

Chapter 1

Beginning with Torah Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Meeting the Torah's author — God
- ▶ Discovering the most important elements of the Torah
- ▶ Glimpsing each of the Five Books of Moses
- ▶ Understanding how to live a righteous life according to the Torah
- ▶ Seeing how the Torah guides the lives of the Jewish people

The Torah, also known as the Five Books of Moses, is the most sacred object and the most important text of the Jewish people. As a sacred scroll found in every synagogue throughout the world, it's referred to as a **sefer Torah** (say-fehr toe-rah; Torah scroll); as a bound book, it's referred to as a **chumash** (khuh-mahsh; five).

The Torah is more than a text, though; it's also the spiritual tradition of the Jewish people, communicated by God (the Creator and Master of the universe) to Moses (the greatest prophet of the Jewish people) on Mount Sinai in 1280 BCE and handed down from generation to generation.

You can understand the word "Torah" in a third way as well. Torah is the vast and constantly growing body of teachings and wisdom of Judaism, and in this sense it even includes what a qualified Jewish teacher will teach tomorrow. The "study of Torah" is not necessarily the same as the "study of *the* Torah." "The Torah" usually means the Written Torah, the Five Books of Moses, whereas "Torah" is Torah studies in the more general sense.

In this chapter, I introduce you to various aspects of the Torah, such as its structure, teachings, and study. I invite you to explore this chapter and discover some basics about this unique document of documents that has taught the world about charity; love; the importance of educating children; honesty in the marketplace; the concepts of bankruptcy, courts, and witnesses; and so many other aspects of modern experience that are embedded into the fabric of our lives.

Introducing God, the Torah's Author

Even though the Torah is mainly *about* God, it's also important to remember that the Torah's author *is* God. Although the first line of the Torah says, "In the beginning of God's creation of heaven and earth . . .," it's God who is speaking. God chose Moses to receive and write down a divine message, which is why the Torah is also known as the Five Books of Moses, but the Torah emanates from God. God reaches into the human world with the Torah.

Jewish tradition teaches that God didn't create the world out of nothing. God's creation is an emanation of divine light that God sculpted into all that exists. God is not just "in" everything. Rather, everything *is* God. This is, of course, a paradox. On the one hand, people live their lives feeling separate from God, but at the same time, Jewish tradition teaches that on the deepest level everything *is* God.



In studying the Torah, you'll often encounter paradoxes. Many spiritual teachers teach that when you encounter a paradox, it usually means that you're going in the right direction. The endless struggle to grasp and understand what is meant by God is both the most important activity of life and, at the same time, an impossible task. The study of Torah is the way in which Jews participate in this paradoxical struggle. Some of the ideas that students of the Torah struggle with include:

- ✓ Humans are created in God's image.
- ✓ God has many names, but no name can possibly be adequate.
- ✓ God exists.
- ✓ God has no gender.
- ✓ God is unique; nothing is like God is any way.
- ✓ God is everywhere.
- ✓ God is, was, and will be; God transcends time.
- ✓ God is beyond human comprehension.

The Torah is mainly God's communication to people about how to behave. Most of the Torah is directed toward the Jewish people, although it also contains instructions for all other peoples of the world. But for reasons that only God knows, the Jewish people are given extra burdens and responsibilities. God chose the Jewish people, but in no way does this status of being chosen by God imply superiority.

People have responsibilities to God and to each other, and the Torah is filled with instructions about how to fulfill both (see the later section "Living Life According to the Torah" for more about people's responsibilities to each other). Regarding a person's relationship to God, the Torah stresses

- ✓ Connecting with God through God's commandments
- ✓ Having faith in God
- ✓ Maintaining trust in God
- ✓ Accepting direction from God
- ✓ Understanding that God directs everything that occurs
- ✓ Struggling to comprehend God
- ✓ Communicating with God through prayer

See Chapter 2 for more information about God, the ultimate author.

Examining the Torah's Important Elements



Jewish tradition maintains that the Five Books of Moses contains everything. Yes, *everything*. Although the Torah is a religious document, it isn't a collection of abstractions in spiritual language. Rather, it uses concrete descriptions in the form of laws and stories to express abstract notions. The Torah also deals with all aspects of life, from business, agriculture, and industry to family life, sexuality, and ritual. The Torah directs human conduct in all its aspects. It urges followers to see the whole world as a Holy Temple in which each student functions as a priest whose job it is to constantly purify and sanctify the entirety of life.

The Torah consists of two parts: One is written and the other is oral. Flip to Chapter 3 for a full introduction to the treasures of the Torah.

