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The Torah is the holiest book in Judaism. Also called “The Five Books of Moses,” it’s made up of the first five books of the *Tanach* (the Hebrew Bible).

During Shabbat morning services (and also on Mondays and Thursdays) we read a section of the Torah.

This pamphlet will give you a brief introduction to the Torah, and to the ritual of reading from the Torah, the most sacred moment in our service.

Why was the Torah given in the wilderness? Just as the wilderness belongs to no one person, so too the Torah belongs to no one person; it belongs to all of us.

*Congregation Beth Am*  
*www.BethAmTampa.org*  
*(813) 968-8511*

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AN  
INTRODUCTION  
TO JEWISH  
PRAYER

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INTRODUCTION  
TO THE TORAH  
AND THE  
READING OF THE  
TORAH

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## The Torah

The Torah is a scroll which contains the first 5 books of the *Tanach* (Hebrew Bible). It tells the story of the creation of the world and the creation of the Jewish people. Our people are enslaved in Egypt and then freed by God and brought to Mt. Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments. The Torah ends after 40 years of living in the desert, just before we enter the Promised Land.

Importantly, it also includes the 613 *mitzvot* (commandments) which make up the foundation of Jewish practice.

## The Torah Scroll

A *Sefer Torah* (Torah Scroll) is the most sacred object in Judaism. It must be completely handmade - the parchment and ink are made by hand, and the text is handwritten with a quill pen. Each scroll is made to exacting religious standards, and those standards have ensured that our Torah has come down through the millennia with hardly a letter changed. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which are 2000 years old, have books of the Torah which are identical to the ones we have today!

## Hearing The Torah

It is a *mitzvah* (a commandment) to hear the Torah read, especially on Shabbat. *Seder K'riat HaTorah*, the ritual for the reading of the Torah, is the high point in the service. We try to imagine that we are hearing the Torah for the very first time, as it was being handed down by God.

## Taking the Torah Out

The Torah is stored in the *Aron HaKodesh* - the Ark (in our synagogue, like in most, the Ark is on the wall closest to Jerusalem). Before we read from the Torah, we take it out of the Ark in a ritual meant to echo the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. We parade it around the sanctuary in a *hakafah* (processional), which gives us all a chance to show honor and respect to our holy book.

## Reading The Torah

The Torah is divided up into 54 *parshiyot* (portions). Each week, one (sometimes two) is read so that the entire Torah is read through in the course of a year.

The *parasha* is also called *parashat haShavuab* (portion of the week) or a *sidra*. Nearly every congregation in the world reads the same *parasha* during any given week.

Some synagogues read the entire *parasha* on Shabbat; like many others, we read just one section of it.

## Aliyot

The portion is divided up into smaller readings. A blessing is said before and after each reading - the honor of reciting these blessings is called an *aliyah* (plural: *aliyot*), which means, "ascending." Having an *aliyah* is the highest honor that we can give to someone during services. An *aliyah* can only be performed by a *bar* or *bat mitzvah* - a Jew of 13 years or older.

## Lifting and Dressing the Torah

After the last reading, there are two more honors: *hagbah* is the lifting of the scroll, an act of respect and admiration, while *gelilah* is the dressing of the scroll.

## Haftarah

On Shabbat and holidays (but not on weekdays) there is an additional reading, taken from some other part of the *Tanach* - usually the prophets. The *haftarah* will usually connect in some way with the *parasha*, often expanding on one theme found in the weekly portion.

## Returning the Torah

When we're done reading from the Torah, we return it to the ark. We keep it in a special place where nothing else should be stored, as a reminder of its special status, and special role, in Jewish life.

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Do you have any questions about the Torah? Please feel free to ask the Rabbi. And, if you've never seen one up close, and would like to, please ask about that, too - everyone should have a chance to see this ancient, sacred scroll!