

*“Superb! ... A gem, as valuable for one beginning to explore Judaism as for one who needs renewal of soul and purpose.”*

—RABBI RACHEL COWAN,  
author of *Mixed Blessings*

# JUDAISM'S 10 BEST IDEAS

*A Brief Guide for Seekers*

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## TORAH

### The People and the Book Text and Interpretation

Judaism is a civilization built around a text. That text is called the Torah, or the “Teaching,” and consists of the five books of Moses, the first section of the Hebrew Bible. Although historians believe the Torah text as we have it was canonized by Ezra and his followers around the fifth century Before the Common Era, the Jewish imagination sees it all as having happened at Mount Sinai, that mysterious encounter in the wilderness where Israel collectively said “Yes!” to each of God’s commandments even before it was given and God handed us the Torah as a token of our covenant and love.

Whenever the final text came into being, the process of interpretation was already going on before that. If you hold strictly to the Sinai view, you may find yourself saying that Moses in his old age, when he was making those great speeches before his death that constitute the book of Deuteronomy, was already revising through commentary some things he had said, or even heard from God, earlier in his life. If you follow the historians, it is clear that the Torah text stands in dialogue with prophetic and other writings of ancient Israel and that these often comment on and respond to one another.

But the process of commentary really gets going later in the Second Temple period (beginning around 150 BCE), when new revelations were no longer accepted. (Yes, that's the right word. There were still people who thought they heard God speaking, but the community stopped listening.) As the Romans ruled Judea, each group among the Judean populace thought they had a proper understanding of God's word: the priests, the Pharisees, the extreme pietists who retreated to the Dead Sea, and the small nascent Christian community. The rabbis, heirs to the Pharisees, saw Torah study and the process of commentary as the highest ideals of Jewish life. Once the Temple was destroyed in 70 CE, the life of Torah became the new sacred center around which all of Judaism revolved.

The most famous story of that early era tells of a dispute between Rabbi Eliezer and the sages, on a fine point of emerging Jewish practice revolving around the ritual purity of a certain type of oven. All the rational arguments possible were exhausted, but the two sides could not agree. Then heaven seemed to intervene on the side of Rabbi Eliezer: a tree leaned sideways, a brook flowed backward. Finally a heavenly voice came forth and took his side. The majority view was that of Rabbi Joshua, who, quoting the Torah itself, proclaimed, "It is not in heaven" (Deut. 30:12). The Torah has already been given; its interpretation is in human hands, not God's. A talmudic postscript to the story adds: "What was God doing at that moment? Smiling and saying: 'My children have defeated Me! My children have defeated Me!'"<sup>1</sup>

Freedom of interpretation became the lifeblood of Jewish creativity. Sometimes it was very daring, uprooting clear commandments of the Torah that seemed heartless to a later, more compassionate age. Deuteronomy 21:18–21 says that a rebellious and gluttonous son may be stoned to death. The rabbis, clearly quite horrified by this dictum, proclaimed that there had never been such an execution. The following chapter calls for the same penalty for a rape victim if she was betrothed to another man. If the incident took place within a city and she did

not cry out, she is presumed to share in the liability, and she is put to death along with her attacker (Deut. 22:23–24). Such are called “honor killings” in some parts of the world. Yes, the Torah prescribes them, but we have no record of post-biblical Jews ever carrying them out. Indeed the death penalty itself was anathema to some of the early sages. They proclaimed that any high court that found one person in seven—and some said seventy!—years liable to execution should be considered a court of murderers.<sup>2</sup>

How could they dare to make such changes, if Torah was the will of God? They did it in the presence of that smiling Deity, the One Who wanted His children to win the argument. Might this be a personified way of talking about tradition's evolution? The One Who set it in motion, dwelling beyond space and time, knows that Torah will have to be carried forward, brought up-to-date, not only regarding technological advances (ranging all the way from “Can you open that refrigerator on the Sabbath?” to “Is cloning kosher?”) but also regarding evolving moral perspectives.

This process of creative rereading or intentional misreading of the Torah is called Midrash, meaning “inquiry” or “deep search” into the text. It involves a whole complex of interpretive strategies, using various tools of

juxtaposition, cross-reading, typologies, acronyms, and more, all seeking to reveal new facets of each word and letter of Torah. Often the midrashic sources will offer multiple interpretations of a single verse, presenting each of them as a legitimate reading: *davar aher*—another reading—and then yet another, all lined up in a row. Torah is true, the Word of God, but it is expansive enough to embrace all these meanings. Judaism has always been a tradition of faithfulness to our sacred texts, but it has never been fundamentalist in terms of how to read them.

One day I was leaving my house to teach a class of rabbinical students. On the way to my car, I noticed a pickup truck parked nearby with a bumper sticker that read, *God said it. I believe it. That settles it.* I walked into my class and told the students about it. “That,” I said, “is not a Jewish bumper sticker! Our bumper sticker (even a strictly Orthodox one, by the way) would read clearly, *God said it. I believe it. Now let's talk about what it means....*”

The Kabbalists, medieval Spanish Jewish mystics, influenced by images of chivalry, depict the interpreter as a male lover of Torah, which is a beautiful maiden dwelling in a high tower.<sup>3</sup> Knowing how much he loves her, she reveals a bit more of her face to him each time he seeks her out. Interpretation of Torah becomes a sort

of seduction. We picture the mystic singing and strumming his interpretive “guitar” beneath her window as she pulls the curtains farther open. The metaphor has to be read carefully. Rather than our working the cold magic of literary criticism onto a passive text, we are here engaged in an act of love with a living partner, drawing both “her,” the Torah, and ourselves into ever greater bonds of intimacy by this ongoing quest for deeper meanings within the text. We seek her out and court her, but it is she who opens her secrets before us.

That’s a key point. Interpretation opens and widens the text, allows us to find ourselves within it, to make room within tradition for our own unique perspective. But it also affirms the text; we make Torah our own as we find ourselves within it. As we work to interpret the text, we have a chance to reshape it in our own image. But as long as we are busy reading and engaging with the sources, Torah has the power to reshape us as well.

A Jew who is called forth to partake in the synagogue’s Torah service recites after each portion of the text that is read, “Blessed are You ... Who has given us the Torah of truth and implanted eternal life within us. Blessed are You, Y-H-W-H, Who gives the Torah.” Listen to a Hasidic reading of this blessing: The Torah, given once to the ancients (hence the past tense of “has given”),

can become the “Torah of truth” only when each reader takes that “eternal life” implanted within us and uses it to reread Torah in a way that speaks to his or her own life. We make Torah come to life. Only then are we able to say that God “gives” the Torah, right now, in the present moment.<sup>†</sup> God not only resides behind the text as guarantor of its infinite elasticity but also dwells within us, in the innermost chambers of our endless creativity. We, together with God, bring life to Torah and Torah to life.



### Chapter 7: Torah—The People and the Book

1. b. *Baba Metzia* 59b.
2. m. *Makkot* 1:10.
3. *Zohar* 2:99a.
4. *Sefat Emet*, *Kedoshim* 1871, s.v. *ba-Midrash*.