (Genesis) starts with two accounts of Creation, Adam and Eve, and Noah. It then continues in chronological order through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (the Patriarchs). It then goes on to tell the story of Jacob's sons and especially of Joseph, his life in Egypt, and then concludes with Joseph's death in Egypt.

Shemot (Exodus) describes the slavery of the Jews in Egypt, and of their redemption under Moses. It describes the leaving of Egypt, and the Revelation at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments and many other laws, and the details of the building of the Sanctuary in the Wilderness are to be found in *Shemot*.

Vayikra (Leviticus) contains laws and only a small amount of narrative. In *Vayikra*, God tells Moses to explain the laws on Priesthood, sacrifices, purity, and certain civil and criminal laws.

Bamidbar (Numbers) describes how the Jews continued their journey through the Wilderness. It tells of the twelve spies, and the subsequent wanderings of the Jews. *Bamidbar* ends with the Jews at the borders of the Promised Land, forty years after leaving Egypt.

Devarim (Deuteronomy) contains a review of the *Torah*, and Moses' parting words to the Children of Israel prior to his death. It also contains further laws. The final chapter describes Moses' death.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

There is obviously controversy amongst different streams of Judaism and Jewish thought about the origin of the *Torah*. The traditional view is that the *Torah* is the word of God, communicated to and written down by Moses. This view holds that all of the *Torah* up until Revelation at Mount Sinai (i.e. until the middle of *Shemot*) was written down by Moses. There is then debate about when Moses wrote the rest of the *Torah*. The issue is that if Moses wrote it all down whilst on Mount Sinai he would have known what would happen next! Some

think that Moses wrote the rest of the *Torah* as it happened, in stages; some believe that Moses did write it all on Mount Sinai. All agree that it had all been written by just after the death of Moses. Joshua is thought by some to have written the last few verses of the *Torah*, dealing with Moses' death.

What does it look like?

The *Torah* text (as written meticulously by a scribe) is different from the *Chumash* (or *Tanach*) text.



The *Torah* scroll does not contain chapter divisions (e.g. Numbers 13:2). These were added later by Christian scholars, but are used in the *Chumash* printed editions as a universal reference tool. They don't refer to anything fundamental in the text - from a Jewish point of view. Unlike the *Chumash*, The *Torah* scroll doesn't contain vowels or cantillation (singing) marks. The cantillation marks are used to allow *leining* (singing) from the *Torah* in a prescribed manner.

In what language is it written?

The *Torah* is written in Hebrew. This Biblical Hebrew is a very old Hebrew, and is different from more recent dialects (eg. Mishnaic or modern Hebrew). This difference is similar in kind and degree to Shakespearean and modern English. Hence Israelis can read and understand the *Torah* like English people can read and understand (or not) Shakespeare.

What do we do with it?

In synagogue...

"For it was taught: 'And they went three days in the wilderness and found no water (Exodus 25:22)'. Upon which those who expound verses metaphorically said: Water means nothing but Torah, as it says: 'Ho, everyone that thirsts should come for water (Isaiah 55:1)'. It thus means that as they went three days without Torah they immediately became exhausted." - Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Baba Kama 82a.

The *Torah* is read in public on three different days of each week. It is read on Shabbat morning and afternoon (at the *Shacharit* and *Minchah* services), Monday morning (at the *Shacharit* service) and on Thursday morning (again at *Shacharit*). Thus there is never a gap of more than three days between public readings of the *Torah*.

The sages divided the *Torah* into 54 portions to allow for a completion in an annual public reading. These portions are called *sidrot*. Each week, a different *sidra* is read in synagogue. (Because there are 54 *sidrot*, some weeks two *sidrot* are read.) On festivals, two special selections from the *Torah* relevant to that day are read.

The word *parasha* is often used to mean *sedra*, but this is a misnomer. Technically a *parasha* is a paragraph marked by an indent on a midline blank space in the *Torah* scroll. *Parashot* can be as short as a sentence and as long as an entire *sidra*.

Each *sidra* is divided into seven *aliyot* (points at which someone from the congregation makes a blessing on the *Torah*, commonly known as "call ups"). These *aliyot* are decided by convention, based on natural spaces in the text. These can be seen in the *Torah* itself, although they are also made with reference to the content of the passages. On Saturday afternoon, Monday, and Thursday, the first *aliyah* (call up, or division of the *sidra*) for the following Shabbat is read - but three people are given the honour of reading it. The first *aliyah* is therefore subdivided into smaller units for use on three days of the week (these smaller units are still called *aliyot* though!) Four people are called to the *Torah* on *Rosh Chodesh* (the New Month), five - for major festivals (*Pesach*, *Shavout*, *Succot*, *Rosh Hashanah*) and six are called to the *Torah* on *Yom Kippur*.

On *Shabbat*, at least seven people are called to the *Torah*. It is possible to divide the *Torah* reading into more parts to let more people share in the honour of being called to read it, but whatever happens, the entire *Parasha* must be read on Shabbat morning.

Everyday use...

The *Torah* is studied extensively, and is the basis for all Jewish learning. That is why the *Torah* is read in public - to make sure that Jews are learning it. *Torah* is taught in Jewish schools and synagogues.

There is a custom of reading one division of the *sidra* each day of the week, so that each week the entire *sidra* is learnt. There are a number of different ways to learn the '*Parashot HaShavua*' (which literally means 'the weekly *sidra*') - by classes or reading. Study of *Torah* at home, on the way to work, during leisure time etc. is part of the lifestyle of many Jews. The *Torah* is one of the most extensively studied Jewish texts.

If I want to read it..

Purchase or borrow a copy of the *Torah*, or *Chumash*. The best editions will have easy to read English and a lot of commentaries. The commentaries are the comments of scholars that make interesting points about the *Torah* text. Reading commentaries is easy and adds a lot of depth to your understanding. Just sit down, maybe start at *Bereshit* (the first book of Moses), and start to read. Or perhaps try to read the weekly *sidra* each week (perhaps an *aliya* each day). The editions of the *Chumash* that one usually finds in synagogue (Hertz or Soncino) have some commentaries on the text included. The Art Scroll edition is also highly recommended.

If you want to understand the themes and appreciate the depths of the *Torah*, perhaps try to read some other book alongside your *Chumash*. This is the sort of thing one might need to do when studying Shakespeare or Descartes in an attempt to really appreciate the text. One wouldn't just read Shakespeare, but a book about the play as well. You can subscribe to weekly newsletters or e-mails on the *sidra*. But remember, if you don't read the actual text first, your understanding will be limited (just like with Shakespeare).

Nevi'im (Prophets)

What is it?

'Moses was the greatest prophet, and there will never be another like him'. However there were other prophets who are thought to have communicated with God. *Nevi'im* is a collection of books about the lives and sayings of some of these prophets. *Nevi'im* consists of:

Yehoshua (Joshua)

Shoftim (Judges)

Shmuel (Samuel)

Melakhim (Kings)

Yeshayahu (Isaiah)

Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah)

Yechezqel (Ezekiel)

Trei Asar (Twelve Minor Prophets - Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habbakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi)

Nevi'im is the second section of the *Tanach*.

What is it about?

