What is the Torah, Actually?
Preparing for Shavuot

Dr. Benjamin D. Sommer

Benjamin D. Sommer joined The Jewish Theological Seminary faculty as professor of Bible in July 2008. Previously, he served as director of the Crown Family Center for Jewish Studies at Northwestern University, where he had taught since 1994. Dr. Sommer has been a fellow at the Israel Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Tikvah Center for Jewish Law and Civilization at the New York University School of Law, and the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. He has served as a visiting faculty member in the Department of Bible of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem and at the Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. He has received fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies and the Yad Hanadiv/Berakha Foundation.

Dr. Sommer’s most recent book, Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition received the prestigious Goldstein-Goren Prize in Jewish Thought from Ben Gurion University for the years 2014-2016 and was a finalist for both for the National Jewish Book Award for 2015 and the Association for Jewish Studies’ Jordan Schnitzer Prize for 2014-2016. A Hebrew edition of the book, Hitgallut Vesamkut: Sinai Bamqra Uvemeasoret, was published by Carmel Publishing House in Jerusalem in 2022. An earlier book by Professor Sommer, The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel, received the Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion in 2010 awarded by the American Academy of Religion, as well as the Jordan Schnitzer Award from the Association for Jewish Studies for the years 2006-2009. The first book Dr. Sommer published, A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66, was awarded the Salo Wittmayer Baron Prize by the American Academy of Jewish Research in 1998. Dr. Sommer has long been active as a lecturer and scholar in-residence, teaching rabbis, Jewish educators, and laypeople in a variety of settings in the United States and Israel.
The Verb Horah (the *hiphil* of ירה)

**I Samuel 20:20**

(20) Now I will **shoot** three arrows to one side of it, as though I were shooting at a mark,

**II Kings 13:17**

(17) “Open the window toward the east,” he said; and he opened it. Elisha said, **“Shoot!”** and he **shot**. Then he said, “An arrow of victory for the LORD! An arrow of victory over Aram! You shall rout Aram completely at Aphek.”

**Exodus 15:25**

(25) So he cried out to the LORD, and the LORD **showed** him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There [God] made for them a fixed rule; there they were put to the test.

**Proverbs 6:13**

(13) Winking his eyes, Shuffling his feet, **Pointing** his finger

**Genesis 46:28**

(28) He had sent Judah ahead of him to Joseph, **to point the way** before him to Goshen. So when they came to the region of Goshen,
**The Noun Torah: Guidance**

Proverbs 1:8

(8) My son, heed the discipline of your father,
And do not forsake the instruction of your mother;

Proverbs 3:1

(1) My son, do not forget my teaching,
But let your mind retain my commandments;

Proverbs 13:14

(14) The instruction of a wise man is a fountain of life,
Enabling one to avoid deadly snares.

**The Noun Torah: A law to be obeyed**

Jeremiah 9:12

(12) The LORD replied: Because they forsook the Teaching I had set before them. They did not obey Me and they did not follow it,

Daniel 9:10

(10) and we did not obey the LORD our God by following His teachings that He set before us through His servants the prophets.
The Noun Torah: A ritual law

Leviticus 6:2
(2) Command Aaron and his sons thus: This is the ritual of the burnt offering: The burnt offering itself shall remain where it is burned upon the altar all night until morning, while the fire on the altar is kept going on it.

Leviticus 6:7
(7) And this is the ritual of the meal offering: Aaron’s sons shall present it before the LORD, in front of the altar.

Leviticus 7:1
(1) This is the ritual of the guilt offering: it is most holy.

Leviticus 7:7
(7) The guilt offering is like the sin offering. The same rule applies to both: it shall belong to the priest who makes expiation thereby.
Amos 2:4-7

(4) Thus said the LORD:
For three transgressions of Judah,
For four, I will not revoke the decree:
Because they have spurned the Teaching of the LORD.
And have not observed divine laws;
They are beguiled by the delusions After which their ancestors walked.
(5) I will send down fire upon Judah,
And it shall devour the fortresses of Jerusalem.
(6) Thus said the LORD:
For three transgressions of Israel,
For four, I will not revoke the decree:
Because they have sold for silver Those whose cause was just,
And the needy for a pair of sandals.
(7) [Ah,] you who trample the heads of the poor
Into the dust of the ground,
And make the humble walk a twisted course!
Father and son go to the same woman,
And thereby profane My holy name.
The Noun Torah: Law generally

Psalms 89:31-32

(31) If his sons forsake My Teaching and do not live by My rules;
(32) if they violate My laws, and do not observe My commands,

The Noun Torah: Legal ruling, פסוק הלכה

Haggai 2:11-13

(11) Thus said the LORD of Hosts: Seek a ruling from the priests, as follows: (12) If someone is carrying sacrificial flesh in a fold of their garment, and with that fold touches bread, stew, wine, oil, or any other food, will the latter become holy? In reply, the priests said, “No.” (13) Haggai went on, “If someone defiled by a corpse touches any of these, will it be defiled?” And the priests responded, “Yes.”
(2) In the days to come,
The Mount of the LORD’s House
Shall stand firm above the mountains
And tower above the hills;
And all the nations
Shall gaze on it with joy.
(3) And the many peoples shall go and say:
“Come, Let us go up to the Mount of the LORD,
To the House of the God of Jacob;
That we may be \textit{instructed} in God’s ways,
And that we may walk in God’s paths.”
For \textit{instruction} shall come forth from Zion,
The word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
(4) Thus [God] will judge among the nations
And arbitrate for the many peoples,
And they shall beat their swords into plowshares.
And their spears into pruning hooks:
Nation shall not take up
Sword against nation;
They shall never again know war.
Torah is associated with priests and scribes

Jeremiah 18:18

(18) They said, “Come let us devise a plot against Jeremiah—for instruction shall not fail from the priest, nor counsel from the wise, nor oracle from the prophet. Come, let us strike him with the tongue, and we shall no longer have to listen to all those words of his.”

