

**Title:** Torah Text Trail

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**Age Group:** Years 5-8

**Format:** Lesson Plan

**Categories/Topics:** Texts/Midrash and Aggadah, Weekly Torah Portion/Yitro, Bible Stories/Moses, Festivals and Fast Days/Shavuot

**Description:** Students explore the wider meaning of 'Torah' by studying classical, medieval and modern midrashim on the story of Mount Sinai, and become active participants in the chain of tradition by creating their own responses to this text.

## Goals

Pupils will

- Understand Torah to mean the chain of Jewish tradition
- Become familiar with several key books of the tradition and explore different ways in which they relate to biblical stories
- Understand the traditional view that Torah originates at Sinai, and recognise the human component in the creation of Torah
- Participate in creating Torah/midrash, in response to a biblical story

## Activity

The activity will be based around the biblical account of the revelation at Sinai, and its interpretation throughout Jewish tradition.

Framework: an empty "text trail" page, with the Torah text at the top and space for the other texts. Pupils will study the Torah text in class ahead of the activity, and identify the elements of the story which are ambiguous, confusing, problematic or unclear.

Introduction: begin by reminding children about the story of Mount Sinai which they have already learned. Link to Shavuot as it is also known as *Hag Matan Torah* (the festival of the giving of Torah). Torah is not just the written Torah but an umbrella term used to talk about all the different texts that have been written in times and places throughout history to make sense of written Torah.

Working in groups of four, pupils will study a post-biblical text, using pre-prepared tasks (see below).

Next, explain that the children are going to change their groups. In the new groups there will be a child that has looked at each of the different texts. The next stage is to piece the whole picture together and then for the children to be part of the process of Torah.

Finally, after another piece of explanation by the teacher, each group completes a creative activity and sticks it to the sheet. The final product will be a visual representation of the chain of tradition, with Sinai at the beginning and pupils' own creative work at the end.

#### **Tasks for concluding group work:**

1. Each pupil explains the text they've been studying to the others. Stick each text in the appropriate place on the Torah trail sheet.
2. Which of the texts do you think best reflects the story in the written Torah?
3. Which one do you like best or find most interesting? Why?
4. As a group, create your own response to the story of Mount Sinai: write a poem, a short story, explanations (like Rashi), or use collage or drawing.

#### **Conclusion**

Looking at the Torah, through time it is a bit like a river, travelling through time and through the world. Explain that our responses are the current end of the line but as future generations come along so will the tradition of Torah carry on. Also explain that there is a Jewish tradition that explains that the more you stand on other people's shoulders and learn the responses and thoughts of people throughout history to inform your own, the more depth it gives to your opinions.

### Text 1 - Written torah – Shemot 19-20

<sup>19:16</sup> On the third day, as morning dawned, there was thunder, and lightning, and a dense cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud blast of the *shofar*; and all the people who were in the camp trembled. <sup>17</sup> Moses led the people out of the camp toward God, and they took their places at the foot of the mountain.

<sup>18</sup> Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke, for the Eternal had come down upon it in fire; the smoke rose like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled violently. <sup>19</sup> The blare of the horn grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder. <sup>20</sup> The Eternal came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain, and the Eternal called Moses to the top of the mountain and Moses went up. <sup>21</sup> The Eternal said to Moses, "Go down, warn the people not to break through to the Eternal to gaze, lest many of them perish...." <sup>25</sup> And Moses went down to the people and spoke to them.

<sup>20:1</sup> God spoke all these words, saying:

<sup>2</sup> I the Eternal am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage: <sup>3</sup> You shall have no other gods besides Me.

<sup>4</sup> You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. <sup>5</sup> You shall not bow down to them or serve them.... <sup>7</sup> You shall not swear falsely by the name of the Eternal your God; ... <sup>8</sup> Remember Shabbat and keep it holy.... <sup>12</sup> Honour your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the Eternal your God is assigning to you.

<sup>13</sup> You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. <sup>14</sup> You shall not covet your neighbour's house: you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.

<sup>15</sup> All the people saw the sounds of thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. <sup>16</sup> "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." <sup>17</sup> Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." <sup>18</sup> So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was. <sup>19</sup> The Eternal said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens.

*(JPS Translation)*

## Text 2 – Talmud – Babylonia, 6<sup>th</sup> Century

Rabbi Joshua ben Levi said: When Moses ascended on high, the angels spoke before the Holy One, saying: 'Ruler of the Universe! What is a human being doing among us?'

'He has come to receive the Torah,' answered God.

They replied, 'That secret treasure, which was hidden for nine hundred and seventy-four generations before the world was created – You want to give it to flesh and blood!?'

'Answer them,' said the Holy One to Moses.

Moses then spoke before Him:

'Ruler of the Universe! The Torah which You give me, what is written in it – *I am the Eternal your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt.*' He said to the angels, 'Did you go down to Egypt; were you enslaved to Pharaoh? Why then should the Torah be yours? ...