Nevi'im contains several third person biographical accounts of the lives of the prophets and accounts of prophesy. That is, the word of God spoken through the mouth of the prophet, in the prophet's own style. *Nevi'im* contains many powerful prayers, hymns, parables, indictments, sermons, letters, and pronouncements. Historically, *Nevi'im* narrates the history of the Jewish nation's entry into Israel under Joshua to the pre-Temple era of the Judges, Samuel, Saul, David, and the building of the First Temple. *Nevi'im* then continues to describe the era of the First Temple, and the warnings and exaltations of many prophets of Israel. *Nevi'im* ends with accounts of prophecies made at the time of the destruction of the First Temple.

The first books of *Nevi'im* are more historical in content. The later books are more poetic in style and often contain stark, ethical and spiritual warnings to the Jewish People.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

Different parts of *Nevi'im* were written down by different people. Some prophets wrote their own book down (e.g. Joshua wrote Joshua), others didn't. The full list is as follows:

Yehoshua (Joshua) was written down by Joshua

Shoftim (Judges) was written down by Samuel

Shemuel (Samuel) was written down by Samuel, Gad, and Natan.

Melakhim (Kings) was written down by Jeremiah

Yeshayahu (Isaiah) was written down by the men of Chizkiah, a King of Judah

Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) was written down by Jeremiah

Yechezqel (Ezekiel) and Trei Asar (Twelve Minor Prophets) were written down by the men of the Great Assembly in around 330-200 BCE

The traditional view of the relation of *Nevi'im* to God is that each book is divinely inspired. The words of the Prophets are the words of God - but the Prophets could "see" God as we can see through clouded glass. So the content of *Nevi'im* was either written by people who communicated with God, or records what these people did, or both. *Nevi'im* does not have the same status as *Torah*. This is because Moses is believed to have had a "clear" view of God - and so could literally write God's words.

What does it look like?

Mostly one will come across *Nevi'im* as part of the *Tanach*. It can also be obtained in separate books. In both it is written in standard Hebrew characters, with full vowels and punctuation. A very old copy of Yeshayahu (Isaiah) is displayed with the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is written in the fashion of the time - and so it looks similar to a *Torah* scroll, without vowels or punctuation. The styles changed to suit the readers.

What do we do with it?

Selections from *Nevi'im* are read publicly each *Shabbat* after the *sidra*. Each selection is known as a *HafTorah*. Each *HafTorah* reflects the themes contained in the *sidra* of that *Shabbat*. The custom of reading a *HafTorah* developed during the time of the Romans, when it was forbidden to study or teach *Torah*. The sages instead read selections from *Nevi'im* in public to remind people of the *Torah* portion that would have been read (and so studied) that week. This practice has been retained as a reminder of a time when we couldn't study *Torah*.

What language is it in?

Like the *Torah*, *Nevi'im* is in Biblical Hebrew. The language can be poetic in parts, rendering it both beautiful and complex.

If I want to read it...

Two highly recommended editions of *Tanach* are the Jerusalem Bible, which has very clear Hebrew and a good English translation, and the JPS *Tanach*, which has the best translation available. The *Nevi'im* section of the Jerusalem Bible, to give some idea of size, runs to almost 500 pages.

Artscroll publish a *Tanach* which contains a short commentary. This volume also contains some pictures, maps, and diagrams. It is also possible to buy individual Artscroll books with extensive commentaries.

The Hertz or Soncino *chumashim* provided in most synagogues also contain the *Haftorot* for each *sidra*. Reading the *HafTorah* of the week, or perhaps a larger amount, would give a good introduction to some of the themes of *Nevi'im*.

Ketuvim

What is it?

The *Ketuvim*, or writings, are a collection of individual stories, philosophical essays, songs and poems. It also contains a continuation of the historical narrative from the exile into Babylon until the return to the Land of Israel and the building of the Second Temple. Finally *Divrei Hayamim* (Chronicles) is a very brief summary of the entire narrative contained in the *Tanach*.

Ketuvim consists of:

Tehillim (Psalms)

Mishle (Proverbs)

Iyov (Job)

Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs)

Rut (Ruth)

Ekha (Lamentations)

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes)

Esther

Daniel

Ezra-Nechemiah

Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles)

Five of the books of *Ketuvim* are known as the *Hamesh Megillot* (Five Scrolls). These are *Shir HaShirim* (Song of Songs), *Rut* (Ruth), *Ekha* (Lamentations), *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes), and *Esther*.

Ketuvim is the last section of the *Tanach*.

What is it about?

As has already been noted, there is a great variety in the subject matter and styles amongst the books of *Ketuvim*. *Tehillim*, *Mishle*, and *Shir HaShirim* (Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs) are self-explanatory. *Ekha* (Lamentations) is a poetic lament about the destruction of the First Temple and the subsequent exile; *Kohelet* is a beautiful piece of philosophical prose dealing with some of the fundamental issues of life. *Iyov* (Job) is a philosophical story that deals with the question of faith after tragedy. *Rut* (Ruth) and *Esther* are stories, the former - about King David's great grandmother and her conversion to Judaism, the latter - the Purim story. *Daniel* and *Ezra-Nechemiah* continue the historical narrative. As mentioned above, *Divrei Hayamim* (Chronicles) is a summary of the historical narrative of the entire *Tanach*.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

Different books of *Ketuvim* are believed to have been authored by different people. The following list outlines the traditional view of who wrote down what:

Tehillim (Psalms) was written down by King David and Ten Elders.

Mishle (Proverbs) was written down by the men of Chizkiah, a king of Judah.

Iyov (Job) was written down by Moses.

Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) was written down by the men of Chizkiah, but composed by King David.

Rut (Ruth) was written down by Samuel.

Ekha (Lamentations) was written down by Jeremiah.

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) was written down by the men of Chizkiah, but composed by King David.

Esther was written down by the Men of the Great Assembly.

Daniel was written down by the Men of the Great Assembly.

Ezra-Nechemiah was written down by Ezra.

Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles) was written down by Ezra and Nechemia.

The books of *Ketuvim* are traditionally believed to have been divinely inspired. What this means varies from book to book, in some cases prophecy is considered to be the word of God, in others a poem or song is considered to have been inspired by God.

There was some debate amongst the sages about including certain books in *Ketuvim*. For example *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) was deemed by some to be too negative and depressing to be included. The status of other texts was also debated and some texts were considered to be "not quite right" in Jewish eyes. These books together compose the *Sefarim HaChitzonim* (External Books, or Apocrypha) - which have no religious value. Thus the process of deciding which books entered the *Tanach* was most definitely performed by humans - the sages of 1 CE.

What does it look like?

As with *Nevi'im*, *Ketuvim* is now mostly reproduced in standard punctuated Hebrew. One would imagine that the *Hamesh Megillot* (Five Scrolls - see above) would be consistently published as scrolls, at least to use for ceremonial purposes. This is not the case (with the exception of *Esther*), and they are usually used - like the rest of *Ketuvim* - from printed books. Mostly one will come across *Ketuvim* as part of the *Tanach*.

What do we do with it?

Each of the *Hamesh Megillot* are read on different occasions in the year.

Shir HaShirim (Song of Songs) is read on *Pesach*.

Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) is read on *Succot*.

Rut (Ruth) is read on *Shavuot*.

Ekha (Lamentations) is read on *Tisha B'Av*, the ninth day of Av.

Esther is read twice on *Purim*.

