

# Lesson Guide: Class One

## Torah: Our People's Story

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Miller Introduction to  
Judaism Program

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY



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## Lesson Guide For Class #1: Torah: Our People's Story

### Class Summary:

Overview of the Torah: its basic narratives, personalities, and themes. Exploration of the concept of *brit* (covenant) as a primary motif of the Torah. Building classroom community and reviewing administrative and learning requirements.

### Objectives:

*Students will:*

- Begin to build a classroom community.
- Understand class expectations and goals and learning resources.
- Be introduced to the basic narratives, personalities, and themes of the Torah by understanding the Torah's "six acts."
- Understand the concept of "*brit*" as an overarching theme of the Torah and as an entry point to understanding what it means to be Jewish.

### Key Vocabulary:

- |                                  |   |
|----------------------------------|---|
| ▪ Torah                          | ▪ <i>Mitzvah/Mitzvot</i>                      |
| ▪ Genesis ( <i>Bereshit</i> )    | ▪ <i>Bein Adam L'Makom/Bein Adam L'Havero</i> |
| ▪ Exodus ( <i>Sh'mot</i> )       | ▪ Patriarchs & Matriarchs                     |
| ▪ Leviticus ( <i>Va'yikra</i> )  | ▪ Exodus                                      |
| ▪ Numbers ( <i>Bamidbar</i> )    | ▪ Sinai                                       |
| ▪ Deuteronomy ( <i>D'varim</i> ) | ▪ Promised Land/Israel                        |
| ▪ <i>Brit</i>                    |   |

### **In-Person Teaching Materials:**

- Room and door signs
- Name tags and pens
- Chalkboard, white-board, or large flip chart
- Colored markers or chalk
- On One Foot course books or printed PDFs
- Syllabus, class schedule, and other class administrative materials
- Projector, computer & screen if using Class Slide Decks and/or On One Foot videos
- *Recommended: Sefer Torah*
- *Recommended: Chumashim for each student*

### **Online Teaching Materials:**

- Zoom Pro Account
- PDF of On One Foot chapter
- PowerPoint Class Slide Deck
- Appropriate background, lighting, and sound setup

### **Welcome**

**In-Person:** As students enter the classroom, the instructor should introduce themselves and distribute name tags. If you have refreshments available, you may wish to give a little bit of time at the start for students to eat and begin to socialize.

**Online:** The instructor should introduce themselves and welcome students to the class. The instructor should then share PowerPoint "Welcome and Community Zoom Norms" and briefly go through online learning etiquette, including keeping the camera on and microphone off and ensuring a safe learning space for all.

### **Ice-Breaker: "Where Are You Coming From?"**

**In-Person:** Four short writing prompts are located at the beginning of Chapter One in On One Foot, under the heading "Where Are You Coming From?". The instructor should give students five minutes to individually journal their thoughts.

Then, invite students to circulate the room and find a partner to discuss each response within a short, timed round (2-3 minutes) in the style of "speed dating." Repeat two more times, each time inviting students to find a new partner and discuss the following question (#2 & #3).

For the final question: "I am here because..." ask students to return to their seats and do a class-wide round, in which students are invited to share their names and briefly what motivates them to take this class. Students should be told to give the most concise version of their narrative ("twitter-length"), as they will have more opportunities to introduce themselves more fully later on.

Teachers should then introduce themselves and share a few words about their background and motivations to teach this course. The teacher should write their contact information on the board at this time.

The amount of time needed for this opening activity will vary based on the size of the class.

**Online:** Four short writing prompts are located at the beginning of Chapter One in *On One Foot*, under the heading "Where Are You Coming From?". The instructor should share their screen and give students five minutes to individually journal their thoughts. Then, place students into breakout sessions (3-4 participants per group) to share their answers for 5-7 minutes. Students should then be brought back into the main session and asked to write in chat: (1) Name (2) Location (3) What motivates them to take this class.

The teacher should then introduce themselves and share a few words about their background and motivations to teach this course. The teacher should share their contact information in the chat at this time.

## **Syllabus and Class Requirements**

1. Distribute/share copies of the class requirements and reading syllabus (samples included in the DropBox and can be customized based on the instructor's preferences).
2. Discuss class requirements, and note that additional steps will be required if they pursue conversion to Judaism.
3. Make time for any questions about administrative matters.

