

“In  
The  
Beginning...”

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Genesis 1:1

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# Torah: Our People's Story

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The Torah opens with the words, “In the beginning” and, for thousands of years, that has been the starting point for all Jewish learning. This class is a sweeping introduction to the Torah — its transformative ideas and vivid characters. It starts in the Garden of Eden and ends at the edge of the Promised Land.

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# Where Are You Coming From?

My experience with Judaism so far is:

At this time, what I find most attractive or compelling about Judaism:

At this time, what I find most troubling or confusing about Judaism:

I am here because:

It is customary to blame secular science and anti-religious philosophy for the eclipse of religion in modern society. It would be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats. Religion declined not because it was refuted, but because it became irrelevant, dull, oppressive, insipid.

When faith is completely replaced by creed, worship by discipline, love by habit; when the crisis of today is ignored because of the splendor of the past; when faith becomes an heirloom rather than a living fountain; when religion only speaks in the name of authority rather than with the voice of compassion — its message becomes meaningless.

Religion is an answer to man's ultimate questions. The moment we become oblivious to ultimate questions, religion becomes irrelevant, and its crisis sets in. The primary task of religion is to rediscover the questions to which religion is an answer.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

God In Search of Man (1955)



**What are (some of) your big questions?**

1)

2)

3)

# Torah: A Drama in Six Acts

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## **Pre-History**

Genesis 1 - 11

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## **Patriarchs & Matriarchs**

Genesis 12 - 50

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## **Slavery to Redemption**

