

Unit 2A What is the Torah and why is it important to Jewish people?

ABOUT THE UNIT

In this unit children are introduced to the Sefer Torah (the Torah scroll), which is the focal point of Jewish worship and the source of Jewish teaching, custom and practice. Children learn about how the Torah is regarded and treated and why it is so precious to Jewish people. They have opportunities to consider what rules and teachings influence their own lives and what they value.

WHERE THE UNIT FITS IN

This unit builds on unit 1E 'How do Jewish people express their beliefs in practice?' in year 1.

PRIOR LEARNING

It is helpful if children have:

- talked about things which are special to them
- made visits outside school

VOCABULARY

In this unit children will have an opportunity to use words and phrases related to:

- religion, eg *God, holy, commandments*
- specialised words associated with Judaism, eg *scroll, ark, yad, Sefer Torah, synagogue, Simchat Torah, shul*
- feelings, eg *precious, value, valuable, sacred, special*

RESOURCES

- a Torah with mantle for school use
- a yad
- a yarmulke, cappel, kippah
- books, pictures and videos showing the Torah being read in the synagogue
- photo packs
- Pentateuch or Bible
- CD-ROM, the internet

EXPECTATIONS

At the end of this unit

most children will:

know that the Jewish holy book is the Torah and explain how it is treated; understand that Jewish people believe that the Torah teaches them how God wants them to live; relate the idea of something precious to something they value in their own lives; explore what or who guides them on how they should live

some children will not have made so much progress and will:

know that the Jewish holy book is the Torah; know that it is special; know that it teaches Jewish people how to live; explore their own feelings about what is precious to them

some children will have progressed further and will:

know why the Torah is precious to Jewish people; understand that the way in which the Torah scroll is made and treated reflects Jewish beliefs about its importance; reflect on what or who guides them and how they should live

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

POSSIBLE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

LEARNING OUTCOMES

POINTS TO NOTE

CHILDREN SHOULD LEARN

CHILDREN

WHAT IS THE TORAH?

- about the Jewish holy book (the Torah), what it is and why it is special to Jews
- about the way the Torah is treated and what this shows about Jewish beliefs
- to explore what is of value in their own lives and to identify a book that is important to them

- Show children a Torah scroll. Emphasise that this is something very special. Carefully undress and examine the scroll and the beautiful cover, and talk about it with the children. Ask the children key questions: *What is it? How am I holding it? What can you guess from the way it is presented and treated?*
- Introduce words such as 'special' and 'precious' which imply value. Ask children to tell the class about their most precious possession, and why it is so special to them.
- Show a short video extract which shows the Torah being handled and read in the synagogue.
- Follow up with questions about what the children have noticed, and draw out that he (or she) was not touching the scroll with their fingers. *What was being used? Did you notice that the person's head was covered? Why do you think this is?* Introduce and discuss the word 'holy'.
- Show the yad and let the children examine it carefully. Is there anything in their home or a relative's home that they are not allowed to touch? *What is it? Why can't they touch it? What's so special about it?*
- Explain that Jews believe that the Torah is God's way of communicating with them. It is his most precious gift to them.
- Ask the children to make a close observational drawing of the yad, or design a yad. Write extended sentences about it and the Torah scroll, and other things they are not allowed to touch, explaining why.
- Talk about books which are special to children and teachers, and what makes them special. Explore reasons, such as the content of the book and who gave you the book.
- Start to make a display of the class special books with labels saying why they are special and to whom.

- recognise that the Torah is the holy book for Jews
- explain that the way in which the Torah is treated shows that Jews believe it is special
- identify what is of value in their own lives and explore reasons why

- For many children this may be their first encounter with Judaism.
- The Torah is the scroll version of the first five books of the Old Testament. The Torah was given to Moses on Mount Sinai and is also known as 'oral law'.
- The Torah is only part of the Jewish holy book.
- When you show the scroll hold it by the rollers not the scroll itself. Torahs made for school use are not produced in the same way as the Sefer Torah, and are made so that children can handle them closely. It is still important to teach them about respect for religious artefacts, and why the actual writing is not touched with fingers.
- In a synagogue the Torah is lifted up and shown to the whole congregation. Note the way people behave when the Torah scroll is taken out – standing up, bowing their heads to the Torah when it is walked around the congregation.

HOW CAN BOOKS TEACH US HOW TO LIVE?

- about the content of the Torah and that it teaches Jewish people how to live
- to consider how they know how to behave, and to reflect on words from the Torah which give guidance for living

- Torah means 'teaching'. Discuss how people find out about God. Explain the link between the Bible and the Torah. Using copies of the Bible find the first five books, and locate and re-read a familiar story, eg *Noah's ark, Joseph or Moses*, as an example of stories which teach people about God.
- Ask how the children know how to behave and treat other people – at home, and at school. Explain that the Torah teaches about these things too, and that it has rules or laws for living which guide the lives of Jewish people.
- Find some accessible examples, such as 'the Ten Commandments' (Exodus 20³⁻¹⁷) or Leviticus 19³² 'show respect for old people and honour them' or Leviticus 19¹⁸: 'love your neighbour as you love yourself'. Discuss what these might mean in practice. *Can the children think of other rules for living? For home? For school?*
- Extension tasks could cover rules for the wider community and even the world. Record children's rules in a class book, along with the examples from the Torah.

- explain with examples that the Torah teaches Jews how God wants them to live
- identify how Jews receive guidance on how to live and relate their own experience to teaching from the Torah

- Make clear that the Torah and the Bible are not the same. Do not refer to the Torah as 'the Jewish Bible'.
- It should be made clear that the Sefer Torah is the focal point of teaching, not of worship.

