



## **Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic** **An Approach to the Jewish Community for Christian Seminarians**

### **Script 6: How Jews Read the Bible 101**

The Hebrew Bible, known in Christianity as “The Old Testament,” is one of the foundational texts of Jewish ethics, laws, rituals, early history, and culture. It is commonly referred to as the *TaNaKh* in the Jewish tradition, with each of the three major sections called by their Hebrew names: *Torah*-Pentateuch; *Nevi'im*-Prophets; and *Ketuvim*-Writings. Jews of all denominations publicly read portions of the *Torah*, the Five Books of Moses, on a weekly basis in a cyclical manner somewhat similar to the lectionary cycles of many Christian churches. Some communities complete the whole *Torah* in one year. Other congregations follow a triennial cycle in which they read 1/3 of each designated portion so that it takes three years to complete the entire *Torah*. And some communities read a small selection of each weekly portion.

On the Jewish Sabbath and holidays there are additional scriptural selections called *Haftarot*<sup>1</sup> from the Prophets section of the Hebrew Bible which are also read publicly during the worship service. In addition, some of the portions of the Writings section are read publicly and studied on specific holidays during the year. For example, the Book of Ruth is read in the late spring on the holiday of *Shavuot*, or Pentecost.

For the individual Jew, it is considered an honorable duty to engage in study of the Hebrew Bible on a regular basis. Each time a Jewish person studies the Hebrew Bible, they seek to gain new insights and the motivation to improve their own lives by acting in accordance with the principles learned in their Bible study. Of course, it is not so easy to understand the words of the Hebrew Bible, even when translated into a modern-day English. To enrich *Torah* learning, one is also encouraged to study with a teacher or a study partner, known as a *havruta*.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, there is an entire literature of biblical interpretation and law, referred to as the Oral *Torah*. This dates back thousands of years; some say as far back as the giving of the *Torah* at Mt. Sinai as recounted in the Book of Exodus. Although there are prohibitions in the *Torah* for officially adding words to this sacred document, at the same time we learn in Deuteronomy Chapter 30, verses 12 to 14: “*Lo ba-shamayeem hee...*” – “*It is not in Heaven that you should*

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “Concluding Sections.”

<sup>2</sup> From the root *haver*, meaning a colleague in learning and, more commonly today, referring to a friend.

say, 'Who will go up to Heaven and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea that you should say, 'Who will cross to the other side of the sea and get it for us and teach it to us so that we may observe it?' No, the thing is very close to you, in your mouth and in your heart, to observe it." This is understood in Jewish practice to justify human authority to interpret the *Torah* and the rest of the Hebrew Bible, and to define the parameters of Jewish law and practice.

Traditional scrolls of the *Torah* and other works in the Hebrew Bible are written without vowels and punctuation. As a result, there was great diversity in pronunciation until the Masoretes<sup>3</sup> developed a set of diacritical marks that standardized the reading and chanting. Today, these are included in printed copies of the Pentateuch, called a *humash* (a copy of the Five Books of Moses) and *humashim*, (plural for copies of the Five Books). *Humashim* are used for study and for congregants to be able to follow official public reading from the *Torah* scroll.

In Jewish tradition, preserving, studying, and reading the original Hebrew text of the *Torah* is a sacred endeavor. Individuals who read publicly from the *Torah* typically read from a scroll that does not contain vocalization, punctuation, or musical notations, having already reviewed these elements in advance. Of course, because of the different cultural influences from the many countries where Jews resided, several different cantillation systems developed and are still in use today. The public chanting of a *Torah* portion is the highlight, too, of *B'nei Mitzvah*—the affirmation ceremonies for Jewish youth at age twelve or thirteen. They study for several years to be able to reach this point in their lives and to demonstrate their fluency both in reading as well as understanding the *Torah*.

The letters themselves and the words of the Hebrew Bible are considered sacred to the Jewish people and the scroll of the *Torah* is handled with great respect. It is covered with a velvet cloth, a silver breastplate (akin to a miniature of what the High Priest in the Temple wore), silver crowns, and a silver pointer for the reader. Jews typically avoid touching the inscribed portion of the parchment of a scroll with their bare hands lest they smear the writing with the natural oil on their palms. Jewish congregations keep these scrolls in a special Ark that is located front and center in a synagogue sanctuary. This Ark is reminiscent of the Ark described in the *Torah* which housed the Tablets of the Law in the Tabernacle during the desert wandering period and later in the First Temple in Jerusalem. In every age when there have been threats to the survival of Jewish people, Jews undertake every effort to save and preserve the *Torah* scrolls because they are regarded as almost human themselves and integral to the life of the Jewish community.

Perhaps the best opportunity to see how Jews celebrate the *Torah* is during the fall holiday of *Simchat Torah*, which marks the completion of the reading the *Torah*. During this festival, worshipers joyously take out all the scrolls from the Ark, march and dance with them around the synagogue or temple, and have a quasi-wedding celebration with the *Torah*. This holiday, which comes at the very end of the Feast of Tabernacles or *Sukkot*, not only marks the conclusion of reading the *Torah*, but the beginning of the *Torah* reading cycle as well, indicating that the practice of engaging with the *Torah* is never complete. In a profound way, there is no

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<sup>3</sup> The Masoretes were a group of Jewish scholar-scribes in Babylonia and northern Israel during the 6<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> centuries CE. CE is the abbreviation for Common Era used by Jews and many Christians instead of AD.

real “break” in hearing and studying these divinely-inspired words. A teaching of the rabbinic sage Ben Bag Bag in *Pirkay Avot*<sup>4</sup> says it best: “Study it (Torah) and review it, for you will find that everything is in it.”

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*With thanks to...*

Dr. Ora Horn Prouser, CEO and Academic Dean  
Cantor Michael Kasper, Dean of Cantorial Studies and Director of Student Life  
Rabbi Dr. Matthew Goldstone, Assistant Academic Dean  
Rabbi Mark S. Diamond, Project Coordinator

*AJR Faculty Contributors:*

Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine  
Rabbi David Evan Markus  
Dr. C. Tova Markenson

*AJR Alumni Writers:*

Rabbi Bruce Alpert  
Rabbi Doug Alpert  
Rabbi Dr. Jo David  
Rabbi Dorit Edut

*AJR Student & Alumni Narrators:*

Cantor Howard Glantz  
Cantor Meredith Greenberg  
Rabbi Cantor Sam Levine  
Cantorial Student Molly May  
Cantorial Student Turia Stark

*Guest Script Editor:*

Rev. Dr. Daniel Aleshire

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*Director of Photography, Video & Sound Editor:*

Beth Styles | L’Dor Vador Films

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<sup>4</sup> “Teachings of the Sages,” a tractate of the Mishnah, an authoritative compendium of Jewish law and rabbinic traditions that dates from 200 CE.