The Written Torah



As the Torah describes, Moses was the greatest teacher and prophet who ever lived. It's important, however, to always keep in mind that Moses wasn't a perfect being. He had the noble attribute of humility, although he was also self-effacing sometimes, and he didn't always do the right thing. As my teacher has often said, "In Judaism, there are no plastic saints."

At Mount Sinai, Moses encountered God in an intimate way unlike anyone before or since, and Moses wrote down what God told him to write. The result was the Five Books of Moses. It is these five books that are the main focus of *The Torah For Dummies*. Table 1-1 shows you the names of the Five Books of Moses, which come from Greek because a few thousand years ago the Torah was translated into that language. The table also gives you the Hebrew names of the books and their translations.

Table 1-1

The Five Books of Moses

<i>Greek Name</i>	<i>Hebrew Name</i>	<i>Translation of Hebrew Name</i>
Genesis	Bereshit	"In the beginning"
Exodus	Shemot	"the names"
Leviticus	Vayikra	"and He called"
Numbers	Bamidbar	"in the wilderness"
Deuteronomy	Devarim	"words"



The Torah isn't the Bible. The Jewish Bible is the book that Christians call the Old Testament, and the Five Books of Moses are the first five sections of the Jewish Bible. The other sections are the books of the Prophets (of which there are eight) and the books of other sacred writings (of which there are 11). In all, there are 24 books in the Jewish Bible, also often referred to as the Hebrew Scriptures.

The Oral Torah

When Moses encountered God and received God's message, the divine transmission included oral teachings that were never meant to be written down. An oral tradition allows for flexibility; too often when an oral teaching is written down, it's taken too literally and loses its power to adapt to changing times and circumstances. It was only after much debate and discussion that the great sages of the Jewish people decided to write down the oral teachings in a process that began a few thousand years ago. This compromise was based on the historical fact that the enemies of the Jewish people were killing so many of the Children of Israel and the sacred traditions were at a great risk of being lost.



The major elements of the Oral Torah include

- ✓ **The Mishnah** (mish-*nah*; repetition): A book consisting of six sections, written in Hebrew, that serve as a summary of the oral teachings as handed down by Moses, along with the Written Torah, to the elders of the Jewish people.
- ✓ **The Gemara** (geh-mah-*rah*; completion): Additions, written mostly in Aramaic, that serve to analyze the Mishnah, define its fine points, and also illustrate how the Five Books of Moses and the Mishnah are applied to the ever-changing conditions of life.

The Mishnah and the Gemara appear together in the **Talmud** (tahl-*mood*; learning), which is a set of books consisting of 63 sections and also includes additional commentaries by great teachers throughout the centuries.

- ✓ **The Midrash** (mid-*rahsh*; interpretation): A few dozen books written over a number of centuries that serve to expand upon the details found in the Five Books of Moses and other books of the Jewish Bible. The various collections of Midrashim (plural for Midrash) teach both divine moral lessons and divine laws.
- ✓ **Halachah** (ha-lah-*khah*; the way to walk): The term for Jewish law. Jewish laws are either positive (“do this”) or negative (“don’t do this”), and 613 of them are traditionally found in the Five Books of Moses (see Appendixes B and C for the full list). This number is deceptive because there are actually thousands of Jewish teachings that grow out of the primary 613 commandments in the Torah.

Taking One Torah Book at a Time



There’s an ancient Jewish tradition that the entire Five Books of Moses is actually one long name of God. The Written Torah is also traditionally seen as five separate books, each with its own character and content. The following are the Five Books of Moses, which I cover in detail in Part II:

- ✓ **Genesis:** The book of Genesis focuses on the creation of the universe and the creation of the Jewish family, starting with Adam and Eve, Noah, his son Shem, and ultimately with the patriarch Abraham and matriarch Sarah. The book is filled with many dramas involving the individuals who form the foundation of the Jewish people, most notably Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Leah, and Joseph.
- ✓ **Exodus:** The book of Exodus essentially tells the story of the Jewish people’s experience of slavery in Egypt and ultimate liberation under the leadership of Moses and his brother Aaron. This book also describes Moses’s encounters with God and the receiving of the divine transmission called the Torah at Mount Sinai.
- ✓ **Leviticus:** This book of the Torah contains the least amount of narrative among the five. Rather, it’s concerned with the rules and functions of a branch of the Jewish family that serves a unique priestly role within Judaism; it’s also filled with laws, rules, and regulations of a wide variety.
- ✓ **Numbers:** The book of Numbers largely concerns itself with the 40-year journey through the desert, from Egypt to the Promised Land (Israel), taken by the Children of Israel. Earlier in the Torah, God promises the Land of Israel to Abraham, and it’s Moses’s mission to lead the freed slaves — who are the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob — to the Promised Land. The book of Numbers provides details of many of their encounters and experiences in the desert and also includes many of the laws incumbent upon the Jewish people.