Tehillim (Psalms) are read on many different occasions throughout the year as a great many prayers are simply quotes from *Tehillim* (Psalms). In addition *Tehillim* are often printed in a *siddur* (daily prayer book). The rest of *Ketuvim* are printed in the *Tanach*, and are studied in much the same way the *Nevi'im* are.

What language is it in?

Ketuvim is written in Biblical Hebrew, except for the second half of *Daniel* and part of *Ezra* which are written in Aramaic. Much of the language is very beautiful and poetic.

If I want to read it...

Again, the JPS *Tanach* the Artscroll *Tanach* (which includes a short commentary) and the Jerusalem Bible are the recommended editions. Many parts of *Ketuvim* are stunningly poetic.

Tehillim (Psalms) are printed in many *siddurim* (daily prayer books), but here they are usually printed without translation. *Shir HaShirim*, *Kohelet*, and *Rut* are to be found in the *machzorim* (special festival prayer books) for the days they are read

Artscroll and others print single volume editions of the books of *Ketuvim*, with extensive commentaries

Mishnah

What is it?

The *Torah* requires interpretation and elucidation if it is to be put into practice. Such traditions of interpretation and practice became known as the Oral Law. After the destruction of the Second Temple, there was concern that the Oral Law would be lost. This led several rabbis to put together the *Mishnah* (which means 'teaching'). The *Mishnah* is therefore a snapshot in time (from around 200 CE) of the Oral Law.

The *Mishnah* consists of six sections or *sedarim* (orders). These are:

Zeraim (Seeds)

Moed (Occasions)

Nashim (Women)

Nezikin (Damages)

Kedoshim (Holy Things)

Taharot (Purity Issues)

Each of these *sedarim* is further divided into parts called tractates. The tractates are divided into chapters, and the sub-divisions of each chapter are called halachot.

What is it about?

The *sedarim* (orders) of the *Mishnah* are on the following topics:

Zeraim (Seeds) - deals with agriculture and prayer.

Moed (Occasions) - deals with Shabbat, festivals, and fasts.

Nashim (Women) - deals with infidelity, marriage, and divorce.

Nezikin (Damages) - deals with civil and criminal law, the government, and ethics.

Kedoshim (Holy Things) - deals with the Temple, sacrifices, and *kashrut*.

Taharot (Purity Issues) - deals with laws of ritual purity and impurity, including menstruation.

The content of the *Talmud* in general - and thus of the *Mishnah* too - can be divided in to two main parts - *Halachah* (literally "the way" ie. the Jewish way of living) and *Aggadah*. A very large amount of the *Mishnah* is thus given over to discussion of *Halachah* (Jewish law). *Aggadah* is the name given to a certain kind of writing (be it history, story, legend, allegory, scientific observation or such like) that is *not* legal or concerned with law.

Although the *Mishnah* isn't arranged as a commentary on the *Torah* or *Tanach* in general, much of the *Mishnah* does explain the *Tanach*, wherever there seem to be gaps in meaning or narrative. In a sense, the *Mishnah* is the first Jewish encyclopaedia.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

The *Mishnah* is the most important collection of the teachings of a group of scholars known as the *Tannaim*. These teachings had been passed down orally from generation to generation, and constituted much of the collective knowledge, teachings, and laws of the Jewish people at each time. The *Tannaim* lived between 400 BCE and 200 CE. The most famous *Tannaim* - and so some of the most prominent names of the *Mishnah* - include Hillel, Shammai, Gamliel, Akiva, and Yehuda HaNasi. Other collections of the statements of the *Tannaim* also exist (such as the *Tosefta*, *Baraitot*, and *Sifra*) but are not included in the *Mishnah*.

The collection of teachings that form the *Mishnah* was first arranged into six *sedarim* (orders) by Hillel, at the time of Herod (30 BCE - 20 CE). This system was improved upon by Akiva, and then by Meir. Finally, Yehuda HaNasi (Yehuda the Prince - head of the Jewish Community and rabbinic court) oversaw the writing down of the *Mishnah* in its present form, in the academy at Yavneh (near Ashdod) around 200 CE.

Some believe that the content of the *Mishnah* is Divinely inspired, and that the *Mishnah* was passed down from God to Moses on Sinai, and then relayed orally by Moses. This is a point of disagreement between differing streams of Judaism.

What do we do with it?

Primarily, the *Mishnah* is studied. As one of the most important collections of Jewish teachings, the *Mishnah* provides both a substantial guide to Jewish Law (*Halachah*) and insight into a Jewish way of seeing the world. The *Mishnah* can either be studied alone or, as is far more common, together with the *Gemara*.

Since the *Mishnah* is arranged by subject matter, it can be used to get a good overview of any subject.

What language is it in?

The *Mishnah* is in Hebrew. This Hebrew differs somewhat from that of the *Tanach* (Bible). By the time the *Mishnah* was composed, Aramaic dialects had supplanted Hebrew as the language of everyday life, and Hebrew had thus become a language employed only for legal and religious purposes. The Hebrew of the *Mishnah* thus contains new grammar and forms of

words as the language evolved according to the needs of those using it. The *Mishnah* is written like a concise legal text, similar in format to a telegram.

If I want to read it...

The *Mishnah* can be read in translation. The best edition is the Kehati edition - which prints Hebrew and English and also gives a commentary to explain the difficult language. The commentary is extensive, and so this edition is very large and expensive.

Danby has written a single volume translation of the *Mishnah*. It is very dry and fairly difficult to understand.

Since the *Mishnah* is fairly difficult to understand without commentary, it is easier to read the *Mishnah* together with the *Gemara*.

One relatively easy place to start study of *Mishnah* include Tractate *Pirkei Avot* - from *Seder Nezikin* (Damages), which is a fairly simple tractate, and is printed in full in many *siddurim* (daily prayerbooks). Other parts of the *Mishnah* might be attractive to someone with a specific interest - such as Tractate *Succah* (which relates basically to *Succot*) from *Seder Moed* (Occasions).

The Talmud

What is it?

The *Talmud* consists of two specific collections of texts - the *Mishnah* and the *Gemara*.

As the *Mishnah* is written in such precise and terse verse, the rabbis needed to discuss and analyse it. The *Gemara* is the collection of the rabbinic discussions about the *Mishnah* and other teachings of the *Tannaim* (scholars from 400 BCE - 200 CE), which took place for three hundred years after the *Mishnah* was written down (200-500 CE).

The *Gemara* is a commentary on the *Mishnah*, and the Babylonian and Jerusalem *Talmuds* contain two different commentaries on the *Mishnah*, each originating from a certain place (Babylon and Israel, not actually Jerusalem). Sometimes, the *Gemara* alone is called the *Talmud*, although strictly speaking this is not true as the *Talmud* also contains the *Mishnah*.