## **Break**

*It is generally advisable to take a more extended break if the class is in-person (10-15 minutes) and a shorter break if the class is online (5-10 minutes). Online courses*

*benefit from multiple, shorter breaks. Students should also be encouraged to manage their own energy and step away whenever they need to take a break.*

## **Set Induction: Introducing The Torah**

**Key Ideas:** The Torah is composed of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible. These books are often referred to as the "The Five Books of Moses. When it's read in the synagogue, it is chanted from a handwritten parchment scroll.

In English and Hebrew, the names of these books are:

1. Genesis (Bereshit)
2. Exodus (Sh'mot)
3. Leviticus (Va'yikra)
4. Numbers (Bamidbar)
5. Deuteronomy (D'varim)

**In-Person:** We recommend you bring out a Sefer Torah, and partially unroll it for the students so that they can see the Torah up close. Students should be invited to share their observations of the scroll and ask questions. This activity aims to promote a sense of access to and ownership of Torah – it shouldn't be a mysterious, inaccessible object handled only by the rabbi, but rather something to which they can feel a personal connection.

You may also wish to distribute chumashim to each student, and refer to it throughout the lecture, so they can see the stories discussed visually. In this case, you may wish to make a list of the key page numbers of the different sections you will reference, so students can quickly follow along.

**Online:** Show the video embedded in the PowerPoint slide deck: "Interview with Scribe Julie Seltzer." Afterward, solicit questions and discuss key takeaways.

## **Lecture: "Torah As a Drama In Six-Acts"**

This lecture aims to provide the students with a "birds-eye view" of the entire Torah, illuminating its basic narratives, personalities, and themes. Keep in mind that it is much more difficult to hold attention through a long lecture delivered online than in-person; use the slides to provide visual interest. Every teacher may wish to recount the Torah's stories in their unique way, but the framework of this lesson treats the Torah as divided into six thematically distinct acts:

1. Pre-History (Genesis 1-11)
2. Patriarchs & Matriarchs (Genesis 12-50)
3. Slavery to Redemption (Exodus 1-18)
4. Covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19 – Numbers 9)
5. Wilderness Journey (Numbers 10 – 36)
6. Moses' Final Speech (Deuteronomy)

## **1. Pre-History | Genesis 1-11**

The first eleven chapters of the Book of Genesis tell the primordial history of the Earth, beginning with Creation and continuing with the famous stories of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, and the Tower of Babel. These evocative stories provide etiologies (origin myths) addressing big, fundamental questions about human nature — including the origins of sexuality (Adam & Eve), violence (Cain and Abel), and human diversity (Tower of Babel). The first eleven chapters do not specifically address themselves to Jews or generally provide any particular laws. Instead, they are more universal in scope.

Your students may find it interesting to address questions about Biblical literalism (science vs. religion) at this point. The PowerPoint includes two quotes from commentaries on Genesis 1 (Rashi and the Netsiv) and a timeline comparing the two different Creation stories found in Genesis 1 and 2. Since many students come to the Introduction to Judaism Program from Christian and other religious backgrounds, it is often quite a memorable revelation to them to see the Bible presented reverently as "poetry, not prose."

## **2. Patriarchs & Matriarchs | Genesis 12-50**

For the remainder of the Book of Genesis, the Torah abruptly shifts from stories about all of humanity to the story of a family whose unfolding relationship with God would form the origins of the Jewish People. Beginning with a single individual, Abram (later Abraham), who sets out on a journey toward an unknown destination — these powerful family stories about faith and conflict retell our earliest beginnings as a People.

This section of the Torah begins and ends with migration, with Abraham and Sarah leaving Mesopotamia for the Land of Israel and ending with their grandchildren and great-grandchildren (Jacob and his family) migrating to Egypt.

The central metaphor of this section is brit (covenant), formed between a family and its God, YHVH. The covenant imposes a mutual loyalty obligation on both God and the family. The mark of the covenant is the physical act of circumcision. The concept of brit will be returned to in section four when we receive the Torah at Sinai, and the brit expands in scope from including a particular family to embracing a whole People.

The coursebook and slide decks contain both a family tree (Judaism's First Family) and a map (Jewish Journeys), which may help students understand this section.

