

## Mishnah: An Overview

### What?

The Mishnah is a vast document composed of 63 tractates and hundreds of chapters. It is the first text of the Oral Law, a crucial component of Rabbinic Judaism. It examines virtually every part of human life. What we eat. Who we live with. Where we spend our time. It is an incredible corpus of text that delves, simultaneously, into deep philosophical questions and outrageously specific details regarding seemingly insignificant minutiae of every-day life.

### Who?

The Mishnah, according to tradition, was written down by Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, though its words had been passed down for at least a few generations beforehand (some would argue for centuries beforehand).

The Rabbis quoted in the Mishnah are called Tannaim. Their names are quoted often in Jewish contexts, and some of the most famous include Hillel the Elder, Shammai, and Rabbi Akiva.

One other question that might be worth asking is “who are the characters?” Importantly, there are no “characters” in any traditional sense (the Rabbis who provide their opinions on matters of Jewish law are the closest thing). There are, on rare occasions, brief anecdotal stories, but these are utilized to help demonstrate the answer to a legal question and generally are very short. The Mishnah differs from the Torah or Midrash in that regard. Its goal is to communicate rules, articulate disagreements, and, very occasionally, to provide ethical teachings (mostly in tractate Avot).

### Where?

Tradition indicates that the Mishnah was written down by Rabbi Yehuda when he lived in Northern Israel. The Mishnah discusses a wide variety of geographic regions, however, and even discusses matters of law regarding those who are voyaging overseas. While it encourages (and in some places, requires) Jews to go to Israel, it works under the assumption that different groups of Jews in different places may have practices that differ from one another. In certain cases, the law actually changes depending on where, physically, a person is located.

## When?

The Mishnah was crafted in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century C.E. There is debate regarding how long before that its teachings were taught orally (though all agree that they were not written down until the year 200 C.E). Orthodox Judaism teaches that the Mishnah's Oral Law actually dates all the way back to the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. According to this understanding, Jews in the Torah (including the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) knew the Mishnah's teachings and abided by its laws, even though they were not written down until centuries after these events. Other denominations tend to take a different approach and believe that the teachings of the Mishnah, while still central to Jewish tradition, only came together a century or two before they were written down.

## Why?

We will never know with complete certainty why the teachings of the Mishnah came together, or why they were written down when they were. But it is fair to ask. So I'll outline a few reasons that many argue this text was compiled.

First, the written Torah contains hundreds of commandments. About oxen killing other oxen, various forms of ritual impurity, keeping Shabbat, and many more. That said, it did not always provide a clear explanation of how exactly to fulfill those commandments. Take the holidays for example. Many are mentioned in the Torah, but rarely are there any details included regarding how, practically, Jews should (or should not) observe them. The Mishnah provides some of that detail. It discusses what makes a Sukkah kosher, when and how to clean your house of chametz before Passover, who is required to fulfill the commandment of hearing the Megillah reading on Purim, and many other questions. In short, it takes on the task of filling in details that the Torah left as open questions. It helps provide a framework to a document (the Torah) that can, at times, lack in its specificity.

In addition to filling in gaps, however, the Mishnah also innovates laws and observes that the written Torah actually doesn't mention at all. For example, the Mishnah includes holidays that are not even mentioned in the Torah! Tish'ah B'av (the fast of the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av) and Tu Bishvat (New Year for Trees), are two observances that the Mishnah discusses that are not even mentioned in the Torah!

This might seem surprising. Tish'ah B'av and Tu Bish'vat, today, are widely observed Jewish holidays that have become a basic part of the calendar of our year. Many of us couldn't even imagine a Jewish year without them. But that's what the Mishnah did. It created a new form of Judaism, with new ideas, teachings, and even holidays that eventually became so ingrained that we forget that there ever existed a Judaism without them!

The Mishnah, in short, achieves two main purposes. One is that it clarifies aspects of the written Torah that might be difficult to understand without further explanation. The second is that it innovates new ideas and structures for Judaism as it entered into a new era. The Mishnah was written not too long after the second temple was destroyed. Temple sacrifices were a thing of the past, and a new form of Jewish life needed to form if Judaism were to survive. The Mishnah helped to achieve that. It is a foundational text of modern Jewish life, and regardless of denomination or background, we should all look to engage with it, learn from it, and grow through it.

## **How?**

Above, we discussed the dozens (63 to be exact) of tractates that make up the Mish'nah, within which there are hundreds of chapters. But how are they split up?

Well, there are six books of the Mish'nah that cover six broad parts of Jewish life. The first is Zera'im – meaning seeds – which discusses agricultural life, including the many different kinds of tithes that make up the taxation system. Second is Mo'ed, which outlines the Jewish calendar year. Third is Nashim, which discusses issues mostly relating to women. Fourth is Nezikin, meaning damages, which explores what happens when individuals (or animals) injure one another, either physically or emotionally. It discusses who is liable to pay damages, what the various payments are, and a variety of other related issues. Fifth is Kodashim – meaning holy things – which discusses the ancient sacrificial system. Last is Toharot – meaning “purities” – which explain how people and things become tamei (ritually impure) or tahor (ritually pure).

These are broad descriptions, but there will be a full lesson delving into each book in greater detail!

## Lesson One Vocabulary

**Beit Hillel:** Meaning the “house of Hillel,” individuals that were part of this stream of thought tended to lean towards interpreting law leniently. They often debated with *Beit Shammai*.

**Beit Shammai:** Meaning the “house of Shammai,” individuals that were part of this stream of thought tended to lean towards interpreting law stringently. They often debated with *Beit Hillel*.

**Halakhah:** Literally meaning “the way” or “the path,” *Halakhah* is the word generally used to refer to Jewish Law. Opinions published in the Mishnah are “*Halakhic*” opinions, in that they articulate how law should be applied to Jewish people.

**Masechet:** A tractate of Mishnah. The first *Masechet* in the Mishnah is *B’rachot*, which begins *Seder Zeraim* and speaks about blessings. There are just over 60 *Masechtot* in the Mishnah.

**Mishnah:** This refers both to the entire body of the Mishnah (all 6 orders collectively) and also to the many individual *Mishnayot* (plural of Mishnah) that make up each chapter in a *Masechet*. There are often between five and fifteen individual *Mishnayot* in a chapter, and anywhere from three to thirty chapters in a *Masechet*.

**Oral Torah:** Rabbinic Jews believe that, in addition to the Written Torah, the “Oral Torah” was given to the Jewish People. The Mishnah was the first element of Oral Torah to be written down.

**Rebbe Yehuda haNasi:** He is credited with redacting the Mishnah in the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century C.E.

**Seder:** Literally an “order” of the Mishnah. There are six of them (*Zeraim, Moed, Nashim, Nezikin, Kodashim, and Toharot*) and they are often referred to as the six “books” of the Mishnah.

**Tanna:** A Rabbi quoted in the Mishnah. Plural is *Tannaim*.

**Talmud:** The Talmud is a two-part text. The first and shorter segment is the Mishnah. The second and longer segment is the Gemara, which elaborates on the text of the Mishnah and debates how it should be interpreted.