- ✓ **Deuteronomy:** The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses's farewell address to his people. In this book, Moses recounts many of the key experiences of the Jewish people after their liberation from Egypt. He also takes the opportunity to repeat many teachings contained in the first four books of the Written Torah. This book ends with the death of Moses.

Living Life According to the Torah

The Torah is God's instruction book to humankind. For practical purposes, you can see these instructions as two different yet overlapping types: One is the instructions by God about how people should behave as individuals on a personal level, and the other is how people should behave in a community.

Watching your personal behavior



The Torah's instructions to people about personal behavior are based on the assumption that the details are what matters. Sure, it's lovely to say that people should be nice to each other and should love each other, but it has been proven again and again that lofty generalizations like "Be nice" or "Be fair" are never enough. The trend in the Torah is to add details rather than to make broad, sweeping statements. Without specific instructions to follow, people all too often don't really get the picture or behave as they're supposed to. The Written and Oral Torahs together show how the highest, deepest, and most profound ideals from God are applied to the ever-changing circumstances of life.

Head to Chapter 9 for more information on keeping your personal behavior in line with the Torah, including tips on treating both your family and strangers kindly.

Playing well with others in the community



The great American poet Robert Frost wrote, "Good fences make good neighbors." This is a terrific summary of the way in which the Torah concerns itself with communal behavior. As with the Torah's teachings about personal behavior, the details are what matters. While some of the general principles can be summarized as "Be honest," "Be compassionate," "Be a good boss," and "Be a good citizen," it's not enough to give sweet, abstract instructions on how people in a community should behave toward one another. Good rules, good definitions, and good fences serve a community well. The Written Torah and the Oral Torah go into minute detail on the main principles, covering just about every conceivable situation in community life.

Check out Chapter 10 for details on living by the word of the Torah in the community, including information on doing better business, dealing with property rights, and keeping order in the court.

Connecting the Torah to Judaism

The way of Judaism as a spiritual tradition is the way of Torah. The Torah is the link between God and the Jewish people. Jewish belief, Jewish law, Jewish practice, Jewish customs, Jewish holy days, and Jewish values all grow out of the Torah, as you find out in the following sections.



Taking note of the holiness of time

The great Jewish sages teach that it's possible to connect with holiness (which means connecting with God) in three ways: the holiness of space, the holiness of the human soul, and the holiness of time:

- ✓ **The holiness of space** focuses on a spot in Jerusalem known as the Holy of Holies; it's surrounded by the Holy Temple. The Holy Temple is situated in the Holy City of Jerusalem, and the Holy City is in the Holy Land of Israel. An example of a constant recognition of the holiness of space is that the Torah instructs Jews throughout the world to face Jerusalem during the three daily prayer sessions.
- ✓ **The holiness of the human soul** implies that the human soul can refine itself and make itself holy through the holy behavior as instructed by the Torah.
- ✓ **The holiness of time** is expressed through special rituals and prayers that are recited at special times and occasions. The Torah instructs the Jewish people that one of the best ways to connect with God is to observe the commandments that guide them through the various units of time.

The Jewish sages teach that the Torah concerns itself with every moment of life: from the moment of birth to the moment of death, and from the moment you wake until the moment you sleep. Just as God is everywhere in space, so too is God everywhere in time. The Torah instructs its students regarding

- ✓ The day (three prayer sessions and other daily requirements)
- ✓ The week (the six working days and the Holy Sabbath)
- ✓ The month (the observation of the new moon each month)
- ✓ The year (many holy days that appear throughout the annual Jewish calendar and are detailed in the Torah)

Chapter 11 has the complete scoop on observing holy days in Torah time.

Following Jewish customs

The Written Torah and the Oral Torah have a lot to say about how Jewish people should conduct themselves throughout each important stage of life, as shown in Table 1-2.

Table 1-2 Key Life Events and Corresponding Jewish Customs	
Life Event	Jewish Custom
Birth	Circumcision for boys; naming the baby for both boys and girls
Coming-of-age	Bar Mitzvah for boys; Bat Mitzvah for girls
Marriage	Signing a marriage contract; husband and wife both have many rights and responsibilities
Death	Following a detailed, elaborate, and (I must say) brilliant series of steps intended to guide mourners through various stages of mourning

The Torah also has a lot to say to the Jewish people regarding all aspects of life, including

- ✓ The use of symbols in Judaism, such as
 - Mezuzah (a sign on the doorpost of every Jewish home)
 - Tzitzit (a sign on the corners of clothes that some Jews wear)
 - Tefillin (a sign that actually wraps itself around your head and arm)
- ✓ The way to eat (eating according to the kosher laws is explained in great detail)

Go to Chapter 12 for more instruction on following Jewish customs according to the Torah.

