

bookSMART



**JLI FLAGSHIP
COURSE
—WINTER 5783**

Course through Judaism's Most Important Titles, and the Authors Who Inscribed Them

Torah. Tanach. Talmud. Midrash. Halachah. Kabbalah. Musar. Chasidism.

Each of these terms represents a voluminous body of Jewish learning, containing works by hundreds or even thousands of different authors, composed over many centuries and in every part of the world. Each genre has its own unique style, methodology, and purpose. Collectively, they embody the timeless wisdom of Judaism.

Book Smart is a six-part course that explores the history, the nature, and the contents of these different areas of Torah literature. Each lesson consists of two primary components. The first component is a historical overview of a particular area of Torah. We will review the primary works that define this field of learning, meet the authors who wrote them, and learn about the circumstances that prompted their composition.

The second component of each lesson provides an actual taste of these various forms of learning. Rather than learning *about* these different genres of Torah, we will experience them firsthand. We will participate in a Talmudic debate, analyze a Midrashic parable, solve a Halachic dilemma, unravel a philosophical conundrum, apply an ethical principle, and decipher an esoteric Kabbalistic text. By the time that we conclude our six-week journey, these various areas of Torah will no longer be abstract terms but familiar domains of the mind, providing us with the contexts for all of our future Jewish learning.

LESSON ONE: THE TORAH

We begin by addressing the question, “What is the Torah?” We discover how the whole of Jewish teaching (“the Torah” in its broader meaning) derives from the *Chumash* (“the Torah” in its narrower meaning). We also discuss the relationship between the “Written Torah” and the “Oral Torah,” and how these two components of Torah constitute a “partnership” of Divine revelation and human toil of the mind.

We then introduce the twenty-four books of the Tanach. We explain the differences between *Torah*, *Neviim*, and *Ketuvim*, and review the contents of each. We also see how the roots of the different “genres” of Torah—Midrash, Halachah, Kabbalah, Musar, etc.—are all in the “Written Torah,” as will be further demonstrated in each of the next five lessons.

LESSON TWO: THE MIDRASH

“Midrash” is both a methodology and a body of literature. In this lesson, we explore both aspects of Midrash. We study the various methods by which additional layers of meaning contained within the words—or between the lines—of the Torah are expounded. We also acquaint ourselves with some of the major Midrashic works that record the expositional teachings by the sages of the Talmudic era (approximately 100 BCE to 500 CE).

Midrash includes Halachic (legal) expositions, which extrapolate the details of the Torah’s laws from the text, as well as Agadic Midrashim—moral, philosophical, and mystical teachings, as well as historical narratives and parables. We study examples from both of these varieties of Midrash, including a number of intricate legal expositions, and an esoteric parable relating to a celestial battle over the creation of the human being and the paradox of goodness and truth.

LESSON THREE: THE TALMUD

More than any other work, the Talmud defines “Jewish learning.” In this lesson, we review the history of the Talmud, explore the structure of this intricate and fascinating work, with its 63 volumes of teachings and deliberations by hundreds of sages over a period of six centuries on virtually every subject under the sun. We also engage in the in-depth study of a

Talmudic *sugya* (“subject discussion”) and experience the unique twists and turns of the Talmudic dialectic.

In the process, we discover how Talmudic learning leverages the “flaws” of the human mind—its circuitous reasoning, its contentiousness, and its inconsistencies—to reveal the multifaceted nature of the Divine wisdom and apply it to the complexities of human life.

LESSON FOUR: HALACHAH

Halachah is the “bottom line” of Torah, where the biblical commandments, rabbinical ordinances, and Talmudic deliberations translate into the dos and don’ts of daily life. Halachah addresses every part of a Jew’s life, from waking to bedtime, from birth to burial, from everyday activities to the most extraordinary situations.

In this lesson, we explore the history of Halachah, from its sources in the Written Torah, through the Halachic Midrashim, the Talmud and its commentaries, the various “codes” compiled through the centuries, and the many thousands of Halachic responsa authored through the centuries. We survey the great variety of issues and dilemmas that Halachah addresses. We then bring it all to life via a case study that traces a Halachic issue from its biblical origins through more than a dozen citations across the entire spectrum of Halachic literature.

LESSON FIVE: MUSAR AND JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

Musar is the body of Torah teachings that deals with ethics, character development, and spiritual self-improvement. The field of Jewish philosophy, also known as “*Chakirah*,” includes works devoted to discussing the philosophy and ideology of Judaism. While these constitute two distinct areas of Torah literature, there is also a certain degree of overlap between them; indeed, some of the fundamental works of Jewish philosophy are also works of Musar, and vice versa.

In this lesson, we review the history and the primary authors and works in these two fields. We then study a number of texts covering three related topics in both these fields: the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (“something from nothing”), *bitachon* (trust in G-d), and the emotion of anger.

LESSON SIX: KABBALAH AND CHASIDISM

Kabbalah is the Torah's mystical dimension, containing its most powerful and empowering ideas. But for many centuries, the teachings of Kabbalah were carefully guarded secrets, transcribed only in the guise of esoteric terminology and metaphors, and taught only to a small, exclusive circle of mystics in each generation. Chasidism is both an extension of Kabbalah as well as a field of Torah in its own right, revealing the inner "soul" that unites the Torah's various components and applying its most abstract spiritual teachings in personally meaningful ways.

In this lesson, we survey the history of Kabbalah and Chasidism. We address the question of why these teachings were kept secret, and why and how they were eventually revealed. We then explore one of the core subjects of Kabbalah—the doctrine of the "Ten *Sefirot*"—beginning with a mysterious passage in the *Zohar*, followed by a series of Kabbalistic and Chasidic texts that examine the great paradox of G-d's relationship with us, and the body-soul dichotomy that defines our own lives.