Exodus 1 - 18

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## **Covenant at Sinai**

Exodus 19 - Numbers 9

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## **Wilderness**

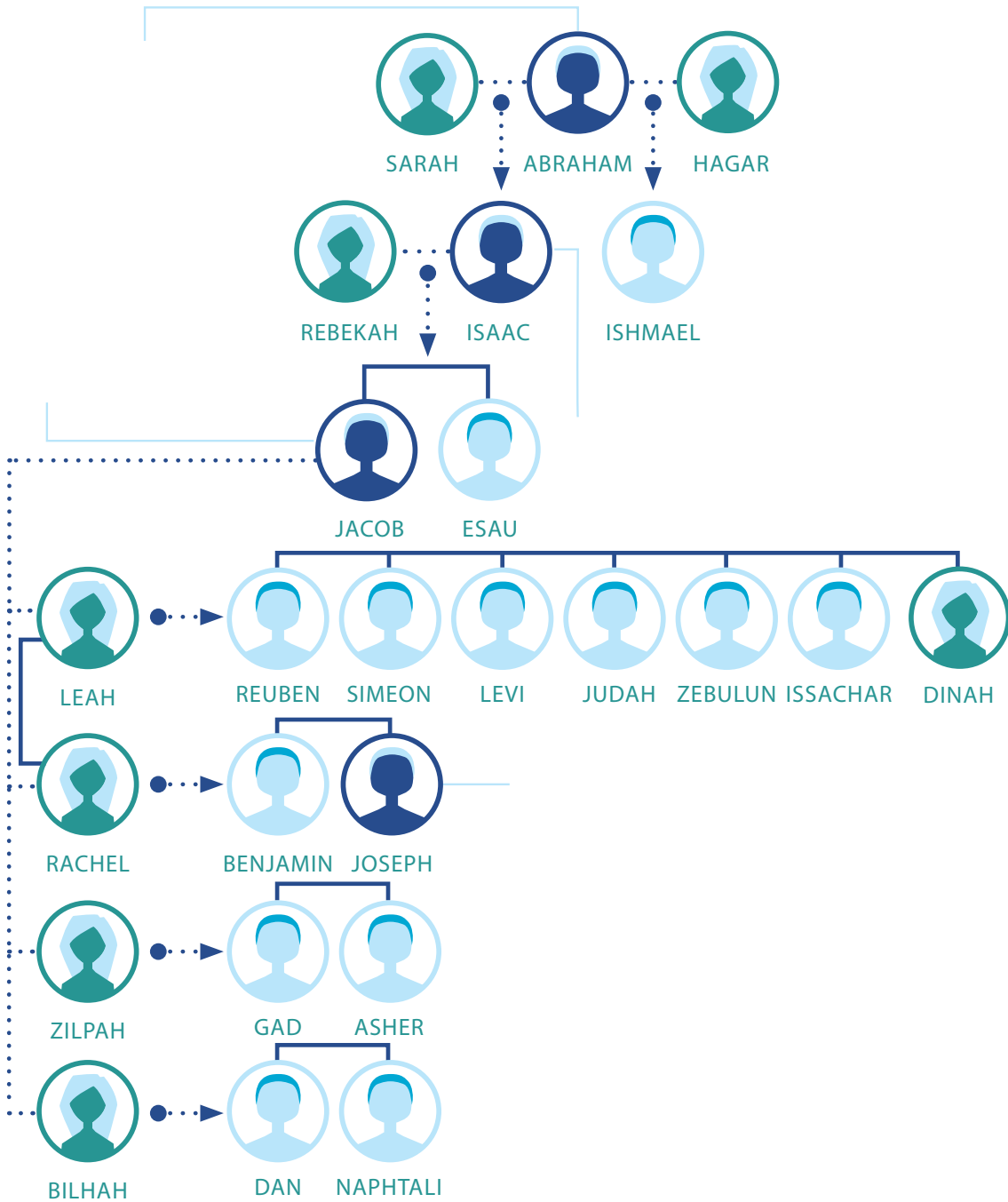
Numbers 10 - 36

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## **Moses' Final Speech**

Deuteronomy

# Judaism's First Family



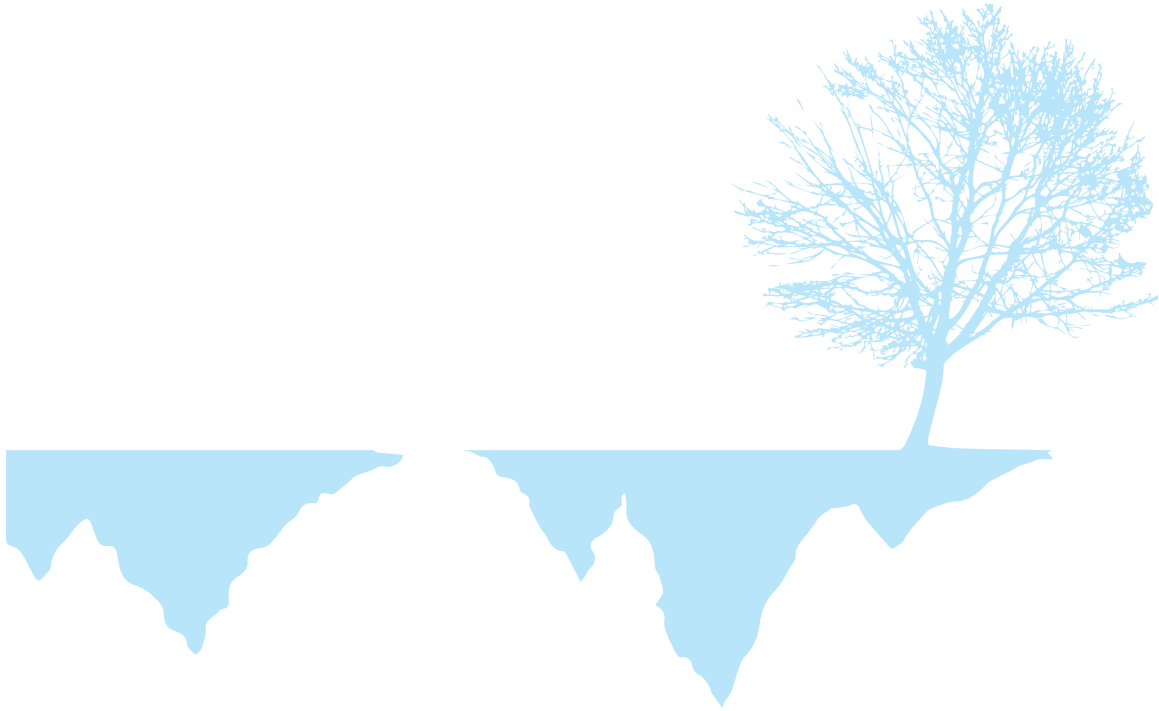
# Jewish Journeys

The Jewish People has always wandered. Our first journey began with Abraham and Sarah, who set out from Ur in Mesopotamia, and made their way to the Land of Israel. Later, the family they founded would migrate to Goshen, in Egypt, to escape a famine. Their descendents would be enslaved there, but would eventually achieve their freedom and set out on a 40-year trek across the Sinai Desert to return to their ancestral home.