Witnessing a Torah synagogue service

The best way to understand how the Jewish people revere the Torah is to watch or participate in the weekly Torah service held on Shabbat (Saturday) in the synagogue; I walk you through this service in Chapter 13. The elaborate ritual and public reading of the Torah is filled with solemnity, joy, reverence, and formality. The Torah resides in a special — and usually beautiful — closet found in every synagogue sanctuary. The Torah, in the form of a scroll,

starts out literally dressed in the finest royal attire and then is undressed, studied, read aloud, and redressed with the utmost care and devotion.

Since ancient times, the Torah has been read publicly each week on Shabbat. This custom certainly served the Jewish people well when printed copies weren't common like they are today, and the communal gathering of Jews to hear the words of the holy Torah continues to be an emotional high point for Jewish people throughout the world. The Five Books of Moses is divided into weekly sections, and every synagogue community reads the same section each week. The entire Torah is read in the course of one year. On the Jewish holy day of **Simchat Torah** (sim-kaht toe-rah; the joy of the Torah), the last sentences are read and the first sentences begin the round of the year once again.

Writing a Torah scroll

The Five Books of Moses actually comes in two formats:

- ✓ A handwritten scroll on parchment, essential for use in the synagogue service
- ✓ A book printed on a printing press and readily available to the masses



According to the Torah, it's the responsibility of each Jewish person to handwrite a Torah scroll. Because the task is so difficult, not to mention time-consuming, Jewish law is lenient and permits you to fulfill this commandment in a number of ways, including providing financial support to qualified scribes. Some authorities say that you can also fulfill this commandment by buying books about the Torah. So purchasing *The Torah For Dummies* means that you've already begun to fulfill one of the Torah's commandments!

Flip to Chapter 14 for more information about the commandment of writing a Torah scroll.

Analyzing and studying the Torah all your life

Throughout the ages it has been frequently said that the most important activity in all Jewish life is the study of the Torah, which is the subject of Chapter 15. Many statements in Jewish holy texts support the notion that Torah study throughout a lifetime is of supreme value. Here are a few from the Talmud:

- ✓ In the same way that it's essential to feed a child, it's essential for the Jewish people to study the Torah.

- ✓ A single day of Torah study is more important than 1,000 sacrifices in the Holy Temple.
- ✓ God cries over people who are able but nevertheless neglect Torah study.
- ✓ God studies the Torah every day.
- ✓ Non-Jews who study the Torah to learn of their obligations are as great as the High Priest in the Holy Temple.

Jewish tradition considers every letter, word, line, story, and detail of the Written Torah to be of divine origin and therefore containing an infinity of meanings. In principle, it's impossible to say that any one line, story, or book of the Torah means only one thing. There are levels upon levels of meaning in every tiny detail of the Written Torah.



In principle, it's assumed that everybody hears the Torah differently. This doesn't mean that Torah study is a free-for-all where every and any interpretation is always correct. But as my teacher says, each person has a personal relationship with God, and that relationship is a completely private affair. You can and should work with a Torah teacher and try to understand the Torah through the commentaries of the great sages, but in the final analysis, you have to trust yourself and make your own decisions. As one tradition states, each of us is a letter in the Torah, and each of us must find our letter.

Although the Written Torah is in Hebrew and the Oral Torah is mostly in Aramaic, the good news is that there are lots of English translations of the Five Books of Moses and also English translations of the commentaries that are essential to arriving at a more complete understanding of the Torah (as you find out in Chapter 16). Jewish life is an immersion into the Torah and into the literature that the Torah has inspired. My home library is filled with a few thousand books (literally) on the Torah. *The Torah For Dummies* is one more book for that ever-growing Torah library. In fact, this book is designed to be a doorway that opens into a vast garden of profound Torah knowledge.



A well-known statement in the Oral Torah summarizes the importance of Torah study:

Rabbi Tarfon used to say: You are not required to complete the task, but neither are you free to withdraw from it. If you have learned a lot of Torah, much reward has been prepared for you, and your Employer can be trusted to compensate you for your labor. But know that the reward of the righteous is reserved for the World to Come.

Mishnah, Ethics of the Fathers 2:21