### **3. Slavery to Redemption | Exodus 1-18**

At the end of the Book of Genesis, the family founded by the Patriarchs and Matriarchs finds itself in Egypt, having gone there to escape a famine. There they were enslaved to Pharaoh for centuries. The narrative told in the first half of the Book of Exodus is about the Israelites journey from slavery to freedom, liberation led by the figure of Moses — an Israelite child saved from slavery, raised in the palace, and given a mission by God to free his People. The Exodus narrative is the first time in recorded history that God is seen as siding with justice over power. Its central theme of the journey from degradation to dignity has formed the basis of the Jewish self-conception ever since.

It may also be interesting to point out that the story of Moses follows the familiar pattern of a "hero narrative" – beginning with an infant saved at birth (Moses in the river), continuing with a moment of awakening to injustice (killing the Egyptian taskmaster), a call that is resisted (the burning bush), an ultimate clash between good and evil (Moses vs. Pharaoh), and a climactic triumph (splitting of the sea). This can be compared with other familiar hero stories from religion, literature, and popular culture.

### **4. Covenant at Sinai | Exodus 19-Numbers 9**

After leaving Egypt, our first major stop was Mount Sinai, where God and Israel entered into a communal covenant (brit) and received its "constitution." In contrast to Act 2, this brit is with the entire people, rather than an individual family. The covenantal terms are expressed as laws (mitzvot), six-hundred and thirteen commandments that shape Jewish ritual (bein adam l'Makom) and interpersonal (bein adam l'havero) life. The majority of the mitzvot are given over the course of the second half of the Book of Exodus and the Book of Leviticus.

## 5. Wilderness | Numbers 10-36

From Sinai, the Israelites travel another thirty-nine years in the desert on their way to the Land of Israel. During this period, they face many obstacles, both from external threats and from internal strife. The old generation, which includes Moses, must pass away in the wilderness before a new generation, born in freedom, can enter into the Promised Land.

## 6. Moses' Final Speech | Deuteronomy

The final book of the Torah takes the form of a speech by Moses, given at the edge of the Promised Land. In the course of that long address, Moses recaps the history of the Israelites and repeats the most important mitzvot that they learned during their desert journey. He offers them blessings and warnings as they set out on the next phase of their journey. Finally, Moses goes to the top of Mt Nebo and dies after looking out over the Land of Israel. The Torah ends as a cliffhanger, with the People poised to cross over to start their new lives.

### Text Study: "An Evolving Covenant"

One of the central motifs of the Torah is the concept of brit, covenant. A covenant is an agreement of two parties, in which each takes on responsibilities to the other. Explain the concept of hevruta study and have students divide into pairs/small groups (if teaching online, use the breakout function). Assign the pairs/small groups to study one or more of the "covenant" texts collected in Chapter 1, answering the following questions:

- How is this a story of covenant?
- What responsibilities does God take on toward human beings?
- What responsibilities do human beings take on toward God?
- What makes this a signature moment in the life of the Jewish People?

As a group, go back through some or all of the selected texts, highlighting major, foundational ideas and characters.

By discussing these texts, the teacher can both reinforce the concept of brit, and discuss other fundamental concepts, including: Tzelem Elohim (Text 1), Abraham's journey (Text 3), Sinai (Text 4), and Promised Land (Text 5), etc.

## **Wrap Up and Reflection**

*Reflection Journal Prompt: "This beginning means to me..."*

Instructors should be checking for understanding throughout the lesson and regularly pausing for questions. However, it is essential to do so at the close of each class. In addition to using the journal prompts included in coursebook, the instructor may wish to do a group check for understanding using one of the following methods:

- As a whole class, have students go around and briefly state/write in chat one thing they learned/that surprised them/that interested them in class.
- Have students divide into pairs and share with their partner something they learned/that surprised them/that particularly interested them.

If you want to check that the students understand primary content, at the end of this class, students should be able to define the vocabulary terms in this lesson plan, name the "six acts," and give a 1-2 sentence recap of each.

## **At Home Work**

Ensure that students are registered for the On One Foot Video Companion. Students should be told to watch the "Our People's Story" video and answer the review questions and journal prompt.

# 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

After leaving Egypt, our first major stop was Mount Sinai, where God and Israel enter into a covenant (brit) and we receive our communal purpose. The terms of the covenant are spelled out in the Torah, and are expressed as mitzvot, commandments that shape both our ritual and interpersonal lives. These mitzvot are given over the course of the second half of the Book of Exodus and the Book of Leviticus.

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## Wilderness

Numbers 10 - 36

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## Moses' Final Speech

Deuteronomy

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