# An Evolving Covenant

Covenant, *brit*, is one of the most important themes of the Torah. From the very beginning, God seeks to enter into relationship with human beings, first with Adam & Eve and Noah, and then with the Jewish People through our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and eventually with the Jewish People as a whole at Sinai.



## QUESTIONS AS YOU STUDY EACH TEXT:

- **What responsibilities does God take on toward human beings?**
- **What responsibilities do human beings take on toward God?**
- **What makes these signature moments in the life of the Jewish People?**

**B'TZELEM ELOHIM:  
COVENANT WITH HUMANITY**

Genesis 1:26-31

God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth." And God created man in the Divine image, in the image of God were they created; male and female were they created. God blessed them and said to them, "Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth." ... God saw all that had been made, and found it very good. And there was evening and morning, the sixth day.

**RAINBOW CONNECTION:  
COVENANT WITH NOAH**

Genesis 9:8-17

God said to Noah, "I now establish My covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that is with you — birds, cattle, and every wild beast as well — all that have come out of the ark, every living thing on earth. I will maintain My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." God further said, "This is the sign that I set for the covenant between Me and you, and every living creature with you, for all ages to come. I have set My bow in the clouds, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth."

**LECH LECHA:  
COVENANT WITH ABRAHAM**

Genesis 12:1-5

God said to Abram: "Go forth from your native land, from your birthplace, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."

**REVELATION AT SINAI:  
COVENANT WITH THE JEWISH PEOPLE**

Exodus 19:1-8

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone forth from the land of Egypt, on that very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. Moses went up to God and Adonai called to him from the mountain, saying, "Thus shall you say to the house of Jacob and declare to the children of Israel: You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." Moses came and summoned the elders of the people and put before them all that the God had commanded him. All the people answered as one, saying, "All that Adonai has spoken we will do!"

**SH'MA YISRAEL:  
A COVENANT BASED ON LOVE**

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

This is the Instruction — the laws and the rules — that Adonai your God has commanded me to impart to you, to be observed in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, so that you, your children, and your children's children may revere Adonai your God and follow, as long as you live, all God's laws and commandments, so that you may long endure. Follow willingly and faithfully, that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as Adonai, the God of your ancestors, spoke to you.

Hear, O Israel! Adonai is our God, Adonai is One. You shall love Adonai your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Take to heart these instructions with which I charge you this day. Teach them upon your children. Recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them as a sign on your hand and let them be a reminder between your eyes; write them on your door-posts and your gates.

# Would You Recommend This Book to Your Friends?

Rabbi Edward Feinstein

I love Jewish books. I attribute this to my fourth-grade Hebrew school teacher who regularly banished me to the synagogue library. I wasn't a bad kid. But after a full day of "regular school," Hebrew school provided the ideal environment to meet and mix. So after being scolded three times: "*Sheket, Yitzchak, Sheket!*" I would find myself in the synagogue library ... where I learned to love Jewish books.

Once, the teacher caught me on the way out the door.

"Yitzhak, go to the library!" she shouted "But I want you to do something there ... write a book report."

"Ok. A book report. I can do that. Any particular book?"

"Yes," she smiled with conspiratorial glee, "write a book report .... about the Bible."

"The Bible?!! How can I write a book report about the Bible?!"

"It's a book, right? Then you can write a book report about it. "So off to the library I went. I found a copy of the Torah, took a piece of paper and a pencil and began my book report.

Title: The Torah. So far, so good. Author: uh oh. Just write, Unknown. Publisher: Jewish Publication Society. Describe the book: What is the setting? Who are

the main characters? What is the plot? And, finally, the all-important: Would you recommend this book to your friends?

The setting, the main characters, especially the plot. I've thought about these questions a great deal since the fourth grade. Does the Bible have setting, character, plot? Does the Bible have a narrative arc? Does it tell a story? We don't typically read the Bible that way. We read for individual nuggets of wisdom. We read a Biblical story, or a weekly portion, or a particular law. We don't read the Bible for the totality of its narrative. What is the Bible's story?

