

JEWISH BIBLE STUDY ROADMAP

Navigate the Tanakh Book by Book

A Practical Weekly Guide to Reading the Tanakh
Without Feeling Behind, Finally Seeing How All 24 Books Fit Together,
and Following Along with Confidence

by Matt E. Rose

A WORKBOOK FOR THE WHOLE FAMILY

TWENTY-FOUR BOOKS · TWENTY-FOUR STOPS · ONE MAP

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Scripture quotations are drawn from public-domain and licensed translations of the Tanakh, referenced by book, chapter, and verse throughout this workbook.

First edition, 2026. Printed in the format it was designed for — 8.5" × 11" — so there is always room to write.

A NOTE ON WHAT THIS BOOK IS

This workbook is an independent educational resource. It is a complement, never a substitute, for the guidance of a synagogue, a rabbi, or a house of Jewish learning. It is meant to walk alongside your community — never to replace it.

It is not a code of Jewish law, a course in Hebrew, or a work of Jewish philosophy. It is a map for reading the Tanakh itself, one stop at a time.

Where this workbook draws on scholarship — including the Jewish Study Bible, Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, and Marc Zvi Brettler's *How to Read the Bible* — it does so to inform its own words, not to substitute for reading those works directly. See "For Going Further," in the closing section, for where to turn next.

Author's Note

I did not grow up reading the Tanakh cover to cover, and I don't know many people who did — Jewish by birth or not. Most of us met it in pieces: a story at a Seder table, a scroll carried around a sanctuary, a name mentioned at a Bar or Bat Mitzvah we didn't fully understand. That patchwork is not a failure. It's simply how most people meet a very old, very large library.

This workbook exists for a specific moment: the one where you realize you want more than pieces. Maybe you're raising children who will ask questions you can't yet answer. Maybe you're the parent who didn't grow up with this text, standing next to a partner or a family for whom it matters deeply. Maybe you simply opened a Tanakh once, got a few pages into Leviticus, and put it down.

Wherever you're starting from, this book assumes one thing: you don't need to become a scholar to walk through these twenty-four books with confidence. You need a map, a steady pace, and permission to write in the margins.

I built this workbook the way I wish someone had built one for me — not a summary that replaces the text, and not a commentary that assumes you already know the basics, but something in between: a companion that sends you back to the Tanakh itself, again and again, with just enough context to read it as more than a list of names and rules.

You will not finish this book and know everything. No one does — not rabbis, not scholars who have spent a lifetime with this text. What you will have, twenty-four stops from now, is something more useful than complete knowledge: a working map of the whole library, a sense of where each book sits and why it was placed there, and a stack of your own notes in the margins to prove you actually walked the path yourself.

That's what these pages are for. Let's begin.

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How to Use This Book

This workbook covers all twenty-four books of the Tanakh in twenty-four stops, grouped into three parts — Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim — the same three parts that give the Tanakh its name.

Each stop follows the same five-step shape, described in full on page 8: Read, The Story, The Question, The Practice, and Your Notes. You can move through the book in order, one stop a week, which takes about six months at a steady pace — or slower, alongside a family calendar, a school year, or a conversion or b'nei mitzvah timeline. There is no wrong speed. There is only the next stop.

Some stops are short — a single, tightly focused book like Ruth or Song of Songs. Others, like Genesis or Psalms, hold more ground and are worth spreading across two sittings instead of one. Either way, the space given to each stop stays consistent, so you always know roughly how much time to set aside.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A copy of the Tanakh in a translation you're comfortable with, a pen, and about twenty minutes per stop. That's all.

IF YOU'RE READING WITH A CHILD

Every stop's closing question is written to be asked at any age. Read it together, out loud, and let their answer surprise you.

IF YOU'RE READING ALONE

Read the Read box first, in your actual Tanakh, before turning to this book's summary — the summary will mean far more once you've met the text firsthand.

A SAMPLE WEEK

Early in the week: Read the assigned chapters in your own Tanakh.

Midweek: Read The Story and The Question in this book, and sit with the question for a day or two before moving on.

Weekend: Read The Practice, fill in Your Notes, and check the stop off your tracker on page 13.

Why You Feel Behind

Here is something worth saying plainly: the Tanakh was never meant to be read the way you'd read a novel, start to finish, in one sitting, by one person, arriving at one tidy meaning.

It is not one book. It is a library of twenty-four, written across many centuries, in more than one voice, and it holds real disagreement inside it — about how to treat a stranger, about whether the righteous suffer, about what a good life even looks like. That is not a flaw to work around. It is the point.

Scholars who have spent their careers with this text describe it as a sourcebook, not a rulebook: a collection you are meant to sit with, argue with, and eventually make your own — inside a family, inside a community — rather than a manual you're supposed to have already memorized.

If you're the parent standing a half-step outside this tradition — not born into it, or born into it but never quite fluent in it — that feeling of being behind can be sharper still. You watch a partner, a grandparent, or a rabbi refer to a story with the shorthand of someone who has known it their whole life, and you quietly wonder when you were supposed to have learned it.

You weren't behind. You were simply never handed a map.

So if you've felt that gap, take it seriously enough to set it down. It isn't telling you the truth about what you're capable of. It's telling you that no one ever gave you a place to start.

“The Tanakh was written to be argued with, not memorized in silence.”

This is that place.

You're Not Starting From Zero

Before you turn the page, take stock of what you already have. It's more than you think.

If you've ever lit Shabbat candles, sat at a Seder, heard a shofar, fasted on Yom Kippur, or watched a Torah scroll carried through a sanctuary — you have already met this text in the way most people first meet it: lived, not read. Every one of those moments is a doorway into a stop in this book.

If you're raising a child who will stand before the community one day and read from the Torah — you are already doing the hardest part of this work, which is caring enough to ask the questions before you have all the answers.

And if none of that lived experience feels present yet — if this is genuinely a first step for you and your family — that counts too. Curiosity is not a lesser starting point than memory. Some of the most careful readers of any tradition's text are the ones who came to it late enough to still find it a little strange, and strange enough to actually look closely instead of skimming past what they assumed they already knew.

This book doesn't ask you to unlearn any of that and start over. It asks you to put a shape around it — twenty-four stops, in order, so the pieces you already carry finally sit inside a whole story instead of floating on their own.

Even ambivalence counts. If you've sat through a service unsure what you believed, or skipped one out of exhaustion rather than conviction, you were still in relationship with this tradition — genuinely, if imperfectly. This book does not require you to have resolved that relationship before you start reading.

Wherever you're standing right now counts as stop zero. Turn the page, and let's find stop one.

A Method as Old as the Text Itself

Every stop in this book follows five steps. They aren't a system invented for this workbook — they're a simplified version of how Jewish tradition has read its own text for centuries: first asking what a passage says in its own context, then asking what it asks of the person reading it today, and finally asking how that reading is meant to be lived.

These pages borrow that shape and make it approachable for a first read:

READ — which chapters to read before the stop, so the text comes first, not the summary.

THE STORY — what happens, and what it meant in its own time and place.

THE QUESTION — one question the text still asks of you, alongside a glimpse of how tradition has wrestled with it.

THE PRACTICE — how this passage is still alive today: a festival, a weekly reading cycle, a custom, or a value it hands down.

YOUR NOTES — space that belongs to you.

You don't need to know the Hebrew names for any of this. It's simply worth knowing, once, that you're not following an invented formula — you're walking a very old path.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

Pardes — Hebrew for “orchard,” and the traditional name for this layered way of reading: P'shat (context), Remez (allusion), D'rash (interpretation), and Sod (mystery). This workbook borrows the first three and leaves the fourth, more mystical layer for another day — and another teacher.

The Tanakh in One Page

"Tanakh" is an acronym built from the first letter of each of its three parts: Torah, Nevi'im, Ketuvim. Together they hold twenty-four books, by the traditional Jewish count — the same books other traditions may divide differently, but never a different library.

Part	Meaning / Books	In One Line
Torah	"Teaching" — 5 books	From the creation of the world to the edge of the Promised Land.
Nevi'im	"Prophets" — 8 books	The rise and fall of a nation, and the voices who kept telling it the truth.
Ketuvim	"Writings" — 11 books	Poetry, wisdom, and lived experience — how faith sounds in a real life.

Every stop in this workbook belongs to one of these three parts. Knowing which part you're in is often the fastest way to know what kind of text you're about to read — a legal instruction reads differently once you know you're in Torah rather than Ketuvim, and a poem reads differently once you know it's sitting in Ketuvim rather than Nevi'im.

