

Common Hebrew Terms and Their English Equivalents

Adonai – One of the names of God; often used instead of the Tetragrammatons (the four Hebrew consonants that make up the holiest name of God)

Chumash – A special book containing only the Books of Moses (divided into parshayot), and selected portions from the Tanakh which have themes connected with the weekly portion. Commentary from the rabbis is often included, much as the EG White Study Bible contains footnotes from various writings of EG White. Chumash is a Hebrew term used when the Torah is printed in book form as contrasted against the Torah in its scroll form. It originates from the Hebrew word for five, ḥamesh (חמש).

Gemara – Means “learning.” It reflects the approaches of two communities to the publication of the Mishnah. The Gemara of the Jerusalem community is seen in the multi-volume set known as the Yerushalmi (Jerusalem) Talmud. The Gemara of the diaspora community of Jews is seen in the multi-volume set known as the Bavli (Babylonian) Talmud.

Hanukkah – (Extra Biblical) Celebrates restoration of temple to the worship of Adonai in the time of Antiochus Epiphanies

Hashem – The Name; also used instead of the Tetragrammaton (the four consonants that make up the holiest name of God which is often translated Jehovah in English); refers specifically to the Tetragrammatons)

Kabbalat – To welcome or greet (not to be confused with kabbalah)

Midrashim – Refers to the way in which the rabbis explain and expand upon Torah. Midrash seek to fill in the gaps we see in information within scripture. It focuses on answering such questions as “Why did they do that?” etc. The purpose is to explore motive and causation, but even more importantly the nature of human relationships and the relationship with God. As a result, more than one interpretation may be recorded for an event, based upon the aspect of human nature which the rabbi perceives may have caused the action or reaction. While not claiming inspiration, these midrashim can be very insightful. For example:

The Lord said to Cain, "Where is your brother Abel?" and he said, "I don't know. Am I my brother's keeper? (ha-shomer achi anokhi?)" (Genesis 4:9-10)

A parable: To what is this similar? To a thief who stole things in the night and was not caught. In the morning, the gatekeeper caught him. He said to the thief, "Why did you steal those things?" He said, "I am a thief, and I didn't let down my profession, but you, your profession is to guard the gate, why did you let down your profession? And now you ask me this?"

And this is what Cain said (to God): "I killed him [because] you created in me the evil inclination. But You--You are the keeper (haShomer) of all things, why did you allow me to kill him? You are the one who killed him--You who are called I (Anokhi), for if you had accepted my sacrifice as you did his, I wouldn't have been jealous of him!" (Tanhuma Bereishit).

Here, the biblical retort in which Cain asks, "Am I my brother's keeper?" has been turned on its head. The word in the text is Anokhi, a somewhat uncommon form of the word meaning 'I,' which is, strikingly, also used at the beginning of the 10 commandments, as in, "I am the Lord your God..."

The rabbis understand Cain's use of the word 'Anokhi' here not as first person singular, but as another name of God. "Isn't Anokhi (God) the guardian of my brother?" he retorts in response to God's question, thereby proving, as it were: "It is God (and not I, Cain) who had the task of watching over my brother Abel, and therefore God who failed him."

Here we see the same type of response to God's question as Adam and Eve gave to God—an answer which shifts blame to someone else, namely God. The world has scarcely begun, and the first human-on-human attack has just taken place, but does Cain accept the blame for this crime? Not only does he liken God to a guard (a shomer) who failed his duties, but he also reminds God that since God created the inclination to commit evil, then God is ultimately responsible!

This is the theme of the Great Controversy in the Midrashim.

Mishnah – Means “repeating.” It is one of the earliest codifications of Hebrew thought from the second century. It is a book that records an understanding of the laws governing a godly life in much the same way as attorneys today turn to case law to argue legal matters. There are six sections called sedarim (orders), which are then divided into additional divisions called masekhtot (tractates). The major divisions are 1) agriculture laws, 2) festival observance (including Shabbat), 3) marriage and divorce, and other contracts, 4) tort and financial law (damages, etc), 5) temple and sacrificial laws, and 6) ritual purification laws.

Moadim – Appointed times; often translated festival or feast

Oneg – Fellowship Meal

Parsha (also spelled parashah with parshayot being the plural) – Division of the Books of Moses into weekly readings

Pesach - Passover

Purim – No English equivalent

Rosh Hashanah – Feast of Trumpets

Shabbat – Sabbath

Shavuot – Pentecost

Simchat Torah – Rejoicing in the Torah

Sukkot – Feast of Booths

Tanakh – The Hebrew name for the Old Testament

Talmud – Means literally “to study.” It contains commentary and expansion upon the Mishnah and Gemara.

Torah – To the Jews, Torah means more than the Books of Moses; it is the central concept of Jewish life. In its larger context, the word means instruction or teaching, thus it is used to refer to the entire portion of scripture we call the Old Testament (the Tanakh) along with rabbinic commentaries upon the instructions and teachings.

Yom Kippur – Day of Atonement