Talmud literally means 'study'. The *Talmud* embodies the labours, opinions, and teachings of the ancient Jewish scholars in expounding and developing the religious and civil laws of the Bible during a period of some eight centuries (from 300 BCE to 500 CE). There are two different versions of the *Talmud* - the *Talmud Bavli* (lit. Babylonian *Talmud*), and the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (lit. Jerusalem *Talmud*). Each of these are very long - the Babylonian *Talmud* is usually printed as twenty large volumes and the much smaller Jerusalem *Talmud* - as three large volumes. The two versions of the *Talmud* contain the same *Mishnah* (i.e. there is one *Mishnah*, common to both) but different *Gemara*. The *Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian *Talmud*) is the authoritative collection, and is usually what people refer to when they mention the *Talmud*. Not every *Masechet* (Tractate) of the *Mishnah* has a corresponding *Gemara* in both, or even either version of the *Talmud*. In general, the *Talmud Bavli* doesn't contain a *Gemara* on *Seder Zeraim* (Seeds) as this is about agriculture in the Land of Israel which was not discussed in detail in Babylon. *Seder Teharot* (Purity) also has no extensive *Gemara* as laws concerning purity were so important in everyday life that it didn't need to be written down.

Although the *Talmud*, strictly speaking, consists simply of the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*, if you look at a standard edition of the *Talmud* there are a lot of other commentaries and discussions printed in the book. Again, this is similar to some editions of a play by Shakespeare that may be printed with all sorts of explanations in the margins. The standard Vilna Edition of the *Talmud* is a little over a hundred years old.

If the *Torah* is the foundation of Jewish life, then the *Talmud* is the central pillar of Jewish study and thought.

What is it about?

The *Talmud* is ordered in the same way as the *Mishnah*, which is not surprising as it consists of the *Mishnah* and very extensive commentary on the *Mishnah* (the *Gemara*). Since the *Mishnah* deals mainly with matters of *Halachah* (Jewish Law), much of the *Talmud* is about exploring *Halachic* issues. However this is by no means exclusively what the *Talmud* is about.

The *Talmud* is a storehouse for information connected with the life, customs, beliefs, and superstitions of the Jews. It deals with issues as diverse as medicine, astronomy, commerce, agriculture, magic, botany, and zoology. The *Talmud* also gathers sayings and stories of the rabbis that are not directly connected to the *Mishnah*.

Because the main purpose of the *Talmud* is not to decide law but to decide what the truth is, it contains much material that doesn't have any obvious practical application.

The contents of the various *Masechtot* (Tractates) of the *Talmud* is as follows. As can be seen from merely a glimpse at the range of major topics, the *Talmud* covers an enormous scope of material.

Seder Zeraim (The Order 'Seeds')

Berachot (Blessings) is about various prayers and blessings.

Pe'ah (Corner, corner of the field) is about the laws of gifts to the poor, and charity.

Demai (Doubtful, doubtfully tithed) is about what to do with produce about which there is a doubt regarding if it is to be set aside for the poor.

Kilayim (Mixtures) is about laws regarding cross-breeding.

Shevi'it (Seventh, the Sabbatical Year) is about the laws of the Sabbatical Year, when fields must lie fallow and loans are cancelled.

Terumot (Contributions) is about the contributions to the Priests.

Ma'aserot (Tithes) is about contributions that were made to the Priestly assistants.

Ma'aser Sheni (Second Tithes) is about contributions that were made to the Priestly assistants, and assorted poor people.

Challah (Dough) is about the laws of separating a portion of dough before making bread to give to the Priests.

Orlah (Uncircumcised, "uncircumcised fruit") is about the prohibition against using fruit within three years of a tree being planted.

Bikkurim (First fruits) is about first-fruit offerings at the Temple.

Seder Moed (The Order 'Occasions')

Shabbat contains most of the laws governing *Shabbat*. In the Babylonian *Talmud*, it also contains a discussion of the laws of Chanukah.

Eruvin (Mergings) is about the boundaries within which one may walk and carry articles on *Shabbat*.

Pesachim (Paschal lambs, "Passover") is about the laws of Passover.

Shekalim (Shekels) is based around a discussion of the taxation levied for the running of the Temple service.

Yoma (The Day, "The Day of Atonement") deals mainly with the order of service in the Temple on *Yom Kippur*. It also deals with the *Yom Kippur* fast and prayer service.

Sukkah (Booth) is about building a *Sukkah*, and the Four Species used on *Succot* in prayer.

Betzah (Egg) is about the laws that apply to all festivals. It is named after the first word in the Tractate.

Rosh HaShanah is about the laws of fixing the date of the New Year, and of the calendar in general. It also deals with the *shofar*, and prayer service on *Rosh HaShanah*.

Ta'anit (Fast) deals with public fast days.

Megillah (Scroll) contains the laws for reading the *Megillat Esther* (the Scroll of Esther) and of *Purim* in general. Incidentally it deals with the laws of both reading and writing the *Torah* and other scrolls, the laws of prayer, and laws about synagogues.

Moed Katan (Minor Festival) discusses the laws of working on *Chol HaMoed* (the intermediate days of *Pesach* and *Succot*)

Chagigah (Festival Offering) deals with pilgrimages to the Temple.

Seder Nashim (The Order 'Women')

Yevamot (Sisters-in-Law) deals with the obligation to marry a widow of one's childless brother (levirate marriage), and forbidden sexual relations. It also deals with the laws of prohibited marriages and with conversion.

Ketuvot (Marriage Deeds) deals the laws of marriage deeds, rape, and seduction.

Nedarim (Vows) deals with laws containing vows.

Nazir (Nazarite) contains the laws of the Nazarite, one who temporarily abstains from drinking wine and cutting one's hair.

Sotah (A Woman suspected of Adultery by her Husband) is about the laws concerning a woman suspected of adultery. It is also about the Priestly Blessing and the laws of warfare.

Gittin (Bills of Divorce) deals with the arrangements for bills of divorce.

Kiddushin (Betrothals) deals with the ways in which people may be betrothed. It also deals incidentally with the commandments binding on men and women, and those only binding upon men.

Seder Nezikin (The Order 'Damages')

Bava Kamma (The First Gate) is about types of legal damage.

Bava Metzia (The Middle Gate) is about disputes over financial matters and property.

Bava Batra (The Last Gate) is about laws of partnership and inheritance.

Sanhedrin contains the laws of capital punishment, and judicial procedure in general. It also contains discussion of principles of faith and the afterlife.

Makkot (Lashes) clarifies the laws of corporal punishment and banishment.

Shevuot (Oaths) is about the various oaths administered in court, and by the Rabbis.

Eduyyot (Testimonies) is a collection of sayings on a wide variety of subjects.

Avodah Zarah (Idolatry) deals with idolatry and the restrictions regarding contact with non-Jews.

Avot (Fathers) is a collection of ethical sayings by the Rabbis.

Horayot (Decisions, rulings) deals with cases where the courts, Priests, or King made an error, and what they must do as penitence in such cases.

Seder Kedoshim (The Order 'Holy Things')

Zehavim (Animal Sacrifices) deals with animal sacrifices. It also contains an exhaustive discussion of the methods used to establish Jewish law.

Menachot (Meal Offerings) is about meal offerings. It also discusses the laws of *Tefillin* (phylacteries) and *Tzitzit* (ritual fringes).

Chullin (Ordinary, unhallowed) deals with the laws of Kashrut.

Bekhorot (Firstlings) is about laws concerning first-born animals and humans.

Arakhin (Valuations) is about the laws of dedicating things to be used for the Temple.

Temurah (Substitution) is about laws governing the substitution of one sacrifice for another.

Keritot (Excisions) is about sins which incur the punishment of excision (a special kind of Divine punishment)

Me'ilah (Sacrilage) is about the laws concerning the unlawful use of objects that have been consecrated in the Temple.