If you've encountered a different count elsewhere — the Christian Old Testament lists thirty-nine books, not twenty-four — the difference is a matter of counting, not content. Books like Samuel, Kings, Ezra–Nehemiah, and the Twelve Minor Prophets are counted as one book each in the Jewish tradition, and split into two or more books elsewhere. This workbook follows the traditional Jewish count of twenty-four, and its order of the three parts, throughout.

The Shape of the Story

Zoomed all the way out, the Tanakh tells one long story in three movements.

It begins with the world, and then narrows — from all of humanity, to one family, to one people, given a teaching and a land. It rises through kingdoms, splits, and falls, as prophets keep interrupting the story to ask whether power and justice have anything to do with each other. And it closes not with a single ending but with many voices — poems, arguments, love songs, wisdom collected from a lifetime of living — as if to say that after everything, the last word belongs to how you actually live.

THE FIRST MOVEMENT — TORAH

Starts as wide as the universe and narrows, book by book, into one family, then one people, standing at the edge of a promised land with a teaching in hand and no full certainty yet how to live it.

THE SECOND MOVEMENT — NEVI'IM

Tells you what actually happened next: kingdoms rise, split, and fall, while a series of individuals with no formal office and no guaranteed audience keep standing up to ask power an uncomfortable question — does any of this have anything to do with justice?

THE THIRD MOVEMENT — KETUVIM

Doesn't resolve that tension so much as sit inside it, honestly, in whatever form the moment calls for: a poem, a protest, a love song, a genealogy, a story about a woman who chose loyalty over safety. It is the most varied of the three, on purpose.

You will lose this shape a dozen times between Genesis and Chronicles. That's expected — twenty-four books is a lot to hold at once. Come back to this page whenever you do.

How Each Stop Works

Here is one full stop, filled in, so you can see the shape before you meet it for real on page 17.

READ

Genesis 1–3

THE STORY

The world is created in an ordered unfolding — light, sky, sea, land, living things, and finally human beings, told twice, from two angles: once as the crown of an orderly creation, once as a person placed in a garden with one instruction and a choice. In the garden, the man and woman are given nearly unlimited freedom, bounded by a single restriction — one tree, one instruction — and a companion, a serpent, that questions why the restriction exists at all. The choice is made quickly, almost anticlimactically, and what follows isn't punishment handed down from a great height so much as a description of what changes once innocence is traded for knowledge: work grows harder, relationships more complicated, and the easy nearness of the garden gives way to a world the man and woman now have to navigate on their own terms.

THE QUESTION

If freedom always includes the freedom to get it wrong, what does it cost to be trusted with a choice? Jewish commentators have long noticed that the text never blames the world for what happens next — only the choice. It would have been easy for the story to end differently: a garden with no tree at all, a world with no real options to weigh, obedience guaranteed because nothing else was ever on offer. Genesis chooses the harder version instead, one where the very first humans are handed the same unglamorous freedom every person after them inherits — the freedom to listen to the wrong voice, and the responsibility that comes attached to it either way. What would it mean to see that freedom as a gift rather than only a risk?

THE PRACTICE

Genesis opens the annual cycle of Torah readings, begun each year on Simchat Torah — the only time a book's ending and its beginning are read on the very same day, Deuteronomy's final words giving way, within the same service, to Genesis's first. The portion covering these opening chapters, Bereshit, is read on the very first Shabbat of that new cycle, meaning every year, somewhere in the world, a community is starting over from “in the beginning” at almost exactly the same moment. It's a small, built-in reminder that no reading of this book is meant to be the last one — there's always another year, another pass through the same opening words, waiting on the calendar.

Notice the pattern: Read tells you where to start. The Story and The Question do the thinking. The Practice ties it to something lived, not just studied. Your Notes make it yours.

You'll see this same shape twenty-four times. By the time you reach Chronicles, it won't feel like a formula anymore — it will feel like how you read.

One more thing worth noticing in the example above: The Question doesn't have a single correct answer printed anywhere in this book. That's deliberate. Somewhere between the Torah's own refusal to hand Adam and Eve's choice one final, tidy verdict, and this workbook's refusal to hand you a settled resolution, sits the actual point of using a genuinely Jewish method of reading — the tradition itself treats a good question as something to keep, not something to solve and set aside.

QUICK REFERENCE

Read → The Story → The Question → The Practice → Your Notes

A NOTE FOR FAMILIES

If you're using this book with children of different ages, don't feel obligated to cover every layer with everyone at once. A six-year-old can sit with The Story and The Practice. A teenager might be the one who wants to stay in The Question the longest. The five steps aren't a staircase everyone has to climb in lockstep — they're five doors into the same room.

Your Year at a Glance

All twenty-four stops, in order. Check one off as you finish it — there's no prize for speed, only for finishing what you start.

PART ONE & PART TWO — TORAH AND NEVI'IM

Part	#	Book	Done	Date / Note
Torah	1	Genesis	☐	
Torah	2	Exodus	☐	
Torah	3	Leviticus	☐	
Torah	4	Numbers	☐	
Torah	5	Deuteronomy	☐	
Nevi'im	6	Joshua	☐	
Nevi'im	7	Judges	☐	
Nevi'im	8	Samuel	☐	
Nevi'im	9	Kings	☐	
Nevi'im	10	Isaiah	☐	
Nevi'im	11	Jeremiah	☐	
Nevi'im	12	Ezekiel	☐	
Nevi'im	13	The Twelve	☐	

PART THREE — KETUVIM

Part	#	Book	Done	Date / Note
Ketuvim	14	Psalms	☐	
Ketuvim	15	Proverbs	☐	
Ketuvim	16	Job	☐	
Ketuvim	17	Song of Songs	☐	
Ketuvim	18	Ruth	☐	
Ketuvim	19	Lamentations	☐	
Ketuvim	20	Ecclesiastes	☐	
Ketuvim	21	Esther	☐	
Ketuvim	22	Daniel	☐	
Ketuvim	23	Ezra–Nehemiah	☐	
Ketuvim	24	Chronicles	☐	

If a stop takes you three weeks instead of one, that's not falling behind — that's actually reading, not skimming. Come back to this page any time you want to see, at a glance, exactly how far you've come.

A SMALL RITUAL WORTH KEEPING

Some families check off a stop together, out loud, the way you might light a candle — a small, repeatable marker that says: we did this one. It doesn't need to be elaborate to count.

Make It Yours

This copy is meant to get worn out. Underline what unsettles you. Argue in the margins. Let a child's handwriting sit next to yours in the Notes pages — that's not clutter, that's exactly what this book is for.

If you're reading this as part of a mixed or interfaith family, know that this book was written with you specifically in mind: not to make a decision for you about how Jewish practice should look in your home, but to make sure that whatever you decide, it's built on having actually met the text — not just its highlights.

If you're doing this alongside a partner from a different background, or fielding questions from grandparents on either side about how you're raising your children, know this too: engaging seriously with this text — reading it, not just referencing it — is itself a way of honoring it, regardless of where each of you started.

There will be stops that move you and stops that leave you cold. Both are normal. Twenty-four books written across a thousand years were never going to land the same way, on the same reader, every single time.

Come back to this same copy in a year, in five years, at a different stage of parenting or a different stage of your own understanding. The Tanakh doesn't change; you will. That's not a flaw in either of you — it's the reason a book like this is worth keeping, not just reading once and shelving.

May you open this book a little uncertain, and close it a little more at home in a text that was, in some sense, already yours to inherit.

Turn the page. Genesis is waiting, and it starts, appropriately enough, with the very first light.

Genesis

Bereshit — “In the Beginning”

READ

Genesis, chapters 1–50 — the whole book. If you can only manage pieces this week, prioritize chapters 1–3, 12, 22, and 37–45.

THE STORY

Genesis opens with two creation accounts told from different angles — the ordered seven-day unfolding of Genesis 1, and the more intimate, human-scaled garden story of Genesis 2–3 — before moving quickly through the flood and the tower of Babel. By chapter 12, the camera narrows sharply: from all of humanity to one family. God calls Abraham to leave everything familiar and follow a promise he cannot yet see fulfilled — land, descendants, blessing. What follows is not a story of perfect people living up to a perfect calling. Abraham lies about Sarah twice to protect himself. Isaac favors one son; Rebecca deceives her husband to secure the blessing for the other. Jacob cheats his brother, is cheated in turn by his uncle, and wrestles literally with a stranger before dawn. None of it disqualifies them from the promise. That is, in many ways, the argument Genesis is making before it says anything else: being chosen was never the same as being flawless.

Jacob's dream at Bethel — a ladder set on the earth with its top reaching the heavens, angels going up and down it (28:12) — comes at his lowest point, fleeing his own brother's anger, sleeping outside with a stone for a pillow. He wakes and says, startled, “God was in this place, and I, I did not know” (28:16), naming the site Bet-El, “house of God.” It's one of Genesis's clearest statements that the promise doesn't wait for someone to be ready or settled to make itself known.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named *Bereshit* — not “Genesis,” but simply its own opening word, meaning “in the beginning.” All five books of the Torah are named this way, for their first distinctive word or phrase, not for a summary of their contents. “Genesis” — from the Greek for “origin” — is a translator's label, added centuries later.

STOP 1 • PART ONE: TORAH

The book's final third belongs to Joseph — sold into slavery by his own brothers, rising to power in Egypt, and eventually holding his family's survival in his hands. When the moment for revenge finally arrives, Joseph instead says the line many readers consider the hinge of the entire book: “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (Genesis 50:20). It is a stunning reframe — not a denial that real harm happened, but a refusal to let that harm be the last word. Genesis ends not in Canaan, the land promised back in chapter 12, but in Egypt, with a coffin and an unfinished journey. That unfinished quality is deliberate: Genesis hands the story to Exodus incomplete, on purpose.

Modern biblical scholarship reads Genesis as a woven text, not a single composition — echoes of what scholars call the J, E, and P sources, each with its own vocabulary and accent, visible side by side in the same chapters. That doesn't flatten the book's power; if anything, it explains why Genesis holds so many perspectives without smoothing them into one voice. The matriarchs, too, drive as much of the plot as the patriarchs: Sarah's laughter, Rebecca's decisiveness at the well, Rachel and Leah's rivalry over children — the promise moves forward through their initiative as much as any man's.

Chapter 22 holds the story tradition calls the Akedah, the “binding” of Isaac — Abraham raising a knife over his own son at what he believes is God's command, until an angel stops him at the last moment and a ram is offered instead. Jewish tradition reads it as a demonstration, once and for good, that this God does not want child sacrifice. The Akedah is read in full every Rosh Hashanah.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Abraham & Sarah	Called to leave home for a promised land and a promised child, fulfilled late and against the odds.
Isaac & Rebecca	The quieter middle generation; their household tension over Jacob and Esau sets the next chapter in motion.
Jacob (Israel) & his twelve sons	Renamed after wrestling with a stranger; his sons become the twelve tribes of Israel.
Joseph	Sold by his brothers, rises in Egypt, and reframes betrayal as survival — the bridge into Exodus.

STOP 1 • PART ONE: TORAH

THE QUESTION

The two creation accounts even call God by different names — Elohim throughout Genesis 1, and the LORD God (YHVH Elohim) once the more intimate account of Genesis 2 begins — one of the textual clues scholars point to when distinguishing the sources woven through the book. Whatever produced that difference, the text itself never flags it as a problem to be resolved.

Classical Jewish commentators noticed something modern readers often smooth over without meaning to: Genesis tells the story of creation twice, and the two versions don't quite agree on the order of events. Genesis 1 builds toward humanity, male and female together, as the crown of an orderly week. Genesis 2 tells a slower, dustier story — one person, formed from the ground, given a single instruction before a partner even exists. Rather than force the two into one seamless account, generations of readers have sat with both, reading them as two different angles on the same truth rather than a contradiction to be resolved. What does it change for you to imagine the text holding two true things at once, side by side, without smoothing the seam between them?

THE PRACTICE

Genesis opens the annual cycle of Torah readings, divided into twelve weekly portions (parashot) from Bereshit through Vayechi. The cycle begins each year on Simchat Torah, immediately after the previous cycle's final portion, Deuteronomy's Vezot HaBerakhah, is read — meaning the very last words of the Torah and the very first words of Genesis are read within minutes of each other, in the same service. It's a small, physical way of saying the story never really ends.

TRY THIS

Ask someone in your life — a partner, a parent, a friend — which biblical figure from Genesis they'd want to sit next to at a long dinner. Compare their pick with your own in Your Notes, and ask why.

Your Notes — Genesis · 1 of 2

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

Your Notes — Genesis · 2 of 2

[illegible]

“Election in Genesis is never about being flawless — it's about being chosen anyway.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can name the shift from Genesis 1–11 (the whole world) to Genesis 12–50 (one family).
- ☐ I can say, in my own words, what Joseph means in Genesis 50:20.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Genesis left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Genesis ends in Egypt, with a family settled comfortably under Joseph's protection. Exodus opens generations later, with that comfort gone and a new Pharaoh in power. The bridge between the two books is silence — an unnarrated stretch of centuries in which a family became a people, and a people became slaves.

Exodus

Shemot — “Names”

READ

Exodus, chapters 1–20 and 32 at minimum — the full book if your week allows it.

THE STORY

Exodus opens generations after Joseph's death, with a new Pharaoh who “did not know Joseph” and a people enslaved by the very country that once saved them. The book's first act is an origin story: Moses, born into danger, raised in Pharaoh's own house, fleeing after killing an Egyptian overseer, and eventually called from a burning bush that is not consumed. What follows is a public contest — ten plagues, escalating, aimed as much at Pharaoh's gods as at Pharaoh himself — until the Israelites walk free through a sea that closes behind them. It is the story every later part of the Tanakh keeps returning to: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt” becomes the single most repeated sentence in the entire Hebrew Bible.

The night of the tenth plague is given its own set of instructions that double as the origin of a ritual still practiced today: a lamb slaughtered, its blood marking the doorposts, the meal eaten dressed and ready to leave (12:1-11) — Passover instituted, in the text's own telling, before the exodus it commemorates has even happened yet. “You shall observe this as an institution for all time,” the text insists (12:24), turning a single, desperate night into an annual obligation for every generation after.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named *Shemot*, “names,” from its opening line: “These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt.” The English title, *Exodus* — Greek for “the road out” — names the book's most famous event instead of its first word, the way most translators have treated all five books of the Torah.

STOP 2 · PART ONE: TORAH

But Exodus doesn't end at freedom — it ends at Sinai, where freedom is immediately given shape. The Ten Commandments are spoken directly to the people, followed by chapters of case law covering everyday disputes, and then, almost immediately, a crisis: while Moses is still on the mountain, the people build a golden calf. The back half of the book is largely taken up with construction — detailed, repeated instructions for building the Mishkan, the portable sanctuary that will travel with the people through the wilderness. Exodus ends with the divine presence, as a cloud by day and fire by night, settling over that structure. The people are free, but they are not left to figure out what freedom means alone.

Exodus 15, the Song of the Sea sung immediately after the crossing, is considered by many scholars among the oldest poetry preserved anywhere in the Tanakh — its archaic Hebrew grammar alone sets it apart from the prose surrounding it. Miriam leads the women in an answering refrain with timbrels, a detail later Jewish tradition expanded considerably, imagining a well of water that followed the Israelites through the wilderness in her merit. The half-shekel census, the instructions for the portable sanctuary, and the elaborate priestly garments that fill the book's final third can feel like a change of subject after such a dramatic rescue — but the text is making an argument: freedom without a place to meet God is unfinished freedom.

The ten plagues that force Pharaoh's hand are often read as a direct challenge to Egypt's own gods — the Nile turned to blood confronting the river deity, the plague of darkness confronting the sun god Ra, each disaster undoing a claim Egyptian religion made about its own power. At Sinai, the covenant is sealed with Ten Commandments (20:2-14) spoken, the text says, directly to the assembled people rather than through Moses alone — the only time in the Torah the whole community hears God's voice together, an experience so overwhelming later tradition says they asked Moses to receive the rest of the law on their behalf.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Moses	Raised in Pharaoh's household, called at the burning bush, leads the exodus and receives the law at Sinai.
Aaron	Moses's brother and spokesman; later the first High Priest — and, briefly, the one who builds the golden calf.
Miriam	Prophetess and Moses's sister; leads the women in song after the sea crossing.
Pharaoh	Never named — a role more than a person, representing power that refuses to yield.

THE QUESTION

The legal section immediately following the Ten Commandments, known as Mishpatim (21:1-23:19), reads like a working constitution for a newly free people: protections for widows, orphans, and resident strangers (“you were strangers in the land of Egypt”), a ban on charging interest to the poor, rules for returning a neighbor's lost property even to someone you dislike. Freedom, in this book, isn't left as an abstract feeling — it's immediately translated into enforceable obligations toward the most vulnerable people in the community.

At the burning bush, when Moses asks for a name, God answers with a phrase that resists any easy translation: Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh, rendered variously as “I Am That I Am,” “I Will Be What I Will Be,” or “I Will Be There.” Rabbinic commentators have long read the open-endedness as deliberate — a God who cannot be pinned to one fixed definition, only encountered in relationship, over time. That same refusal to settle for one fixed shape shows up again later in the book, in how Exodus treats law itself.

Pirkei Avot, the classical collection of rabbinic ethical teachings, makes a wordplay in Hebrew that doesn't survive translation cleanly: the tablets were charut (engraved) with the commandments, but the sages read the word as though it said cherut — freedom. Their point: don't read law and liberty as opposites competing for the same space. Exodus itself seems to argue this before the rabbis ever said it — the same book that celebrates walking out of slavery spends twice as many chapters on what to build once you're free. What would it mean, in your own life, to treat structure as a form of freedom rather than its opposite?

THE PRACTICE

Exodus is read across eleven weekly portions, from Shemot through Pekudei, generally falling between December and March. Its opening story is also the one Jewish families retell every year at the Passover Seder — not as history recited at a distance, but in the first person: “In every generation, each person is obligated to see themselves as if they personally had come out of Egypt.”

TRY THIS

Name one piece of “structure” in your own life — a routine, a rule, a boundary — that, looked at closely, is actually a form of freedom rather than a limit on it. Write it down before you talk yourself out of it.

Your Notes — Exodus · 1 of 2

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

Your Notes — Exodus • 2 of 2

[illegible]

***“Exodus insists that freedom and structure are not opposites
— they're partners.”***

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe what happens at the burning bush in my own words.
- ☐ I can name one thing the Israelites are freed from, and one thing they are given in its place.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Exodus left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Exodus ends with the Mishkan built and the divine presence settling over it. Leviticus picks up in that very same moment, still standing at the entrance to this new structure — and asks not “what happens next in the story,” but a quieter, more practical question: now that it's built, how do we actually use it?

Leviticus

Vayikra — “And He Called”

READ

Leviticus, chapters 1, 16, 19, and 25 at minimum — the whole book if you have time, since it's shorter than it looks.

THE STORY

If Exodus ends with a sanctuary built, Leviticus is the manual for what happens inside it. Its opening chapters catalog the sacrificial system in careful, almost technical detail — what kind of offering for what kind of occasion, brought by whom, handled how. It is, admittedly, the part of the Torah most first-time readers find hardest to love. But Leviticus is not only, or even mainly, a ritual manual. Its center — chapter 19, often called the Holiness Code — reads less like ritual instruction and more like an ethics statement: love your neighbor as yourself, leave the edges of your field unharvested for the poor and the stranger, don't hold back a hired worker's wages overnight, don't put a stumbling block before the blind. Ritual and ethics sit inside the same book, on purpose, without a hierarchy between them.

Among the offerings Leviticus catalogs, the peace offering (*shelamim*) stands apart: unlike offerings burned entirely or reserved for the priests, portions of it are returned to the person who brought it, to be eaten in a celebratory meal with family and friends (chapter 3, 7:11-18). Sacrifice, in other words, wasn't only about loss or atonement — some of it was designed, deliberately, to end in a shared table.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named *Vayikra*, “and He called,” from its opening words: “And the LORD called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting.” The English title, *Leviticus*, comes from the Greek for “relating to the Levites,” the priestly tribe — a fitting summary of the book's content, but not, as in Hebrew, its own opening line.

STOP 3 • PART ONE: TORAH

Leviticus also introduces Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, in careful ritual detail in chapter 16 — the one day a year the High Priest entered the innermost sanctuary. And the book closes with a vision that extends holiness beyond the sanctuary altogether: the sabbatical year, when the land itself rests every seventh year, and the Jubilee, when every fiftieth year, land returns to its original family and debts are released. It's a striking way to end a book that opened with altar instructions — holiness, by the final chapters, has become an economic and ecological idea, not only a ceremonial one.

Chapter 19, often called the Holiness Code's centerpiece, moves in a single breath from ritual instruction to some of the most quoted ethical demands in the Tanakh: leave the corners of your field for the poor, do not deal falsely, do not stand idly by your neighbor's blood, love your neighbor as yourself (19:18) — a verse the sage Rabbi Akiva later called the Torah's single greatest principle. Modern scholars generally attribute Leviticus to the Priestly source (P), the same strand responsible for Genesis 1's ordered creation account, and read the whole book as building one sustained argument: that holiness is not confined to the sanctuary but is meant to spread outward into how a community treats its most vulnerable members.

Chapter 11 lays out the dietary laws — kashrut — that still shape observant Jewish life today: which animals may be eaten, the requirement that a mammal both chew its cud and have split hooves, why fish need fins and scales, why certain birds are excluded by name rather than by rule. Scholars have proposed many explanations, from hygiene to ancient symbolic ecology; the text itself gives only one — that a people set apart is meant to eat differently, distinguishing “between the unclean and the clean” (11:47) as a daily, repeated reminder of a larger identity, not a single dramatic gesture but a habit built into every meal.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Aaron & his sons	The priestly family responsible for the sacrificial system and the sanctuary's daily operation.
Nadab & Abihu	Aaron's two eldest sons, whose deaths early in the book remain one of its most debated, unresolved moments.
The whole community	Chapter 19's Holiness Code addresses its ethical demands directly to “the whole congregation of the Israelites” (19:2) — holiness here is not the priesthood's job alone, but everyone's.

STOP 3 • PART ONE: TORAH

THE QUESTION

The clearest picture of how Leviticus separates these categories comes on Yom Kippur itself: two goats are chosen by lot, one sacrificed at the altar and one — the scapegoat — sent out into the wilderness bearing the community's sins (16:20-22). Even here, the ritual keeps a physical, external form (an animal sent away) distinct from an internal state of guilt requiring repentance; the ritual manages what it can manage, and leaves the rest to the person.

Scholars who study ancient Israelite religion point out that ritual impurity, in Leviticus's system, was not rare or shameful — it was an expected, recurring part of ordinary life, generated by things every person eventually experiences: childbirth, illness, contact with death. The system exists to manage that reality, not to punish it. That framing matters for how the next distinction in this book actually functions.

Leviticus draws a careful line, easy to blur from the outside, between ritual impurity (*tumah*) and moral guilt. Touching a corpse, for instance, makes a person ritually impure — but it is not a sin. The two categories are treated as genuinely different things, requiring different responses. What might it change to hold “I did something wrong” and “I am in a state that needs addressing” as two separate ideas, rather than collapsing every kind of not-okay into guilt?

THE PRACTICE

Leviticus is read across ten weekly portions, from Vayikra through Bechukotai, generally falling between March and May. Chapter 19 — the Holiness Code — is read in many communities on the afternoon of Yom Kippur itself, pairing the day's themes of atonement with its most direct statement of what a holy life actually asks of you, day to day.

TRY THIS

Reread Leviticus 19:9–18 slowly. Pick one instruction from it — leaving something for someone else, paying promptly, not standing idle — and try to actually do it this week, not just note it.

Your Notes — Leviticus • 1 of 2

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

Your Notes — Leviticus • 2 of 2

[illegible]

“In Leviticus, holiness is not kept separate from daily life — it's built into it.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can name one ritual law and one ethical law from Leviticus 19.
- ☐ I can explain, in my own words, the difference between impurity and guilt.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Leviticus left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Leviticus ends with laws for a people who are, for the moment, standing still at Sinai. Numbers opens with a census — the first sign that standing still is about to end, and that a journey toward the land itself is finally about to resume.

Numbers

Bemidbar — “In the Wilderness”

READ

Numbers, chapters 13–14, 16, and 20 at minimum — the whole book if you can.

THE STORY

Numbers (Bemidbar, “In the Wilderness”) opens with a census — the counting that gives the book its English name — and then sends twelve scouts ahead into Canaan to report on the land. Ten come back afraid, describing a land that “devours its inhabitants” and people so large they felt like grasshoppers by comparison. Two, Joshua and Caleb, disagree, insisting the land can be taken. The people side with fear, and the consequence is severe: an entire generation, the story says, will not live to enter the land they were promised — forty years, one for each day the scouts spent scouting, will pass in the wilderness first.

Chapter 6 also gives the Tanakh its most recited blessing: “May the LORD bless you and protect you; may the LORD deal kindly and graciously with you; may the LORD bestow favor upon you and grant you peace” (6:24-26) — words a priest was instructed to say over the people, and which Jewish parents still say over their children at the Shabbat table, nearly word for word, more than three thousand years later.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named Bemidbar, “in the wilderness,” from its opening line: “The LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai.” The English title, Numbers, translates the Greek Arithmoi — a nod to the two censuses that open and close the book, rather than to the wilderness setting that gives the book its Hebrew name and its true subject.

STOP 4 · PART ONE: TORAH

What follows is a long middle stretch marked by rebellion and consequence: Korah leads an uprising against Moses and Aaron's leadership; Miriam and Aaron both die in the wilderness; Moses himself, in a moment of frustration, strikes a rock for water instead of speaking to it as instructed, and is told he too will not enter the land. By the book's end, though, a new generation has been counted — a second census, a fresh start — camped at the edge of the Jordan, finally ready for what their parents could not face. Numbers is, in that sense, less a story about a place than about the time it takes to become ready for one.

One of Numbers' strangest episodes belongs to an outsider: Balaam, a non-Israelite prophet hired by a Moabite king to curse the approaching Israelites, finds himself blessing them instead — three times, against his own client's growing fury — after his donkey, seeing an angel blocking the road before Balaam does, refuses to move and is given, briefly, the power of speech. Balaam's opening line in his second blessing, “How goodly are your tents, O Jacob” (24:5), became the words later tradition chose to open the morning synagogue service — a hostile outsider's grudging praise, still recited daily, centuries later, as if to prove a blessing's source matters less than its truth.

Late in the book, five sisters — the daughters of Zelophehad — approach Moses directly to challenge a law that would leave their father's inheritance with no heir, since he died without sons. Moses brings their case to God, and the ruling changes: daughters may inherit when there is no son (27:1-11), a law amended in the text itself because five women asked a hard question out loud. It is one of the few moments in the Torah where legislation visibly changes in direct response to someone's objection, with the people who raised it named and credited.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
The Twelve Scouts	Sent to assess Canaan; Joshua and Caleb alone report with confidence rather than fear.
Korah	Leads a rebellion against Moses and Aaron's authority, challenging the structure of leadership itself.
The new generation	Counted at the book's end, camped at the Jordan, ready to do what their parents could not.

STOP 4 · PART ONE: TORAH

THE QUESTION

The wilderness years are threaded with complaint: about water, about the monotony of manna, about missing the food of Egypt even while remembering slavery selectively. At Kibroth-hattaavah, “graves of craving,” a plague strikes after the people demand meat and then gorge on it (11:31-34) — named, permanently, for the appetite that drove people there. Numbers doesn't hide how difficult freedom's transition period actually was, or flatter the generation living through it.

Twelve scouts are sent to survey the land; ten return with a report calibrated to provoke fear (“we looked like grasshoppers in our own eyes”), while only Caleb and Joshua argue the land is winnable. The people believe the frightened majority, and the consequence is precise and deliberate: forty years of wandering, one year for each of the forty days the scouts spent in the land (14:34) — the punishment mirrors the crime exactly, in scale as well as substance.

It would have been faster, narratively, to skip straight from the promise to its fulfillment. Numbers refuses that shortcut, insisting on forty hard years in between. Is there a promise in your own life — for yourself, or for someone you're raising — that you've been impatient with, expecting readiness to arrive faster than it actually can?

THE PRACTICE

Numbers is read across ten weekly portions, from Bemidbar through Masei, generally falling between May and July. Its sixth chapter contains the Priestly Blessing — “May the LORD bless you and protect you...” — among the oldest continuously used blessings in Jewish practice, still recited by many parents over their children at the start of Shabbat.

TRY THIS

Look up the words of the Priestly Blessing (Numbers 6:24–26) in a translation you like. Try saying it, once, over someone in your household this week — a child, a partner, even yourself in a mirror.

Your Notes — Numbers • 1 of 2

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

Your Notes — Numbers · 2 of 2

[illegible]

“Numbers is the story of what has to happen between a promise and being ready for it.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain why the scouts' report leads to forty years in the wilderness.
- ☐ I can name one leader who dies in Numbers, and why it matters that they don't reach the land.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Numbers left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Numbers ends with a new generation counted and camped at the Jordan, ready to cross. Deuteronomy opens in that exact spot — not with a river crossing, but with one long speech, because before this generation moves forward, Moses insists they understand what they're carrying with them.

Deuteronomy

Devarim — “Words”

READ

Deuteronomy, chapters 1–11 and 34 at minimum — the whole book if you can, since much of it is one continuous speech.

THE STORY

Deuteronomy (Devarim, “Words”) is almost entirely a farewell. Moses, standing with the new generation at the edge of the Jordan, delivers a series of speeches that retell the story so far and reissue the law — not as a dry repetition, but addressed directly to people who, for the most part, were children or not yet born when it first happened at Sinai. Again and again, the speeches return to a single command: remember. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt. Remember the day you stood at the mountain. The word appears so often that memory itself becomes one of the book's central themes — not memory as nostalgia, but as the thing that is supposed to shape how you treat a stranger, a worker, a debtor, precisely because you know, firsthand, what it felt like to be one.

Deuteronomy 17 lays out rules for a king the people don't have yet, limiting his power in advance: he may not accumulate excessive horses, wives, or silver and gold, and he must personally write out a copy of this teaching and read from it all his life, “so that his heart not be lifted above his brothers” (17:14-20). Written, by most scholars' reckoning, centuries before any king it describes, the law reads like a deliberate check placed on power before power existed to resist it.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named Devarim, “words,” from its opening line: “These are the words that Moses spoke to all Israel.” The English title, Deuteronomy — Greek for “second law” — reflects an ancient (and slightly imprecise) reading of the book as a repetition of the law already given; in Hebrew, it is simply the words Moses said, once, before he could no longer say them.

STOP 5 • PART ONE: TORAH

The book closes with Moses's death — in view of the land, on Mount Nebo, but not inside it. It is one of the most quietly devastating endings in the entire Tanakh: the person who did more than anyone to get this people to this point does not get to finish the journey himself. Leadership passes to Joshua, and the Torah ends there, at the border, with the next chapter deliberately left for someone else to write. Deuteronomy's final portion, *Vezot HaBerakhah*, is the only one read on a festival rather than a regular Shabbat — on Simchat Torah, immediately followed, in the same service, by Genesis's opening words.

Deuteronomy also gives the Tanakh its single most recited line: “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One” (6:4), the opening words of the Shema, paired immediately with the instruction to love God “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might” and to teach these words to your children — a verse still said morning and night in traditional Jewish practice, and, by long custom, among the last words a dying person tries to say. Few sentences in any literature have been repeated by as many people, for as long, as this one.

Deuteronomy 16:20 supplies one of the most quoted phrases in later Jewish social-justice writing: “Justice, justice shall you pursue” — the word doubled, commentators have long noted, perhaps for emphasis, perhaps to insist that just ends require just means. The book's central speeches close on a stark choice laid out in chapter 30: “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore choose life” (30:19) — not a prediction but an appeal, addressed to a people about to enter a land they haven't seen yet.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Moses	Delivers his final teaching and dies within sight of the land he spent his life leading toward.
Joshua	Publicly commissioned as Moses's successor — the one who will lead the actual crossing.
The new generation	The direct audience of Moses's speeches — told to remember, for the sake of those who won't cross with them.

STOP 5 • PART ONE: TORAH

THE QUESTION

Deuteronomy returns again and again to a single justification for its social laws: “remember that you were a slave in Egypt” (repeated, nearly word for word, at 5:15, 15:15, 16:12, and 24:18, 22). Protection for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow isn't grounded in abstract ethics so much as in memory — a formerly enslaved people commanded to treat vulnerability the way they once wished someone had treated them.

The same passage that gives the Shema its opening line also instructs binding these words “as a sign on your hand” and between your eyes, and writing them on the doorposts of your house (6:8-9) — the textual origin of tefillin and the mezuzah, two of Judaism's most enduring physical practices, both born from a single verse about keeping a teaching close enough to touch.

Moses begs, more than once, to be allowed across the river — “Let me cross over and see the good land” (3:25) — and is refused, told firmly to drop the subject and instead commission Joshua for the job Moses himself won't get to finish. It is one of the rare moments in the Torah where Moses's own private grief, rather than the people's, is placed directly in view.

Moses spends his final weeks pouring everything he has into people who will get to see what he worked for, and he will not. What does it cost — and what might it be worth — to invest that fully in an outcome you know, going in, you won't personally witness?

THE PRACTICE

Deuteronomy is read across eleven weekly portions, from Devarim through Vezot HaBerakhah — the very last portion of the annual cycle, read on Simchat Torah and followed immediately by the first words of Genesis, closing the loop the Torah has been building toward all year.

TRY THIS

Write one sentence you'd want passed on to someone after you — a child, a student, a friend — the way Moses tried to pass on everything he knew in his final words. Keep it in Your Notes; it doesn't need to be finished today.

Your Notes — Deuteronomy · 1 of 2

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

Your Notes — Deuteronomy · 2 of 2

[illegible]

“Deuteronomy is what it looks like to pass on a story you won't get to see the ending of.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can say what Deuteronomy asks readers to ‘remember,’ and why.
- ☐ I can explain why Moses doesn't enter the land, and how the book handles that.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Deuteronomy left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Deuteronomy ends the Torah at the border, with Moses's death and Joshua newly commissioned. Nevi'im — Part Two of this book — picks up exactly there: a people about to cross into the land for the first time, led by someone who is not Moses, carrying a teaching Moses will not see put into practice himself.

Joshua

Yehoshua — “The LORD Saves”

READ

Joshua, chapters 1–2, 6, and 23–24 at minimum — the whole book if you can.

THE STORY

Joshua opens exactly where Deuteronomy left off: Moses is dead, and Joshua — his aide since the days in the wilderness — is told to lead the people across the Jordan into the land. The book's first half is a conquest narrative: the fall of Jericho, whose walls come down after seven days of marching and a shout; the ambush and eventual capture of Ai; a series of southern and northern campaigns against coalitions of local kings. Interwoven with the battles is a quieter, deliberately placed story — Rahab, a Canaanite woman in Jericho, hides two Israelite scouts and is spared along with her household when the city falls, becoming, in later Jewish tradition, one of the most honored converts in the entire Tanakh. The line between insider and outsider, drawn so sharply elsewhere in this book, is not as fixed as it first appears.

During the battle against a coalition of Amorite kings, the text records one of its strangest moments: at Joshua's command, “the sun stood still, and the moon stayed, until the nation had taken vengeance on their enemies” (10:12-13), a day the text says had no equal before or since. Commentators across the centuries — from ancient astronomers to medieval philosophers — have argued over how literally to read it; the book itself simply reports it as fact, credited to a poetic source, the lost Book of Yashar, that it cites by name.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named Yehoshua, after its central figure — “the LORD saves,” from the same root later shortened to Hoshea, one of the names Moses gives Joshua earlier in the Torah. It's the first of the Nevi'im named for a person rather than an opening word, a pattern most of the rest of this part will follow.

STOP 6 · PART TWO: NEVI'IM

The book's second half slows down considerably: chapter after chapter allots specific territory to each of the twelve tribes, the least dramatic reading in the entire Tanakh and, for the original audience, probably the most practically important — this is a land registry as much as a story. Joshua closes with two farewell speeches. In the second, at Shechem, Joshua lays out the whole story so far and asks the people to choose, plainly, whom they will serve — his own answer supplying one of the most quoted lines in the Tanakh: “as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” (Joshua 24:15). The people renew the covenant, Joshua dies, and the book ends, quietly, with two burials — Joshua's, and, a few verses earlier, the bones of Joseph, finally brought up from Egypt generations after Genesis promised they would be.

After the crossing, Joshua orders twelve stones pulled from the Jordan's riverbed and set up as a monument — one for each tribe — with instructions that when children later ask what the stones mean, their parents are to tell the story of the crossing all over again (4:6-7). It's the same anxiety about memory and transmission Deuteronomy voiced just one book earlier, now put into physical form: a monument whose entire purpose is to provoke a question, not answer one on its own.

Before the conquest can continue past Jericho, one man's disobedience nearly stops it: Achan secretly keeps plunder that was supposed to be devoted entirely to God, and Israel's next battle, at Ai, ends in unexplained defeat until the concealed act is uncovered (chapter 7). The episode sits uneasily with modern readers — an entire community bearing consequences for one person's private choice — and rabbinic commentators themselves wrestled with exactly that discomfort, debating how far collective responsibility should extend.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Joshua	Moses's successor, leads the crossing and the conquest, and closes the book by asking the people to choose.
Rahab	A Canaanite woman in Jericho who protects Israelite scouts and is spared — later honored in Jewish tradition as a righteous convert.
Caleb	One of the two scouts (with Joshua) who trusted the land could be taken back in Numbers; here, finally, he receives his portion.

THE QUESTION

Joshua includes some of the hardest chapters in the entire Tanakh to sit with — accounts of destruction presented, at points, as divinely commanded. Modern scholars, including the historians this workbook draws on, generally read these chapters as more ideological than strictly historical — ancient conquest rhetoric and a theology of land and promise, shaped well after the events it describes, rather than a battle-by-battle transcript; archaeology does not support a single, sweeping military conquest of Canaan on the scale the text sometimes suggests. None of that makes the chapters easier to read, and this workbook won't pretend otherwise. If you're reading this stop with a younger child, it may be worth previewing chapters 6–11 yourself first and deciding how much detail belongs in that conversation.

THE PRACTICE

The story of Rahab and the scouts (Joshua 2) is read as the haftarah for parashat Shelach Lecha, paired with the Torah's own story of scouts sent into the land in Numbers — one generation's failure of nerve set directly against another's courage. Joshua 1 is also read as the haftarah on Simchat Torah, right after the Torah's final portion — a new book picking up within the very same service the old one ends.

TRY THIS

Rahab appears for only a few verses, yet Jewish tradition treats her as one of the most honored figures in the whole Tanakh. Look up one thing she does or says in Joshua 2, and write down, in Your Notes, why you think later readers found her so compelling.

STILL ECHOING

Joshua's closing challenge — “as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD” — deliberately echoes Deuteronomy's own closing appeal to choose (Deuteronomy 30:19, “choose life”). The Torah hands off its central demand at the very end of Part One, and Joshua is the first to answer it.

Your Notes — Joshua

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Joshua is the story of a promise moving from words into land — complicated ground and all.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe what happens at Jericho, and who is spared.
- ☐ I can explain, in my own words, why scholars read the conquest chapters as more theological than strictly historical.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Joshua left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Joshua ends with the land divided and its conquering generation buried. Judges opens by quietly admitting the job was never finished — the same territory, described a second time, with far less confidence than Joshua's closing chapters suggested.

Judges

Shoftim — “Judges”

READ

Judges, chapters 4–5 and 13–16 at minimum — the whole book if you can.

THE STORY

Judges runs on a repeating cycle, stated almost like a formula: the people abandon their commitments, are oppressed by a neighboring power, cry out, and a judge — not a courtroom figure, but a rescuer raised up for the moment — delivers them, after which the land is at peace until the cycle starts again. Deborah, a prophet and judge, directs a military victory over a Canaanite general and is honored with one of the oldest poems in the Tanakh, the Song of Deborah (chapter 5), sung alongside Barak and crediting Jael, another woman, with the final blow. Gideon is recruited reluctantly and tests the call for certainty more than once before leading a deliberately small force to victory, so the outcome can't be credited to numbers.

The book's second judge, Ehud, is introduced almost incidentally as left-handed (3:15) — a detail that turns out to matter enormously: he straps a hidden dagger to his right thigh, past guards who search the left side by habit, and uses it to kill the oppressive King Eglon in a private audience before escaping. It's one of several moments where Judges takes evident interest in overlooked or unlikely people — a left-handed assassin, a woman judge, an illegitimate son — succeeding exactly where expectation would have bet against them.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named *Shoftim*, “judges” — not judges in a courtroom sense, but the Hebrew *shofet*, closer to “one who sets things right.” The same root gives the book its recurring refrain: in the era it describes, Israel has no king, and each *shofet* is a temporary, local answer to a temporary, local crisis.

STOP 7 • PART TWO: NEVI'IM

The judges get progressively more complicated as the book goes on. Jephthah wins a war but makes a rash vow that costs him his daughter — one of the most difficult, deliberately unresolved episodes in the Tanakh. Samson, the best known, is set apart from birth, extraordinarily strong, and extraordinarily undisciplined, and his story ends in his own death alongside his captors. The book's final chapters, often skipped, describe a spiral into civil war so severe it nearly ends the tribe of Benjamin — held together only by the refrain repeated four times in these closing pages: “in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25). It's less a conclusion than a diagnosis, setting up the very question the next book has to answer.

Deborah, the book's fourth judge and its only woman in the role, is also a prophet, and the victory she leads is followed by a poem, the Song of Deborah (chapter 5), that many scholars consider — alongside the Song of the Sea in Exodus — among the very oldest pieces of Hebrew literature preserved in the Tanakh, its archaic language predating the surrounding prose by centuries. The song singles out another woman, Jael, for the battle's decisive act, and pointedly mocks the enemy general's mother for waiting at a window for a son who will never return — Judges rarely lets any one side hold a monopoly on courage or grief.

Gideon, asked to lead against a Midianite army, first asks God for proof — twice, with a wool fleece left overnight, wet one morning and dry the next, dry the following morning and wet — before he'll act. Even after he agrees, his army of 32,000 is cut down to just 300 men, specifically so that victory can't be credited to numbers (7:2): “lest Israel vaunt themselves against Me, saying, my own hand has saved me.” The story insists, more than once, that the win has to be legible as anything other than human strength alone.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Deborah	Prophet and judge; leads Israel to victory and is honored with one of the Tanakh's oldest surviving poems.
Gideon	A reluctant leader who wins a decisive victory with a deliberately small force.
Samson	Set apart from birth, immensely strong, and undisciplined; his story ends in his own downfall.