'What else is written in the Torah? *Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.* Do you work, that you need to rest? ...

'What else is written in it? *Honour your father and your mother,* do you have fathers and mothers?

'What else is written in it? *You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal.* Do you get jealous? Are you tempted?'

Straightaway the angels agreed with the Holy One....

**(Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat, page 88b-89a)**

## Group Tasks

Read the story and answer the following questions:

1. When God invited Moses up to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, why did the angels complain?
2. Moses answered the angels by explaining that the Torah is only relevant to human beings. Look at the text from Shemot and underline the examples of the ten commandments that the angels use.
3. Who won the argument – the angels or Moses?
4. This story does not appear in the written Torah. Highlight the date of this text and where it comes from.
5. Try and find the place in the written Torah in the section of Shemot when this meeting could have taken place. Mark the possible places with a star.

### **Text 3 - Rashi / Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki, France, 11<sup>th</sup> Century**

*Written Torah: "The blare of the shofar grew louder and louder. As Moses spoke, God answered him in thunder."*

Rashi: For ordinary people, the longer you continue to blow a horn, the sound becomes weaker and fainter. But here it became stronger and stronger. So why was it not strong at first? To penetrate their ears with that which they were able to hear.

*Written Torah: "The Eternal came down upon Mount Sinai, on the top of the mountain."*

Rashi: You might think that He actually came down, therefore the Torah states "You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens." This teaches that He bent down the heavens and spread them out on the mountain like a blanket on a bed, and the divine throne descended onto them.

*Written Torah: "All the people saw the sounds of thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance."*

Rashi: They saw things which should be heard, which is impossible to see elsewhere. "The sounds of thunder" were the sounds that came out of the mouth of God.

### **Group Tasks**

Read Rashi's comments and answer the following questions:

1. Who was Rashi, when and where did he live?
2. Find the verses Rashi comments on in the written Torah and highlight them.
3. What's strange about the sound of the shofar getting louder and louder? Why did it do this, according to Rashi?
4. What's strange about God coming down onto the mountain? What does Rashi say actually happened?
5. What's strange about the verse "saw the sounds of thunder..."? How does Rashi try and make sense of it?
6. Which one of these explanations makes most sense to you and why?

**Text 4 – Yehuda Amichai – Israeli poet, 1998**

Moses saw the face of God just once  
and forgot. He didn't want to see the desert  
or even the promised land, just the face of God.  
He struck the rock in the anger of his longing  
He went up Mount Sinai and came down, he broke both  
tablets of the law and made a golden calf, he searched  
in fire and smoke, but he only remembered  
the strong hand of God and his outstretched arm  
but not his face and he was like a man who wants  
to remember the face of one he loved but cannot.  
He made himself a photo-fit from the face of  
God and the face of the burning bush and the face of  
Pharaoh's daughter which bent down to him when he was a baby in the basket,  
and distributed the picture among all the tribes of Israel  
and across the desert, but no-one saw  
and no-one recognised. Only at the end of his life,  
on Mount Nevo he saw it and died  
as he was kissed by the face of God.

***From Tanach Tanach and other Midrashim in Open Closed Open.***

**Group Tasks**

Read Yehuda Amichai's poem and answer the following questions:

1. Who was Amichai, where and when did he live?
2. Amichai writes about different stories from the Torah: find five Torah stories mentioned in the poem and highlight them.
3. What was the one thing Moses wanted?
4. Does the idea that Moses couldn't find the face of God fit in with the story from the written Torah? Find one or two verses in Shemot which back up your opinion, and highlight them.

## **Text 5 - Visual art: Marc Chagall – Jewish artist, Russia and France, 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Visit the following links to see the images:

[http://www.franklinbowlesgallery.com/NY/Artists/Chagall/Pages/Etchings/bible/CHAG0755P\\_Plate\\_39.htm](http://www.franklinbowlesgallery.com/NY/Artists/Chagall/Pages/Etchings/bible/CHAG0755P_Plate_39.htm)

<http://www.artres.com/LowRes2/TR3/S/K/N/6/ART156514.jpg>

[http://www.musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/images/pages/bitmaps/cha\\_5\\_tables.jpg](http://www.musees-nationaux-alpesmaritimes.fr/images/pages/bitmaps/cha_5_tables.jpg)

<http://www.artres.com/LowRes2/TR3/F/W/J/F/ART15849.jpg>

### **Group Tasks**

Look at Chagall's pictures and answer the following questions:

1. Where and when did Chagall live?
2. What activities is Moses doing in each of the pictures? Find one of these activities in the written Torah and highlight it.
3. What are the people doing in each picture? Find one of these activities in the written Torah and highlight it.
4. Do these pictures fit in with the story from the written Torah, or are they different in some way?