Tamid (Daily, 'daily sacrifices') contains the permanent laws of the Temple, and the arrangements for the daily service in the Temple.

Middot (Measurements) contains the plan of the Temple, with measurements.

Kinnim (Birds' nests, "pairs of sacrificial birds") deals with the sacrifice of birds.

Seder Teharot (The Order 'Purity')

Kelim (Vessels) is about the various forms of impurity of utensils.

Ohalot (Tents) discusses the ritual impurity of a tent containing a dead body.

Nega'im (Leprosy) contains the laws regarding leprosy.

Parah (Heifer) is about the laws of the Red Heifer, which was used to purify those made "impure" by a dead body.

Teharot (Purifications) contains general laws and principles of ritual impurity.

Mikvaot (Ritual Baths) contains the laws of ritual baths, including how they are to be constructed.

Niddah (Menstruating woman) deals with the ritual impurity of menstruating women, women who have bleeding not connected to their regular periods, and laws of ritual purity regarding a woman who has given birth.

Makhshirin (Preparations, predispositions) is about how foods can be made ritually impure by contact with certain liquids.

Zavim (Those suffering from secretions) deals with the laws of ritual impurity of those suffering from sexual diseases.

Tevul Yom (Immersed during the day) contains laws about at what time in the day one becomes ritually pure after immersing in a ritual bath.

Yadayim (Hands) contains laws about washing hands.

Uktzin (Stems, stalks) contains a discussion of the laws governing the susceptibility of fruit to ritual impurity.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

The *Talmud Bavli* (Babylonian *Talmud*) is a the collection of sayings and teachings of the *Amoraim*, in Babylon. The *Amoraim* is the name given to the generation of scholars responsible for the *Gemara*; the *Amoraim* lived between 200-500 CE. Most of the sayings of the *Amoraim* were needed to clarify the *Mishnah*. The assorted teachings of the Babylonian *Talmud* were compiled and written down in a process started by Rav Ashi and Rav Ina, in around 500 CE.

The *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem *Talmud*) is a similar collection of sayings and teachings, but of the scholars in Palestine. In effect, two separate communities of the time developed different intellectual traditions and explained the *Mishnah* in different ways. The Jerusalem

Talmud was written down approximately 100 years earlier than the Babylonian *Talmud*, in 400 CE.

Each *Talmud* is thus the recorded dialogue of generations of scholars of a certain place, edited together at a certain time to form a more complete discussion.

Like the *Mishnah*, the entire *Talmud* is believed to be Divinely inspired by some Jews. Again, as with the *Mishnah*, the same disagreements about the status of the entire *Talmud* exists.

What do we do with it?

The *Talmud* is a compendium of some of the main discussions concerning a Jewish world view. Although it is used as the key source material for establishing *Halachah* (Jewish Law), it is also much more than that. The *Talmud*, through its breadth and depth of material, links the key text of the *Torah* to the world.

It is important to know that the two *Talmuds* are not on an equal footing. The Babylonian *Talmud* is seen as authoritative. There are three main reasons for this. First of all the Babylonian *Talmud* was completed later, and so it addresses issues raised in the Jerusalem *Talmud*. Secondly the Babylonian *Talmud* is far more extensive than the Jerusalem *Talmud*, and this detail lends the work more weight. Lastly the Babylonian *Talmud* has a sharper and intellectually deeper approach. The difference in standing of the two *Talmuds* is so great that for most purposes, the Jerusalem *Talmud* is neglected.

The *Talmud* itself stresses that it is important to learn Jewish thought *for its own sake*, and this is borne out by the place of the *Talmud* in Jewish life. For hundreds of years, the *Talmud* has been the main source of material for Jewish learning. At age fifteen, many Jews start learning the *Talmud*, and continue this study for the rest of their lives. In Jewish places of learning throughout the world, the Babylonian *Talmud* is the text most commonly studied. It is because study of *Talmud* is not seen as merely a means to some end that minority opinions and entire arguments are recorded and learnt in the *Talmud*.

There is a custom to learn a page of *Talmud* (which is really a double page, or folio) each day. Called the *Daf Yomi* (Daily Page) system, hundreds of thousands of people around the world learn the same page of *Talmud* each day, completing the entire (Babylonian) *Talmud* in seven years.

Some passages from the *Talmud* are used in prayer

The *Halachah* (Jewish Law) is developed by using the *Talmud* as the starting text. Decisions on what to do in various situations are made by first examining the *Talmud*. Here, the later an opinion (which is known by who said it) the greater weight is given to it.

What language is it in?

The *Talmud* is mostly in Aramaic, but some Hebrew is used too. Throughout the *Talmud*, there are words and expressions borrowed from one language by the other.

Aramaic began as the language of the Aramean tribes but became the common tongue for many people of the Middle East after 100 CE.

The Aramaic of the Babylonian *Talmud* is Eastern Aramaic, which was spoken by the Jews of Babylon at the time. The Aramaic of the Jerusalem *Talmud* is Western Aramaic, which was spoken by the Jews of Palestine. The languages are similar to each other. Aramaic is also quite similar to Hebrew, and share common roots for many words.

If I want to read it...

The *Talmud* can be a very difficult work to study. The *Talmud* appears to have no internal order, and a strange logic all of its own. In parts, it is very complicated, and even experienced scholars have difficulty with it. On the other hand, some parts of the *Talmud* are more accessible, and yield entry into a Jewish way of thinking.

It is obviously very expensive to buy an enormous twenty volume Babylonian *Talmud* or even a three volume Jerusalem *Talmud*. A standard (Vilna) edition of the *Talmud* Bavli (Babylonian *Talmud*) in Aramaic (and Hebrew) today would cost upwards of \$750. An edition is available with much smaller print that costs around \$300, but is less comfortable to use. Luckily, almost all Jewish libraries contain a *Talmud*.

There are translations of the *Talmud* currently available. The best editions include the Soncino and the ArtScroll. Check before buying to see if the English translation is something that you feel comfortable with, as they can be difficult in places.

Steinsaltz is currently translating the *Talmud* into English. The English translation is actually based on his translation into Hebrew (from old Hebrew and Aramaic). As each Tractate is completed, it is published. The Steinsaltz *Talmud* contains a literal translation as well as a free translation. The free translation is very accessible. Steinsaltz also provides a very

thorough reading of the text, and this level of accuracy makes the Steinsaltz *Talmud* extremely dependable, which is important when each word is treated as vital and meaningful. The Steinsaltz *Talmud* is a wonderful way to learn *Talmud* for those who aren't comfortable in Hebrew and Aramaic. The Steinsaltz translation of the *Talmud* will fill over a hundred volumes, and each volume costs over twenty pounds.

No translation of the *Talmud* contains all of the extensive commentaries that are printed with the *Talmud* in the standard editions. The Steinsaltz translation does reproduce the most important commentary - that of Rashi - but is translated into simple Hebrew, not English.

Talmudic study is traditionally conducted in *Chevruta* (friendly learning pairs). *Chevruta* learning is done aloud, and is thought to aid understanding.

There are numerous classes in synagogues and other places based around the *Talmud*. Often called simply '*Gemara Shiur*' (*Gemara* Lesson) these could be on any part of the *Talmud*. There are also numerous internet based classes, and even services that can link people to study *Talmud* together on-line.

A Page of Talmud

What does it look like?