THE QUESTION

The book's final chapters (19–21), often skipped in casual reading, describe a spiral into civil war so brutal it nearly erases the tribe of Benjamin entirely — triggered by an act of violence against an unnamed woman that the text describes without flinching or moralizing. Judges doesn't end on triumph; it ends by showing, in the starkest terms it has, exactly what “no king, everyone did what was right in their own eyes” actually costs in human terms.

The book's closing refrain — “everyone did what was right in their own eyes” — reads, on the surface, like praise for individual freedom, and on a second look, like a warning about what a community loses without any shared structure at all. Where do you draw your own line between healthy independence and the kind of “everyone for themselves” that Judges shows spiraling into real harm?

THE PRACTICE

The Song of Deborah (Judges 4–5) is read as the haftarah for parashat Beshalach, directly paired with the Torah's own victory song, the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15) — two songs by two generations, on either side of the same kind of deliverance, read in the same service.

TRY THIS

Judges cycles through the same pattern — crisis, rescue, peace, drift — five or six times. Try mapping one cycle in your own life or your family's onto that same shape in Your Notes: what was the crisis, who or what was the “judge,” and did the peace last?

STILL ECHOING

The cycle of crisis and rescue that structures Judges resurfaces, transformed, in the book of Psalms: nearly a third of that book cries out from exactly this kind of trouble, asking the same question Judges keeps asking structurally, one generation at a time — how long?

Your Notes — Judges

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Judges is what happens in the gap between a promise kept and a people not yet ready to keep their end of it.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe the book's repeating cycle in my own words.
- ☐ I can name at least two judges and one thing that makes each of them memorable.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Judges left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Judges ends in near civil war and a refrain that keeps insisting Israel has no king. Samuel opens by answering that refrain directly — with the birth of the prophet who will anoint Israel's first two kings, and reluctantly preside over the end of the era Judges describes.

Samuel

Shmuel — Named for the Prophet Who Anoints Israel's First Kings

READ

1 Samuel 1–3, 16–17; 2 Samuel 7, 11–12 at minimum — the whole book if you can. (Jewish tradition counts Samuel as a single book, printed today as I & II Samuel for length alone.)

THE STORY

Samuel opens with Hannah, unable to have children, praying so fervently in the sanctuary at Shiloh that the priest Eli mistakes her for drunk — her prayer becomes the model, in Jewish tradition, for how the Amidah, the central prayer of Jewish worship, is meant to be said. Her son, Samuel, becomes the last of the judges and the prophet who reluctantly anoints Israel's first king at the people's insistent request, warning them plainly what a monarchy will cost them. Saul, tall and reluctant, starts well and unravels under the pressure of the role, disobeying instructions, growing suspicious, and eventually losing the throne to the very person he once welcomed into his own household: a shepherd named David, anointed in secret while Saul still reigns.

David's introduction to the wider story comes at Goliath's challenge: a giant Philistine champion taunting Israel's army for forty days while Saul's soldiers, fully armed, stay in their tents. David, a shepherd boy visiting the camp to bring supplies to his brothers, refuses Saul's armor as unfamiliar and faces Goliath with a sling and five smooth stones instead — “the battle is the LORD's,” he tells the giant before the first stone even flies (17:47). It's the origin of an underdog image so lasting it still describes any lopsided contest, in cultures that may not know where the phrase came from.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named Shmuel, after the prophet whose birth opens it — not because Samuel is the central figure for most of its length (Saul and David dominate the story), but because he is the one who anoints both kings, the hinge the whole book turns on.

STOP 8 · PART TWO: NEVI'IM

David's rise takes up most of the rest of the book: his victory over Goliath, his friendship with Saul's son Jonathan, years as a fugitive from an increasingly paranoid Saul, and his eventual coronation over all Israel after Saul's death in battle. As king, David brings the ark to Jerusalem and receives, through the prophet Nathan, one of the most consequential promises in the Tanakh — that his dynasty will endure (2 Samuel 7). But the book refuses to let David become a simple hero: his affair with Bathsheba and the death he arranges for her husband are recorded in unflinching detail, followed by Nathan's rebuke and a family unraveling that includes his own son Absalom's open rebellion. Samuel closes with David still on the throne, but visibly, deliberately, not spared the consequences of what he did.

Before any king is anointed, Samuel delivers one of the Tanakh's most pointed warnings (1 Samuel 8): a king, he tells the people bluntly, will take their sons for his armies, their daughters for his service, their fields and vineyards for his officials, and a tenth of everything else besides — and when that day comes, “you will cry out... but the LORD will not answer you.” The people ask for a king anyway. Samuel's speech hangs over everything that follows, a built-in warning the monarchy narrative never lets readers forget it received and ignored.

Near the end of his reign, a desperate Saul — having banished mediums from the kingdom by his own decree — disguises himself and visits one anyway, at Endor, asking her to summon the dead prophet Samuel for guidance on the eve of his final battle (1 Samuel 28). Samuel's spirit, when it appears, offers no comfort: only confirmation that the kingdom is already lost. It's one of the eeriest scenes in the entire Tanakh, and one later tradition has argued over for centuries — was this genuinely Samuel, or something else entirely.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Samuel	The last judge and a prophet; anoints both Saul and David, warning Israel what kingship will cost.
Saul	Israel's first king; begins well and is gradually undone by fear and disobedience.
David	A shepherd anointed in secret; becomes king, receives God's promise of an enduring dynasty, and is held accountable for his worst choices.

STOP 8 · PART TWO: NEVI'IM

THE QUESTION

When the prophet Nathan confronts David over Bathsheba and Uriah, he doesn't open with an accusation — he tells a story about a rich man who steals a poor man's single beloved lamb, and lets David's own outraged verdict (“that man deserves to die!”) become the trap that exposes his own guilt (2 Samuel 12:1-7). “You are the man,” Nathan says, four words landing after David has already convicted himself.

Samuel refuses to simplify David into either a villain or a hero — the same book that records God's unconditional promise to his dynasty also records, in detail, exactly what he did to Bathsheba and Uriah, and exactly what it cost his family afterward. What does it mean to you that this text preserves both the promise and the accountability, in the same book, about the same person?

THE PRACTICE

Hannah's prayer (1 Samuel 1–2) is read as the haftarah for the first day of Rosh Hashanah — a story about waiting and finally being answered, read at the start of the year when many are doing exactly that kind of waiting themselves.

TRY THIS

Read Nathan's rebuke of David (2 Samuel 12:1–7) — a parable told to someone in power, indirectly, until the truth lands. Think of a time someone told you a hard truth sideways rather than head-on, and note in Your Notes whether it worked.

STILL ECHOING

David's family unraveling after his own worst choices foreshadows a pattern Kings will repeat at national scale: consequences that outlast the person who caused them, inherited by the next generation whether or not they chose them.

Your Notes — Samuel

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

“Samuel holds a promise and an accountability in the same hands, about the same king, and refuses to let either one cancel out the other.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain why Israel asks for a king, and what Samuel warns them it will cost.
- ☐ I can describe what happens with David, Bathsheba, and Nathan, and why it matters that the text includes it.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Samuel left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Samuel ends with David still on his throne, his household still unsettled. Kings opens with that household's unfinished business — a succession fight over who follows David — before widening out to the rise, split, and long decline of the kingdom he built.

Kings

Melakhim — “Kings”

READ

1 Kings 3, 11–12, 17–19; 2 Kings 17, 25 at minimum — the whole book if you can. (Like Samuel, Kings is one book in Jewish tradition, split into two volumes for length.)

THE STORY

Kings opens with Solomon: famous for his wisdom (the request that opens his reign, and the case of the two women and one baby that proves it), for building the First Temple in Jerusalem, and, by his later years, for the wealth and foreign alliances that lead the book to describe his heart as “turned away.” After Solomon's death, the kingdom splits in two — Israel in the north, ten tribes, and Judah in the south, built around Jerusalem and David's line — and the book settles into a rhythm of alternating between the two thrones, king by king, mostly judged (bluntly, and not evenly) by whether each one tolerated or dismantled worship at unauthorized shrines.

The judgment that made Solomon's reputation involves two women, both claiming the same living infant, after one child dies in the night. Solomon orders the baby cut in half, one piece for each — and the true mother instantly offers to give the child up entirely rather than see it harmed, exposing herself by her mercy (3:16-28). The story sets the pattern for how Kings will judge every ruler after him: not by cleverness alone, but by whether wisdom actually serves the vulnerable.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew, this book is named Melakhim, “kings,” plainly describing its subject. Its structure — Solomon, then a running comparison between the northern and southern thrones — makes it read less like a single continuous story and more like parallel chronicles, checked against each other reign by reign.

