



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

Script 8: The Centrality of Torah in Judaism

Every Torah scroll is virtually identical to every other. And yet every Torah scroll is unique.

They are identical in that they are all letter-perfect to the canonized text. Any error, fading, breaking, or blotting of a single letter, would render a scroll unfit for public reading, though damaged scrolls may be repaired by a *sofer*, or scribe.

They are unique in that each is a one-of-a-kind work of the scribe who created it. Torah scrolls differ in height and weight, in the hue and thickness of the parchment on which they are made, in the stylized calligraphy in which they are written. No two Torah scrolls look exactly alike, even though the words they contain will allow for no variations.

In this sense, the scroll becomes a metaphor for the centrality of Torah in Jewish life. For these scrolls are the point at which the unvarying perfection of God's word meets the ever changing, ever striving human hand, heart, and mind. From this meeting comes a creativity that has defined the Jewish people as an eternal people.

Many people mistakenly believe that the word "Torah" means "law." While the Torah does indeed contain many laws, it is much more than a legal text. The Hebrew word "Torah" actually means "teaching," and that is exactly what Torah is: the foundational teaching of the Jewish people; the master teaching toward which all other teachings point. Like all great teachings, it accomplishes its end by inspiring, challenging, and holding out the promise of self-knowledge. While the word is often used in a more general sense, in a narrow sense Torah specifically refers to the first five books of the Bible - Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

One of the last verses in the Torah, Deuteronomy 34:10, teaches, "Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses, whom the Lord knew face-to-face." Jewish tradition ascribes the authorship of these books directly to Moses, thus making the Torah the written record of God's most intimate prophet. While many modern Jews question this attribution, few dispute Torah's unique status in Jewish consciousness. Hence the exacting care with which Torah scrolls are faithfully copied by *soferim*, highly-trained scribes. They use time-honored tools of their craft—

specially prepared parchment from a kosher animal, quill or reed pens dipped in special black ink, and threads made of hair or animal sinew to sew the parchment panels together-- to do their holy work. Such is the love and reverence Jewish people hold for the centerpiece of their learning and worship.

As much care as goes into the writing of a Torah scroll goes into its public recitation. The Torah reading on a Sabbath morning is the dramatic high point of the service. An intricate interplay of call and response between the prayer leader and the congregation culminates in the opening of the synagogue's Holy Ark, where its collection of scrolls is kept, each clothed in a regal mantle, adorned with silver breastplate and crown. The scroll that will be used for that week's reading is removed and carried around the sanctuary, where congregants scramble to place a kiss on it using the spine of their prayer books or fringe of their prayer shawls.

The Torah is not read, but chanted, using a system of notation that shapes the meaning of the unvocalized text recorded in the scroll. Torah readers prepare for their assignment by studying the notated text until they know the proper vocalization perfectly. Should the reader err, one of two assistants, standing on either side of the scroll and following along with a notated text, will correct the reader, for one must be clear and precise when declaiming the word of God.

As part of the reading, the rabbi or a learned congregant may offer a *d'var Torah*, a teaching explicating or exploring a word or theme in the weekly reading or relating that reading to a topical issue. These days, thousands of such teachings are published online every week. The grandeur and formality of a synagogue reading inform the sense of sanctity each Jew feels toward the Torah. Yet for the observant Jew, contact with the Torah is far more constant and far more intimate.

The study of Torah is a continuous part of the life of any observant Jew. Each fall, shortly after the High Holidays of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the process of reading Torah begins at the opening of the Book of Genesis. Each week, the next section of Torah - usually around four or five chapters - is read in the synagogue until, the following fall, the Book of Deuteronomy is concluded and the Book of Genesis is begun anew. Thus, there is always more Torah to be learned. And while the text remains the same, year after year, students are always growing and changing, allowing them to continually find new insights in its familiar passages. To aid in their study, students of Torah read its every verse through the lens of commentary. Such commentary is voluminous, amounting to thousands of years of exegesis, composed by Jews all over the world, in diverse times and conditions.¹

And here is where the metaphor of the Torah scroll to the centrality of Torah to Jewish life really applies. Because just as the scroll is the place where the eternal words of God meet the ephemeral strivings of the human, so too do our studies of its teachings reflect that same dynamic.

Torah is a challenging book. Much of it is inspiring, much majestic, much dramatic, and deeply moving. But long sections of Torah - like the description of the Tent of Meeting that the

¹ To learn more about types of Jewish interpretation, please refer to "How Jews Read the Bible 201," another episode in the "Mosaic Religion and the Religious Mosaic" series.

Israelites built in the wilderness - seem repetitive and dry. Other parts - like the detailed procedures for offering animal sacrifices - seem obscure and outmoded. And still other parts - like hardening of Pharaoh's heart, or the punishment meted out to the recalcitrant son - challenge common conceptions of justice and mercy.

Yet if every word of the Torah is Moses's revelation of a God who is, as Exodus 34:6 states, "compassionate, gracious, long-suffering and great in kindness and truth," then it must be read with the utmost subtlety and creativity. Where a text seems stark, it demands a search for nuance. Where its meaning is unclear, it requires comparative study. Where its message is troubling, it demands that one go deeper. The challenges of Torah have taught the Jewish people that its sanctity requires them to bring the best of themselves to its study and understanding. They have learned the delicate art of reading a text sacredly without necessarily doing so literally. And, in so learning, they have harmonized the Torah's most challenging teachings with their faith in the loving, caring, forgiving God of all of humanity.

Torah is the vital center of the Jewish people because it is the place where human striving meets that which is transcendent. It instructs that restless, self-seeking spirit both by inspiring it and by challenging it. In that instruction, Torah's eternal words create an eternal people.

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