The layout of the *Talmud* page that we have today was established approximately five hundred years ago. As new editions of the *Talmud* were printed, extra reference tools and commentaries were added, until the standard Vilna edition from around 100 years ago was printed.

(1) This is the page number, using the Hebrew numbering system. In this example the page number is 25. Each page is really two sides, e.g. 25a and 25b. The two sides back each other, and don't face each other. On the reverse side, the English number is included, but counting pages and not double pages - eg 50.

(2) This is the page heading. On the left is the name of the Masechet (Tractate) - in our case Megillah, in the middle is the chapter number (Perek Shlishi, or chapter three), and on the right is the chapter heading (in our example HaKoreh Omed). The chapter heading is usually the first words of the chapter, and is often used for reference.

(3) This is the text of the *Talmud*, i.e. the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*. They are only a part of the content of the page, although everything else on the page is there to elucidate the meaning of the *Talmud* text. This *Talmud* text is, properly speaking the *Talmud*. The rest of the content of the page is not the *Talmud*, although all standard editions include it.

(4) When a new *Mishnah* starts it is preceded by the abbreviation 'מתני' in larger letters, an abbreviation of Matnitin (Our *Mishnah*). The start of the *Gemara* section that leads on from each *Mishnah* is indicated by the large letters 'גמ', the abbreviation of *Gemara*. In our example a section of *Gemara* starts following a *Mishnah* that started on the previous page. A new *Mishnah* starts near the bottom of the page. (5) The text of the *Talmud* is further punctuated using the colon (:) which is used like a full stop, and the full stop (.) which is used like a comma.

(7) This is the commentary of Rashi. It is found next to the *Talmud* text on the side of the page near the binding. Rashi wrote in Hebrew (with the occasional use of a word from French), but his commentaries, as well as most others, are printed using letters called Rashi Script. Rashi's commentaries, like most others, start by quoting a phrase to be commented on from the main text.



Rashi is universally acknowledged as the greatest commentator on the *Talmud*. He lived in France a thousand years ago, and had a wide circle of students, who are collectively known as the Tosafot. Rashi's commentary is related to by virtually all subsequent commentators.

(8) The Tosafot is the name given to the commentary compiled by Rashi's students and their disciples. This name is also applied, as mentioned earlier, to this group. The Tosafot is printed on the opposite side to Rashi's commentary, also using Rashi script. (9) Occasionally cross-references to other *Talmudic* passages are added in to Rashi's commentary and the Tosafot by later Rabbis.

(10) This is the commentary of Rabenu Chananel, who lived in North Africa at the same time that Rashi lived in France. (16) Gilyon HaShas (Sheet of the *Talmud*) is a collection of notes on the *Gemara*, Rashi's commentary, and the Tosafot, by Rabbi Akiva Eger (1761-1837 CE). It draws attention to many difficult problems and contradictions.

(11) Ein Mishpat (Study of Law) is a tool that cross-references *Talmudic* discussions with works that deal with *Halachah* (Jewish law) so that one can find out what normative decisions were finally made. (12) *Torah Or* (Light of *Torah*), cross references the *Talmudic* text to passages from *Tanach*. (13) Masoret HaShas (Tradition of the *Talmud*) in the inside margin of the page provides a reference apparatus to parallel texts and identical passages elsewhere in the *Talmud*.

(6) We don't have one perfect manuscript of the *Talmud*. Printing errors occurred, printers corrected manuscripts incorrectly, and various rabbis have corrected manuscripts. There are doubts about whether or not certain things ought to be in the text. These words are indicated by brackets. (14)(15)(17) are suggested corrections to the text of the *Gemara*, Rashi's commentary, and the Tosafot, that haven't been incorporated by the use of brackets in the main body of the text. They are by, respectively, Rabbi Yoel Sirkes (17th Century CE), the Vilna Gaon (1761-1837 CE), and Rav B. Ronsburg (1760-1820 CE)

Midrash

What is it?

Midrash is the name given to certain collections of writings that are ordered around the layout of the *Tanach*. The *Midrash* is distinguished by the high amount of *Aggadah* it contains. *Aggadah* is the name given to a certain kind of writing (be it history, story, legend, allegory, scientific observation or such like) that is *not* legal or concerned with law. The *Midrash* is, therefore, mostly collections of stories that relate to words, themes, or narratives in the *Tanach*.

The word *Midrash* comes from the Hebrew root 'darash', meaning to search or investigate. *Midrash* attempts, through minute examination and interpretation of the *Tanach*, to bring out the deeper or ethical meaning of the text.

There are many different collections of *Midrash*. The largest collection is called *Midrash Rabbah* (The Great *Midrash*), which consists of a number of volumes. Other collections include *Pesikta* (Divisions), *Mechilta* (Treatise), *Sifra* (Book), and *Sifre* (Books).

What is it about?

The *Midrash* is about a wide variety of topics. Faced with opposition from those who interpreted *Torah* in a strictly literal sense, the Rabbis sought to find more subtle meanings within the words of *Torah*. The *Midrash* often includes whole stories from an examination of a word or words. Other times, the *Midrash* will fill in an apparent gap in a story. The *Midrash* can be thought of as an attempt to discover the inner meaning of *Tanach*.

There are two main types of *Midrash* - *Midrash Aggadah* and *Midrash Halachah*. *Midrash Aggadah* is the most common and contains stories and legends, concerned with ethical teachings or other topical issues. *Midrash Halachah* expounds upon the legal aspects and implications of texts in *Tanach*. *Midrash Halachah* and *Midrash Aggadah* exist side by side in the same way that Halachic (to do with Jewish Law) and Aggadic (not to do with Jewish Law) material exist together in the *Talmud*. However some volumes contain mostly *Midrash Halachah*, and others mostly *Midrash Aggadah*.

Midrash Rabbah contains volumes on the *Chumash* (Five Books of Moses) and the *Hamesh Megillot* (Five Scrolls, from *Ketuvim*).

The *Pesikta* (Divisions) is really three different works, based around the *Shabbat* and festival readings from the Prophets (the *Haftorot*).

Mechilta (Tractate) is a *Midrash* to *Shemot* (Exodus). *Sifra* (Book) is a *Midrash* to *Vayikra* (Leviticus). *Sifre* (Books) is a *Midrash* to *Bamidbar* (Numbers) and *Devarim* (Deuteronomy). All three are mainly Halachic (to do with Jewish Law). Different *Midrashim* are sometimes repeated in different collections.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

The *Midrashim* are thought by some to have been divinely inspired and so are part of the religious *corpus*. Some are meant to be interpreted literally and others aren't, but all are meant to be taken seriously.

The material of the *Midrash* is mostly from the time of the *Amoraim* (200 - 500 CE). Some of the *Midrash* (particularly *Mechilta*, *Sifra*, and *Sifre*) can be traced back to the *Tannaim* (400 BCE - 200 CE).

Different *Midrashim* were written down at different times, over a period of almost a thousand years, from 300 - 1200 CE.

The compilers of the different collections of *Midrash* are generally unknown.

What do we do with it?

Because of the accessibility of a story, and the ethical messages that they contain, *Midrashim* are often used in preaching. Rabbis' sermons often start with a *Midrash*, which is used to bring out the deeper meaning of a passage from *Tanach*.