Ezekiel 7:26

(26) Calamity shall follow calamity, and rumor follow rumor. Then they shall seek vision from the prophet in vain; instruction shall perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders.

Jeremiah 8:8-9

(8) How can you say, “We are wise, And we possess the LORD’s Instruction”? Assuredly, for naught has the pen labored, For naught the scribes! (9) The wise men shall be put to shame, Shall be dismayed and caught; See, they reject the word of the LORD, So their wisdom amounts to nothing.
Torah is parallel to law and covenant

Psalms 19:8-10

(8) The teaching of the LORD is perfect, renewing life; the decrees of the LORD are enduring, making the simple wise;
(9) The precepts of the LORD are just, rejoicing the heart; the instruction of the L. is lucid, making the eyes light up.
(10) The fear of the LORD is pure, abiding forever; the judgments of the LORD are true, righteous altogether,

Torah is the title of a book of law (Deuteronomy)

Deuteronomy 4:44

(44) This is the Teaching that Moses set before the Israelites:

Deuteronomy 17:18

(18) When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests.

Deuteronomy 29:20

(20) The LORD will single it out from all the tribes of Israel for misfortune, in accordance with all the sanctions of the covenant recorded in this book of Teaching.
Joshua 8:31-32

(31) as Moses, the servant of the LORD, had commanded the Israelites—as is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses—an altar of unhewn stone upon which no iron had been wielded. They offered on it burnt offerings to the LORD, and brought sacrifices of well-being. (32) And there, on the stones, he inscribed a copy of the Teaching that Moses had written for the Israelites.

II Kings 14:6

(6) But he did not put to death the children of the assassins, in accordance with what is written in the Book of the Teaching of Moses, where the LORD commanded, “Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents; they shall be put to death only for their own crime.”

Deuteronomy 24:16

(16) Parents shall not be put to death for children, nor children be put to death for parents: they shall each be put to death only for their own crime.
Torah is the title of a book of law (the Pentateuch)

Ezra 7:10
(10) For Ezra had dedicated himself to study the Teaching of the LORD so as to observe it, and to teach laws and rules to Israel.

Nehemiah 8:1
(1) the entire people assembled as one man in the square before the Water Gate, and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the scroll of the Teaching of Moses with which the LORD had charged Israel.

Nehemiah 9:3
(3) Standing in their places, they read from the scroll of the Teaching of the LORD their God for one-fourth of the day, and for another fourth they confessed and prostrated themselves before the LORD their God.
II Chronicles 30:15-16

(15) They slaughtered the paschal sacrifice on the fourteenth of the second month. The priests and Levites were ashamed, and they sanctified themselves and brought burnt offerings to the House of the LORD. (16) They took their stations, as was their rule according to the Teaching of Moses, man of God. The priests dashed the blood [which they received] from the Levites.

Torah is a text providing guidance broadly, not only of a book of law

Joshua 1:7-9

(7) But you must be very strong and resolute to observe faithfully all the Teaching that My servant Moses enjoined upon you. Do not deviate from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. (8) Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night, so that you may observe faithfully all that is written in it. Only then will you prosper in your undertakings and only then will you be successful. (9) “I charge you: Be strong and resolute; do not be terrified or dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.”
Psalms 78:1-5

(1) A maskil of Asaph.
Give ear, my people, to my teaching,
turn your ear to what I say.
(2) I will expound a theme,
hold forth on the lessons of the past,
(3) things we have heard and known,
that our fathers have told us.
(4) We will not withhold them from their children,
telling the coming generation
the praises of the LORD and His might,
and the wonders He performed.
(5) He established a decree in Jacob,
ordained a teaching in Israel,
charging our fathers to make them known to their children,

Isaiah 8:16-20

(16) Bind up the message,
Seal the instruction with My disciples.”
(17) So I will wait for the LORD,
whose face is hidden from the House of Jacob,
and in whom I will trust.

Deuteronomy 1:5

(5) On the other side of the Jordan,
in the land of Moab, Moses undertook to expound this Teaching. He said:…
(5) So, when the LORD has brought you into the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, which was sworn to your fathers to be given you, a land flowing with milk and honey, you shall observe in this month the following practice: (6) “Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the LORD. (7) Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found with you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory. (8) And you shall explain to your child on that day, ‘It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.’ (9) “And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth—that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt. (10) You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year.
Law, narrative, and justification

Rashi’s first comment on the first verse of Genesis:

In the beginning. Rabbi Isaac said: The Torah should have started with the verse, “This month shall be the first of your months” (Exodus 12:2), which is the first commandment given to Israel. So why did it start with the this verse? Here is why. A verse states: “He told His people about the strength of His works [i.e., the strength He displayed in creating what created], in order to give them what [other] nations had inherited” (Psalms 111:6). Thus if the peoples of the world say to Israel, “You are thieves, for you conquered the lands of seven nations,” Israel can reply, “All the world belongs to the Holy One, blessed be He. He created it, and He gave it to whomever He thought best. It was His desire to give it to them, and then it was His desire to take it from them and to give it to us.”
For further reading:


