

Additional activities **Tanakh and Talmud: going deeper**

Ongoing Interpretation

Over time further commentaries on the Talmud were written. The great Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides, born in Spain in 1135, produced an influential commentary on the Talmud called the *Mishneh Torah*. He wrote this while living in Egypt. Maimonides attempted to codify and condense the Talmud into one book, allowing Jews to use it alongside the Tanakh and the *Mishneh Torah*, and no other book.

In 1563 CE a further compilation of Jewish law was created by Israeli scholar Joseph Karo. This is called the *Sulchan Aruch*, or the 'prepared table'. This compilation draws on previous commentary and codification, bringing all that has gone before into a new volume. Again, this has been influential and widely used.

One contemporary scholar, Karen Armstrong, suggests that this ongoing interpretation by new generations of scholars is 'an endless meditation on the Word of God, the new Holy of Holies; each layer of exegesis [interpretation] represented the walls and courts of a new Temple, enshrining the presence of God among his people.' Armstrong, K. (1999) *A History of God* (London:Vintage), p. 88.

- 1) Discuss the image Armstrong creates of the ongoing interpretation of Jewish law as being like building a new temple. Does this image make sense? Can you suggest a different image to describe the process followed by the scholars of Jewish law?
- 2) Search online for an artist's impression of the Temple of Jerusalem. Find out about key scholars who have produced commentaries, such as Rabbi Judah Ha-Nasi (100s CE), Rabbi Shelomo Yitzchaki (1000s), Maimonides (1100s) and Joseph Karo (1500s). In groups, research about what conditions were like for Jews in these times and places, as well as any information about the particular commentary. Print the Temple image and stick it in the centre of a piece of A3 paper. Write your information around the image, creating a collage of writing around the image.
- 3) The Temple of Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 CE and has never been rebuilt. Discuss whether it is the people in each generation, rather than physical buildings, that keep a religion alive. What role does a religious building offer that people cannot?

Total way of life

The original Mishnah is made up of six sections. Each part is called a *seder* – 'order' (plural, *sedarim*). (You may recognise this word from the Passover (Pesach) festival: the seder plate holds the symbolic food.) The six sedarim cover all aspects of life: spiritual, legal, religious and personal:

- 1 **Seeds:** covering laws on agriculture and the payment of tithes, as well as prayers and blessings
 - 2 **Festival:** relating to the day of rest, Shabbat, and observing festivals
 - 3 **Women:** the law concerning marriage and divorce contracts, and contracts generally
 - 4 **Damages:** concerning the law courts, the criminal and civil laws, and the contract laws
 - 5 **Holy things:** relating to the food laws, ritual and sacrifice, and laws associated with the Temple
 - 6 **Purities:** laws relating to purity and impurity, such as food or bodily purity.
- a) Create a diagram setting out the names of the individual sederim and what they cover. How will you present this? Create an icon to represent each seder.
 - b) Share your responses to the total way of life offered by the Tanakh and Talmud. Should religion permeate all aspects of life like this? Or is religion just one aspect of life – one which should not comment on matters of business or personal matters? Is Judaism a religion or an entire way of life? Discuss your answers.

Tanakh and Talmud: going deeper (continued)

'The Highest Form of Worship'?

At a Jewish World Congress in 1923, the idea of 'Daf Yomi' was formed. Meaning 'page of the day', Daf Yomi is a plan for reading the whole Talmud, one page a day, in sequence. This takes seven years. Daf Yomi means that the Jews who take part read the same page at the same time as tens of thousands of other Jews all over the world. Daf Yomi makes the Talmud accessible to Jews who are not trained scholars, and aims to unify Jews and keep knowledge of the faith alive. This is less likely to be used by Progressive or Reform Jews. For Charedi Jews (see p. 4), study of the Tanakh and Talmud is seen as the best way to live.

The *Emet ve-Enumah*, or 'Statement of Principles of Conservative Judaism' (1988) states that studying the Torah is the highest form of worship.

- 1) Does the idea of study fit in with your idea of worship? Discuss.
- 2) In what way can studying be seen as different from worship? Choose one answer from the list below, or offer your own:
 - Worship involves saying thank you to God, whereas studying involves understanding
 - Worship is done together, whereas studying is done alone
 - Worship can be done by anyone, but it is only scholars who study.
- 3) In what ways can studying a holy text be seen as worship? Choose one answer from the list below or offer your own:
 - The text is revealed by God, so understanding it is part of understanding God
 - Understanding God's laws is the first step in following them
 - Understanding and observing God's laws shows obedience to God.