Many of the stories that are taught about characters from the *Tanach* are from *Midrash*. Because the *Midrash* is written to fill in gaps in the narrative, any attempt to reconstruct the lives of characters from *Tanach* will necessarily include a use of the *Midrash*. The film, "Prince of Egypt", for example, was full of material taken from collections of *Midrash*.

Midrash was translated into Modern Hebrew by early Zionists. Writers such as Bialik collected various stories from *Midrash*, and published them to encourage Jews to read from the actual body of Jewish tradition. Today *Midrash* is often studied as literature, as well as a religious text.

What language is it in?

The *Midrash*, like the *Talmud*, is written in a combination of Hebrew and Aramaic. Some parts are in Hebrew, most are in Aramaic, and others are a combination of the two.

If I want to read it...

There is a translation of the *Midrash Rabbah* published by Soncino. This comes in ten volumes, including an index. It is a well-written and fairly straightforward translation.

The *Sefer HaAggadah* (Book of Legends) by Bialik and Ravinitzky is a compilation of many stories from both *Midrash* and *Talmud*. It is very well written and contains a very wide range of material, with a clear indication of the source. It is an expensive book, but can frequently be found in Jewish libraries.

Halachic Codes

Halachah ("The Way" – i.e. Jewish *way* of living) is Jewish law. The *Halachah* extends not only to areas such as property and crime, but has much to say on spiritual and religious matters.

The *Halachah* uses basic Jewish texts as a starting point. Halachic Codes collect relevant discussions together from various sources in the *Tanach*, *Talmud*, and *Midrash* to create guidebooks to having a (certain kind of) Jewish way of life.

Two of the most famous Halachic Codes - the *Mishneh Torah* and the *Shulchan Aruch*, are detailed below.

Mishneh Torah

What is it?

Mishneh Torah means 'Repetition of the *Torah* (Teaching)'. It is considered to be a repetition of the *Torah* because it provides a practical summary of Jewish teaching.

The *Mishneh Torah* consists of fourteen books. Each book deals with a sphere of human life, and the laws governing behaviour in that sphere. The *Mishneh Torah* is often referred to as the '*Yad Chazakah*' (literally, 'Strong Hand').

What is it about?

The *Mishneh Torah* is an attempt to summarise the decisions about all areas and topics of Jewish Law. The fourteen areas into which the work is divided are: Knowledge, Love, Festivals, Women, Consecration, Separation, Agriculture, Temple Worship, Sacrifices, Cleanliness, Damages, Acquisition, Legal Disputes, and Judges. The *Mishneh Torah* is a comprehensive work, and thus contains even those laws that were only applicable during the times of the Temples.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

The *Mishneh Torah* was written by Rabbi Moses Ben Maimon (Maimonides), and was compiled between 1170-80 CE. Maimonides is often known by the anacronym *Rambam*. Maimonides reviewed the Halachic discussions of the *Talmud* and *Midrash*, and then of the *Geonim* (600 - 1050 CE). Based on this review of the literature Maimonides attempted to

judge what normative law was for all situations. However, the *Mishneh Torah* does not indicate what sources particular laws are based upon, or where they are derived from.

What do we do with it?

Because Maimonides did not indicate his sources, in places, it is unclear whether he had overlooked important material, or erred in some way. Perhaps for this reason, and also because some of Maimonides' rulings were not acceptable to *Ashkenazim* (Jews from Northern Europe) the *Mishneh Torah* did not become the final authoritative code of Jewish Law. It has however, become one of the major sources to use for deciding *Halachah*.

What language is it in?

The *Mishneh Torah* is in a terse legal Hebrew, similar in style to that of the *Mishnah*.

What does it look like?



If I want to read it...

Much of the *Mishneh Torah* is translated in an edition published by Moznaim. This edition includes notes. Other parts of *Mishneh Torah* exist in smaller translations.

Shulchan Aruch

What is it?

Shulchan Aruch means 'Prepared Table'. The *Shulchan Aruch* is the standard code of Jewish Law. As the name implies, it is written in a clear and concise style so that its contents are readily understood. The literate lay-person can quickly obtain a ruling on any law or practice (just as one can quickly obtain food from a laid table).

The *Shulchan Aruch* has four sections. They are:

Orah Chayim (Way of Life), which contains 697 chapters.

Yoreh Deah (Teaching Knowledge), which contains 403 chapters.

Even Ha'ezer (Stone of Help), which contains 178 chapters.

Choshen Mishpat (Breastplate of Judgement), which contains 597 chapters.

What is it about?

The *Shulchan Aruch* is a practical guide to Jewish life. Unlike the *Mishneh Torah* by Maimonides, the *Shulchan Aruch* does not seek to be fully comprehensive, and so does not detail laws that are seen as no longer valid since the destruction of the Temple. The *Shulchan Aruch* does however detail all the laws that still apply, and so is comprehensive for practical purposes. The four parts of the *Shulchan Aruch* are arranged as follows:

Orah Chayim (Way of Life) is about *Tzitzit* (ritual fringes) and *Tefillin* (phylacteries), prayers, synagogue, blessings, *Shabbat* and the festivals. This part of the *Shulchan Aruch* deals with most subjects that a lay person might need to know.

Yoreh Deah (Teaching Knowledge) deals with animal slaughter, *Kashrut*, idolatry, usury, ritual purity, vows, respect due to parents and teachers, kindness, circumcision, writing a *Torah* scroll, the sick and dying, mourning, and other similar subjects.

Even Ha'ezer (Stone of Help) is about marriage and divorce.

Choshen Mishpat (Breastplate of Judgement) deals with civil and criminal law.

The *Shulchan Aruch* details the customs and decisions of *Sephardi* Jews (from Spain, North Africa, and the Middle East). Like the *Mishneh Torah*, the *Shulchan Aruch* does not indicate sources, and only states final rulings.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

The *Shulchan Aruch* was completed in 1555 by Joseph Caro (1488 - 1575 CE), a Spanish born scholar. Caro developed the *Shulchan* by editing material for his commentary on the fourteenth century *Tur* (Exploration) by Jacob Asher. Caro's extensive work, the Bet Yosef (House of Joseph), soon expanded to be far more than a commentary on Asher's Halachic work as it contained sources, proof passages, and introduced overlooked material. Caro abridged the Bet Yosef to form a compendium of Jewish law. As mentioned above in the discussion of the origins of *Mishneh Torah*, the question of whether the *Shulchan Aruch* is in some sense Divinely inspired depends upon the origins ascribed to the works it is ultimately based upon.

What do we do with it?

Few books of the *Halachah* have received such general recognition and comprehensive use as the *Shulchan Aruch*. Essentially, the *Shulchan Aruch* is the principal book of practical Jewish Law. The *Shulchan Aruch* contains differing views in some places, and doesn't always give only one answer to a question of law.

Because Caro was *Sephardi* (he was born in Spain), his opinions tended to recognise the *Sephardi* customs, and disregard *Ashkenazi* (Northern European) customs. Rabbi Moses Isserles (1520-1572 CE), a Polish scholar known as the 'Rama', wrote a book that commonly takes his name - the 'Rama'. The 'Rama' is more properly called the '*Mapa*' (Tablecloth), or the '*Haggahot*' (Glosses), and is to be used in conjunction with the *Shulchan Aruch*. This work records all the *Ashkenazi* customs, and is now included in the main text of the *Shulchan Aruch*. It is used by *Ashkenazi* Jews in ascertaining Jewish Law.