## THE BIBLE IS A DRAMA IN THREE ACTS:

**ACT ONE.** The Bible's central character is a God who dreams of a world of blessing. God creates a world, and it is good. God wants a partner to share and care for this world. So God creates the human being. And God creates a remarkable place for this new human creature, a Garden in Eden. The Garden is the epitome

me of God's dreams: a place of perfection, oneness, and peace. But in this place of perfection, the human is not content. Something is missing. This human creature, God discovers, is unique — the human being craves freedom. Unlike every other creature, the character of the human being is not fixed by nature. To be human is to be a self-creating being. To achieve their humanity, man and woman disobey the God who created them. Bewildered and disappointed, God expels them from the Garden.

Outside the Garden, humans turn further away from God's dream, descending from disobedience to murder and violence until God gives up on the world altogether and decides to destroy it all. Just then, God's eye catches sight of one man, a man with moral potential. God finds Noah, *ish tzadik*. God decides to start again.

**ACT TWO.** If God couldn't create a suitable partner, perhaps God can choose one — choose a man committed to sharing the divine dream. But Noah disappoints God as well, and his children turn from God, filling the world with corruption, and again God is disappointed. With all God's power, God couldn't create a partner, God couldn't choose a partner. Perhaps, God can teach a man to share the divine dream.

**ACT THREE.** God said to Abram, “Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you. I will make your name great. Be a blessing! I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. And blessed in you will be all the families of the earth.”

**GOD'S CURRICULUM:** Take a man and remove him from his culture. Strip him of his identity, his power, position, patrimony. Remake him into a vessel of divine blessing. Be a blessing. Bring blessing to all the families of the earth. God doesn't say: “Be a blessing to Me.” God doesn't demand Abram's reverence, worship or submission. God invites Abram: Be my partner. Share blessing with all the families of humanity.

Is this charge to Abram an expression of Jewish particularism or Jewish universalism? The answer is yes to both, because Jewish identity defies those categories. From the beginning of our collective existence we were charged to bring blessing to the world. Our identity is distinctive — we are a people, but a people described by our obligation to the “families of the earth.” To be a Jew is to embrace both. The project begins with Abram and Sarah. It has yet to see its fulfillment.



Rabbi Edward Feinstein is senior rabbi of Valley Beth Shalom in Encino, California. He serves on the faculty of the Ziegler Rabbinical School, the Wexner Heritage Program, the Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem and is the author of several books, including, [The Chutzpah Imperative: Empowering Today's Jews for a Life that Matters](#) (2014).

# Reflection on Chapter 1

The Torah says, "Leave your land," a person must always keep walking, "To a land that I will show you," always to some new fulfillment. This is why a person is called a "journeyer." Whomever stands still is not renewed, for nature holds him fast.

Sefat Emet (1870-1905)

Translation by Rabbi Arthur Green, *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet* (2012)



**Take a few moments to reflect on what this beginning means to you:**

# Additional Readings

## Books

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- Common *chumashim* (The Torah written in book form, with commentary) by denomination:
  - *The Stone Edition Chumash*, ed. Nosson Scherman (Orthodox)
  - *Etz Chayim Torah and Commentary*, ed. David Lieber (Conservative)
  - *Torah: A Modern Commentary*, ed. Gunther Plaut (Reform)
- Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses*  
A beautiful translation of the Torah, which is unique in its readability while preserving the lyrical feel of the original Hebrew. A detailed commentary is included.
- Bradley Shavit Artson, *The Bedside Torah: Wisdom, Visions, and Dreams* and *The Everyday Torah: Weekly Reflections and Inspirations*  
These collections of short, insightful reflections on each *parasha* (section) of the Torah are great companions to take with you to synagogue to help you find meaning in the weekly reading.

## Websites

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- *Sefaria* ([sefaria.org](http://sefaria.org))  
Sefaria is a non-profit organization dedicated to building the future of Jewish learning in an open and participatory way. They have assembled an extraordinary digital collection of classical Jewish texts, in Hebrew and translation, and made them accessible and interactive. This is an incredible resource for anyone who wants to engage with our textual tradition, from beginners to scholars.