



Essential Words & Concepts

The foundational terms this book relies on, gathered in one place

This book uses Hebrew and Aramaic terms throughout. Most are explained the first time they appear, but a handful are so foundational that we are introducing them here.

Torah

The foundational teaching of Judaism, given by G-d to Moshe (Moses) at Mount Sinai. In its narrowest sense, the Torah is the first five books of the Bible. In its broader sense, it includes the entire body of Jewish learning that flows from those books, including everything in this book.

Written Torah and Oral Torah (Torah Shebiksav and Torah Shebaal Peh)

According to Jewish tradition, two Torahs were given at Sinai. The *Written Torah* is the text of the five books of Moshe. The *Oral Torah*² is the explanation that was given alongside it, passed down orally from teacher to student for over a thousand years before finally being written down. The Mishnah and Gemara are the written record of that Oral Torah.

Mishnah

The first written record of the Oral Torah,¹ compiled in Hebrew around 188 CE by Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi. The Mishnah is brief and concise; a few words can encode an entire law.

Gemara

The longer Aramaic commentary on the Mishnah, recorded between roughly 200 and 500 CE. Where the Mishnah *states* the law, the Gemara *discusses* it: asking questions, raising objections, proposing answers, and working the matter through. Most of this book is about how to read the Gemara.

Talmud

The Mishnah and the Gemara together. When people say "the Talmud," they usually mean both.

Bavli and Yerushalmi

Two separate Talmuds were compiled: the *Bavli*, in the academies of Babylonia, and the *Yerushalmi*, in the Land of Israel. The Bavli is the larger and more authoritative one, and is what is studied in nearly every yeshiva (academy of Torah study) today. When this book says "the Talmud" or "the Gemara," it generally means the Bavli.

Maseches / Masechta (Tractate)

A single volume of the Talmud. There are sixty-three tractates in total. This book walks through the opening pages of *Maseches Berachos*, the tractate on blessings and the laws of prayer.

Daf and Amud

A *daf* refers to a two-sided page of the Talmud. Each side is called an *amud* (column or side). The front is *amud aleph* (abbreviated "a") and the back is *amud beis* (abbreviated "b"). Every tractate of the Talmud begins on *daf* 2, not *daf* 1, so the opening page is always *daf* 2a; *daf* 2b is the back of the first daf.

Sugya

A self-contained discussion in the Gemara on a single question or topic. The plural is *sugyos*. Some sugyos are brief; others span many pages.

Shema

The central twice-daily declaration of G-d's oneness, beginning "Hear, O Israel, the L-rd our G-d, the L-rd is One." Reciting it in the morning and at night is a Torah obligation. The opening Mishnah of *Berachos* is about *when*, exactly, the evening Shema may be recited.

Shabbos / Sabbath

The weekly day of rest, from Friday at sunset until Saturday after nightfall. Many laws of Jewish life apply differently on Shabbos.

Tanna and Amora

The plural forms are *Tannaim* and *Amoraim*. The two historical groups of sages whose voices fill the Talmud. The *Tannaim* (c. 10–220 CE) are the sages of the Mishnah, namely, Hillel, Shammai, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi, and others. The *Amoraim* (c. 200–500 CE) are the sages of the Gemara, namely, Rav, Shmuel, Rabbi Yochanan, Abaye, Rava, and others. An Amora generally cannot overrule a Tanna.

Kohanim

Descendants of Aaron (the brother of Moshe) are the priestly family of the Jewish people. In Temple times they performed the Temple service, and certain laws still apply only to *Kohanim* today. They appear in the very first Mishnah of *Berachos*, which uses the moment the Kohanim sat down to eat their priestly portion as a marker of nightfall.

If any of these terms still feel unfamiliar after one reading, that is fine. The book will use them in context and remind you as needed. A fuller glossary of these and many other terms appears in Appendix B.

¹ See ITT pages 303–312. [↩](#)

² See ITT pages 3–9 for broader treatment of Torah Shebiksav and Torah Shebaal Peh. [↩](#)