Solomon Ganzfried (1804-1886 CE) 'abridged' the *Shulchan Aruch* to produce the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Abridged '*Shulchan Aruch*'). The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* gives prominence to the first part of the *Shulchan Aruch* as this contains those laws most frequently required for daily practice. 'Abridged *Shulchan Aruch*' is really something of a misnomer. Instead of merely attempting to reduce the standard *Shulchan Aruch* in size, the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* tends to be very stringent as it eliminates certain minority or alternate opinions, and promotes the more stringent views.

Israel Meir Kahan, 1838-1933 CE, commonly referred to as the *Chofetz Chayim* (Desirer of Life) wrote the *Mishnah Berurah* (Clear Teaching) which is a very famous commentary on the first part of the *Shulchan Aruch*. The *Mishnah Berurah* acts essentially as a guidebook to the *Orah Chayim* (Way of Life, the name of the first part of the *Shulchan Aruch*), and is published together with the text of that work and the Rama. The standard edition of the *Mishnah*

Berurah also includes two other commentaries on *Orah Chayim* by other authors. It is the standard reference book in many Jewish homes to determine Jewish Law on everyday matters.

For some Jews, the *Shulchan Aruch* is very central to everyday life. Either directly or indirectly it gives them instruction for living their life. For others it is not, because they do not choose to live according to *Halachah* (Jewish Law), and so they relate to the *Shulchan Aruch* in a different way.

Because new situations arise all of the time as society evolves, commentaries on the *Shulchan Aruch* are continuously being written.

What does it look like?



Rabbi Joseph Caro



What language is it in?

The *Shulchan Aruch* is written in Hebrew. In places, there are quotations from the *Talmud* in Aramaic. The language of the *Shulchan Aruch* is brief and clear, making it ideal for use as a reference work.

The *Rama*, *Mishnah Berurah*, and *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, are also in Hebrew. The Hebrew of the *Mishnah Berurah* and the *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* is relatively modern.

If I want to read it...

There is no complete English translation of the *Shulchan Aruch*. The *Mishneh Berurah* (Clear Teaching) is available in an extensive translation issued by Feldheim publishers

The *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch* (Abridged *Shulchan Aruch*) is translated into English by Chaim Goldin.

Kabbalah

Kabbalah means 'Tradition' or 'Transmitted Teachings'. The *Kabbalah* is the general term for a body of Jewish mystical teachings about the mysteries of God and the universe. The teachings of the *Kabbalah* are based on the assumption that true knowledge can be achieved only through a certain kind of speculation.. Taken as a whole, the *Kabbalah* represents a world-view, providing an essentially spiritual way of seeing the world.

The *Kabbalah* has had a major impact upon Jewish life. Religious life, prayer, textual readings, *Halachah* (Jewish law), and even messianic movements have all been affected. The most important work of the *Kabbalah* is the *Zohar*, which is detailed below.

Zohar

What is it?

The *Zohar* (Splendour) is the central work of the *Kabbalah*. The *Zohar* is not one book, but a complete body of literature which has been united under one title. The *Zohar* is usually printed in five volumes. The *Zohar* consists of 21 parts. These parts may be printed in a variety of ways - sometimes a part might be scattered throughout other parts of the *Zohar*, and sometimes it might exist as a separate volume.

What is it about?

The largest part of the *Zohar*, which is untitled, is arranged around the *sidraot* (weekly *Torah* portions). It consists of a mystical interpretation of the *Torah*, mixed with statements and stories of Simeon Ben Yochai. It can be quite hard to follow due to its technical language and abrupt manner. Its points are often highly elusive and not to be grasped without close and attentive scrutiny.

The *Zohar's* teachings combine practically all of the main elements of the *Kabbalah*. The *Zohar* contains passages about the 12 *Sefirot* (Emanations) which flow from God, about the soul, and about Creation. The *Zohar* also deals with descriptions of heavenly places, contains symbolic interpretations of prayers and ceremonies, and explains an elaborate number and letter mysticism.

Zohar provides a world-view through the doctrine of *Sefirot* (Emanations). According to the *Zohar*, G-d is boundless, and cannot be designated by any known attributes. To allow Himself to be known at all, G-d allows 12 *Sefirot* to flow from Him, giving rise to the Universe. The

Sefirot can be observed in the world, and allow us to 'notice' G-d. For adherents of the *Kabbalah*, this shapes everyday life at the most fundamental level.

Where does it come from? Who wrote it down?

The *Zohar* first appeared in Spain at around 1300 CE. It was published by Moses de Leon. Exactly where the *Zohar* came from is the subject of some dispute, however it is commonly ascribed to Simeon Ben Yochai. Simeon Ben Yochai was one of the *Tannaim* (group of scholars from 400 BCE - 200 CE). He was famed for his mystical tendencies. Some maintain that Simeon Ben Yochai wrote the *Zohar*, others that the *Zohar* was merely based upon his teachings. Certainly, the *Zohar* as a *written* work was not known until it was published by Moses de Leon.

What do we do with it?

"Our masters taught: Four men entered the *Pardes* ('Orchard' of mystical teachings), namely Ben Azzai, Ben Zoma, Aher (Elisha Ben Abuyah), and Akiva... Ben Azzai.. died, Ben Zoma.. became demented, Aher [became a heretic]. Rabbi Akiva departed unhurt." - Babylonian *Talmud*, Tractate *Chagigah* 14b

The teachings of the *Kabbalah* have always been esoteric - that is they have been obscure and understood only by a select few. Thus the learning of *Kabbalah*, some say, should be restricted to those who are already sufficiently knowledgeable and mature to handle the subject matter. Thus for many, the *Zohar* is a mysterious, mystical work that is not greatly studied.

For adherents of Jewish mysticism, the *Zohar* is of vital importance. It provides a way of seeing the world, and is raised to the same rank of importance and holiness by Kabbalistic groups as the *Talmud*. The *Zohar* is primarily studied by Hasidic and *Sephardi* Jews.

The *Zohar* and *Kabbalah* greatly influenced the mystics of (16th Century CE) Tsfat. Doctrines from the *Zohar* regarding *Shabbat* have impacted upon *the Kabbalat Shabbat* service that takes place on Friday night in many synagogues.

Because the *Zohar* is thought by some to be the writings of Simeon Ben Yochai, an important early scholar, it has weight in determining the *Halachah* (Jewish Law).

Recently the *Zohar* has achieved a certain prominence through the interest of some Hollywood celebrities. People such as Roseanne Barr and Madonna have developed an

interest in the heavy mysticism of the *Kabbalah*, through *Kabbalah* Learning Centres, and have studied its most famous book the *Zohar*.

What language is it in?

The language of the *Zohar* is an Aramaic similar to that of the *Talmud*. Its style is usually very beautiful, and at times difficult. Short sections of the *Zohar* are in a medieval Hebrew.

The language of the *Zohar* can be hard to decipher. This is mostly due to the unfamiliarity of the subject matter. In parts it is due to the corruption of the standard text leaving the original meaning obscure.

If I want to read it...

A Soncino edition of the main part of the *Zohar* is available in three volumes. Smaller sections of the *Zohar* may be found translated in various other works.