

Common Terms in Torah Study

Avodah

Originally understood as Temple service but expanded to mean any service to God.

Beit Midrash

Literally “house of study,” it refers to a school or a communal study hall.

D’var Torah

Literally translated as “Word of Torah,” this refers to a sermon, usually short.

Gemara

The discussion portions of the Talmud based on the quoted Mishnah.

Gemilut Hasadim

Performing acts of kindness (hesed).

Halakhah

Jewish law as a concept as well as specific Jewish laws.

Hesed

There is no perfect translation, but is generally defined as “loving-kindness.” When we act with Hesed, we are doing Gemilut Hasadim.

Hevruta

A study partner. A *hevruta* is more than just a ‘study buddy’ it is a serious and personal relationship between colleagues.

Kabbalah

Kabbalah. Literally - ‘received tradition’ of Jewish mysticism. There are many written and practical forms of Kabbalah with those based on the Zohar being the primary.

Ketuvim

The Hebrew word for the Writings. This refers to the final third of the Tanakh, including the poetic and wisdom literature. It also includes the five Megillot.

Keva, Kavanah

Keva literally means “fixedness,” a term used to describe the fixed conventions of prayer. This is often contrasted with Kavanah, literally meaning “intention” or “direction,” the term can refer either to one’s intention while praying, studying, or awareness while performing a ritual.

Megillah(ot)

Literally “scroll(s).” Used as a general term for the books of Esther, Ruth, Jonah, Song of Songs, and Lamentations. Megillot are read on the pilgrimage festivals, Purim and Tisha B’Av.

Midrash(im)

This word is used in two ways, as both a concept and a literature. As a concept, midrash is the expansive interpretation of biblical texts. The term is used to describe the practice of rabbinic interpretation. As a text, it refers to specific collections of interpretations, particularly from the third to ninth centuries in the Land of Israel and Babylonia.

Mishnah(ot)

A collection of rabbinic teachings edited in Israel around 225 CE. Organized in six *sedaraim* by subject matter and dealing with both ritual and civil law. Both the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmud are expansive discussions of the Mishnah.



Common Terms in Torah Study

Mishneh Torah

A code of Jewish law written by Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (also known as, Maimonides or the Rambam) in the late 12th century.

Neviim

The Hebrew word for Prophets. This refers to the middle third of the Tanakh, including the prophetic books. It is commonly the source of the Haftarah, a weekly addition to the Torah reading on Shabbat.

Oral Torah

Interpretive traditions and teachings, originally oral (but later committed to writing), deemed by the early rabbis to supplement and complement the Written Torah.

Parashah

The weekly Torah portion read in synagogue on Mondays, Thursdays, and Saturdays.

Peshat

The plain meaning of a text in context.

Pirkei Avot

A section in the Mishnah, with ethical and spiritual teachings from Second Temple times through the 2nd century. Often translated as “The Wisdom of our Ancestors” or literally as “Chapters of our Fathers.”

Rashi

The abbreviated name for Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, the preeminent French commentator on the Tanakh and Talmud who lived from 1040-1105.

Shekhinah

Literally translated as “Presence,” while rabbinically, it is a term referring to God’s presence in the world. Its feminine form gave rise to the mystical expression of God’s feminine attributes.

Shulchan Arukh

Code of Jewish law written by Rabbi Yosef Caro in the 15th century from the Sephardic perspective. Ashkenazi glosses were added by Rabbi Moshe Isserles to all standard printings.

Talmud

Referring to one of two collections, the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds, edited in the 6th century, that contains hundreds of years of commentary, discussion, and exploration of the ideas in the Mishnah. One could describe it as Mishnah + Gemara = Talmud.

Tanakh

An acronym for the name of the Hebrew Bible: Torah, Neviim, and Ketuvim.

Torah

Refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Tanakh, also called the Five Books of Moses, Pentateuch or the Hebrew equivalent, Humash. This is also called the Written Torah. The term may also refer to teachings that expound on Jewish tradition.

Torah Lishmah

The study of Torah for its own sake—that is, not for ulterior gain.