MAKING A TORAH SCROLL

- about how a Torah scroll is made and what this shows about its importance for Jews
- to appreciate the care that goes into making something beautiful

- The making of a Sefer Torah is in itself an act of devotion for Jews. Talk about the work of the scribes who write the scrolls by hand.
- Show a video extract of Jewish children learning Hebrew in synagogue (shul).
- Show examples of Hebrew writing. Talk about how the letters are formed and that it is written from right to left.
- Make links with the experience of any bilingual children in school who have the skill of reading and writing in more than one language.
- Tell the children that Jewish children sometimes make small scrolls to take to a special service at the synagogue to give thanks to God for the Torah. Ask the children to make small scrolls; they could use letters from the Hebrew alphabet as decoration. The text could be one of the rules for living that they have included in their class book, or one from the Torah itself.
- An extension of this task could be to make a decorated cover, encouraging children to engage further with the special nature of the Torah scroll for Jews.

- know how a Sefer Torah is made
- show an understanding of its value and significance by making a Torah scroll of Jewish beliefs

- There is a good range of video material which is pitched at an appropriate level. Choose examples which show Jewish children talking about their faith and way of life. CD-ROM material is also readily available.
- Jewish children sometimes make small scrolls to wave at the festival of Simchat Torah.
- Make sure that the RE focus of this task is not lost.
- As part of an extension task look at differences in Torah scroll covers. Depending on culture: Sephardi – wooden box, wrapped with carpet; Ashkenazi – often blue velvet covers.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

POSSIBLE TEACHING ACTIVITIES

LEARNING OUTCOMES

POINTS TO NOTE

CHILDREN SHOULD LEARN

CHILDREN

PREPARING TO VISIT A SYNAGOGUE

- that the synagogue is the special place where Jews keep the Torah
- how Jews show that the Torah is special
- Prepare the children for a visit to a local synagogue.
- Explain key points to the children: that the ark in the synagogue is the special place where the Torah is kept; and that there are things we must do to show that we understand how important the scroll is to the Jews, *eg cover heads if boys, possibly sit separately if girls, talk in quiet voices.*
- Explain that the synagogue is a 'house of assembly' where Jewish people gather to pray. The Torah is kept in an ark at the front of the synagogue.
- Build up a sense of excitement and privilege that they are going to be shown something very special.
- Help children to prepare a list of questions they would like to ask during the visit.
- Talk to the children about when and what they celebrate in their lives.

- ask appropriate questions about Jewish people's beliefs and practices in order to understand them
- recognise the need for respect when visiting a place that is special to other people
- identify relevant questions to help their investigation
- identify and write about causes for celebration in their own lives

- Prepare for the visit well in advance. Discuss with leaders and members of the community what their role will be, *eg talking to the children, answering questions.*
- Make it clear that the focus of your visit is to see the Sefer Torah and the ark, and to hear a member of the community talking about why it is so precious to them.
- Some Jews go to the synagogue three times a day to pray in obedience to God's commandments in the Torah.
- Jewish people pray from a prayer book which has been developed over centuries.
- If a visit is not possible, use other resources, *eg the internet, CD-ROMs, videos, visitors from the Jewish community.*

VISIT TO A SYNAGOGUE

- that the Torah has a central place in the synagogue and that it is celebrated in a special festival
- that it is important to respect other people's special places and the things which are precious to them
- Allow time for the children to experience the atmosphere when they arrive by just sitting quietly.
- *What do you think is the most important part of the synagogue and why?*
- See if they can identify the ark where the scrolls are kept.
- Ask the leader or a member of the congregation to read a short passage from the scroll in Hebrew and in English, something that the children will recognise.
- Tell, or ask a member of the congregation to tell, what happens in the synagogue on Simchat Torah. Emphasise the role of children waving flags or their small scrolls.
- Ask the children to do a careful drawing of something they like in the synagogue.

- know the central place of the Torah in the synagogue
- understand its importance for Jews

- Brief everyone involved in the visit. Make sure that parents are aware of its purpose and of what the children will be doing.
- In all synagogues male children and adults, and married women, will be asked to cover their heads. In Orthodox synagogues females will sit separately from the males. This is not so in a Reform synagogue. Check beforehand, and discuss the reasons for all these requirements with the children.
- People share carrying around the Torah in the synagogue. This is a great privilege 'mitzvah'. They go round the synagogue seven times.

WHAT HAVE WE LEARNT ABOUT THE TORAH?

- to explain and draw together what they have learnt about the Torah, and about their own special books
- to present their findings so that others can understand and appreciate what has been learnt
- Brainstorm everything that the children think they have learnt about the Torah; its special status, their own feelings and experiences of special books and rules for living.
- Make a display bringing together all the elements of the work covered, *eg the class book, the scrolls, the drawings and writing, photos taken on the visit, labelled artefacts, computer set up with CD-ROM giving information about Judaism, a selection of reference books used in the work.*
- Invite other children and teachers to look at the display. Children could produce a guide to the display and take turns to show people around and answer questions.
- Ask the children to write letters to the people who they met at the synagogue, thanking them for the visit, and including what they have learnt from their visit.

- recognise that it is important to respect other people's special places and the things which are precious to them
- evaluate their learning through discussion
- present findings to an audience
- communicate in a formal style, *eg by letter*

- Children could search the internet for more information.

FUTURE LEARNING

Children could go on to:

- learn more about the teachings in the Torah
- learn about worship in the synagogue in more detail