STOP 9 • PART TWO: NEVI'IM

Running alongside the kings are two of the Tanakh's most vivid prophets, Elijah and Elisha, who spend as much narrative space confronting kings as any king spends on the throne — Elijah's contest with the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, his flight into the wilderness afterward and the “still small voice” he hears there, and his fiery departure witnessed by Elisha, who inherits his role. The Northern Kingdom falls to Assyria in 722 BCE and its population is dispersed — the origin of what later tradition calls the Ten Lost Tribes. Judah survives another century and a half, propped up by reforming kings like Hezekiah and Josiah, before falling to Babylon in 586 BCE: the Temple burned, the city destroyed, the people exiled. Kings ends, almost as an afterthought, on a small note of mercy — the exiled King Jehoiachin, in Babylon, is released from prison and given a permanent seat at the Babylonian king's table.

Solomon's fame reaches its high point when the Queen of Sheba travels a great distance to test him with hard questions and returns home, the text says, with her breath taken away — a story so vivid it later took on an entire literature of its own in Ethiopian and Yemenite Jewish tradition. His Temple dedication (1 Kings 8) includes his own carefully worded prayer, asking that even a foreigner who prays toward this house be heard — an inclusive note that sits, deliberately or not, in real tension with the harsher exclusions found elsewhere in the same books.

One of the clearest indictments of royal power in the whole book comes from a small crime made enormous: King Ahab wants a vineyard belonging to a man named Naboth, who refuses to sell inherited land; Queen Jezebel arranges false charges that get Naboth executed, and Ahab simply takes the vineyard (1 Kings 21). Elijah confronts the king directly at the scene of the theft — “have you murdered, and also taken possession?” — a reminder that in this book, no throne sits above account, whatever it manages to get away with in the moment.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Solomon	Builds the First Temple, renowned for wisdom, and presides over the kingdom's peak before its decline begins.
Elijah	A prophet who confronts kings directly, most famously at Mount Carmel; tradition holds he never dies but is taken up in a whirlwind.
Hezekiah & Josiah	Reforming kings of Judah credited with attempts to restore faithful worship before the kingdom's eventual fall.

THE QUESTION

Elijah's own exit from the story is unlike any other prophet's: rather than dying, he's taken up in a whirlwind by a fiery chariot, in front of Elisha, who tears his own clothes and picks up Elijah's fallen mantle as the sign of succession (2 Kings 2:1-14). It's one of the only departures like it in the entire Tanakh, and it sets a bar — an uncompromising, larger-than-life standard — that every king judged in the pages that follow will be measured against just as much as any law.

Kings measures nearly every ruler, north and south, by one recurring standard — did they tolerate unauthorized worship — while largely setting aside questions of military success, wealth, or popularity that most histories would lead with. What would it mean to judge leadership in your own life, or your own community, by one consistent standard like that, even when it's not the standard everyone else is using?

THE PRACTICE

The prophet Elisha's healing of the Shunammite woman's son (2 Kings 4) is read as the haftarah for parashat Vayera, paired with a similar story of a miraculously granted and then endangered child in the Torah portion itself — one of several places where Nevi'im and Torah are set deliberately side by side across the year.

TRY THIS

Elijah hears God not in the wind, the earthquake, or the fire, but in “a still small voice” (1 Kings 19:12). Try ten minutes of real quiet this week — no phone, no music — and note in Your Notes whether anything became clearer in it.

STILL ECHOING

The prophets who confront kings in this book — Elijah first among them — are the same kind of figure Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel become on a larger scale in the stops ahead: people with no throne and no army, whose only real power is being willing to say the true thing out loud.

Your Notes — Kings

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Kings keeps asking the same question of every ruler it introduces: does power here have anything to do with faithfulness?”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain why the kingdom splits after Solomon, and into what two kingdoms.
- ☐ I can name one prophet from this book and one king, and what each is remembered for.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Kings left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Kings ends with two kingdoms fallen and a people in exile. Isaiah — the next stop — steps back from that same history to ask what it means, taking up a prophetic voice that spans the warning before the fall and the comfort that follows it.

Isaiah

Yeshayahu — “The LORD Is Salvation”

READ

Isaiah, chapters 1, 6, 40, and 53 at minimum — the whole book if you can.

THE STORY

Isaiah is the longest of the prophetic books and, in the judgment of most scholars working from the historical-critical method this workbook draws on, not the work of one person across one lifetime. Chapters 1–39 (“First Isaiah”) speak to Judah in the 8th century BCE, warning of the Assyrian threat and calling out injustice at home in some of the most quoted lines in the whole Tanakh — “learn to do good, seek justice” (1:17), and the vision, in chapter 2, of nations beating swords into plowshares. Chapters 40–55 (“Second Isaiah”) speak from a completely different moment — the Babylonian exile, decades later — opening with words that have named an entire season of the Jewish year: “Comfort, comfort My people” (40:1).

Chapter 7 delivers the sign that would become one of the most debated verses in the whole Tanakh: a child to be named Immanuel, “God is with us,” born as a marker of how quickly a current political crisis will pass (7:14-16). In its own context, the sign is about timing — the threat will be gone before the child is old enough to know right from wrong — long before later Christian tradition read it as a much larger prophecy; Jewish commentary has generally kept it anchored to Isaiah's own moment.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named Yeshayahu, “the LORD is salvation” — the prophet's own name, given no other title, unlike Kings or Judges. Jewish tradition has generally read Isaiah as one continuous prophetic voice; the division into First, Second, and (often) Third Isaiah described here reflects modern historical scholarship rather than the way the text has traditionally been read and transmitted — both are worth knowing.

Second Isaiah includes the Tanakh's most debated “Suffering Servant” passages (especially chapter 53), describing a figure who suffers on others' behalf — read in later Christian tradition as a prophecy of Jesus, and read within Jewish tradition, going back to classical commentators, primarily as a figure for the people of Israel itself, suffering collectively in exile. Chapters 56–66 (sometimes called “Third Isaiah”) speak to the community after the return from exile, wrestling with what faithfulness looks like once the crisis has passed. Across all three sections, Isaiah keeps returning to one image: a vision of restoration so complete that even the natural world is transformed — the wolf lying down with the lamb (11:6), a highway through the wilderness (40:3), swords into plowshares. It is the most quoted prophetic book in the Tanakh for a reason.

The book opens (in what scholars call First Isaiah) with the prophet's own account of his call: a vision of God enthroned, seraphim calling to each other “holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts” (6:3), before one touches a live coal to Isaiah's lips to purify him for the task ahead. That threefold “holy” became, centuries later, the core of the Kedushah, recited standing in the traditional synagogue service — meaning worshippers today repeat, several times a week, words the text says were first spoken by angels, to a prophet, in a vision no one else in the room could see.

Chapter 5 opens with what scholars call the Song of the Vineyard: God as a farmer who does everything right for a vineyard — clearing stones, planting the best vines, building a watchtower — only for it to yield wild, worthless grapes instead of good fruit. The parable turns on a wordplay in Hebrew that lands like a verdict: God “hoped for justice (mishpat), but found bloodshed (mispach); for righteousness (tzedakah), but heard an outcry (tze'akah)” — the words for what was hoped for and what was found nearly identical in sound, a single letter apart, as if injustice were always disappointment's closest neighbor.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Isaiah	A prophet active across decades of crisis in Judah; his book preserves both warning and comfort in one collection.
King Hezekiah	A reforming king Isaiah confronts and counsels directly during the Assyrian siege of Jerusalem.
“The Servant”	An unnamed, much-debated figure in chapters 40–55 — read in Jewish tradition mainly as a symbol for Israel itself.

THE QUESTION

A complete copy of Isaiah, over a thousand years older than any previously known Hebrew manuscript, was found among the Dead Sea Scrolls at Qumran in 1947 — and when compared line by line to the medieval text still used today, the two versions matched overwhelmingly, a rare, concrete demonstration of just how carefully this book was copied and preserved across two millennia.

Isaiah embeds his message even in his own family: he names one son Shear-Yashuv, “a remnant shall return,” and another Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz, “quick to plunder, swift to spoil” (8:1-4) — living, walking prophecies, their names alone delivering a message every time someone called them home for dinner.

Jewish and Christian tradition have long read the “Suffering Servant” passages differently — one seeing Israel collectively, the other a single foretold individual. Rather than settling that debate, sit with a smaller question the text itself raises: what does it mean, to you, that suffering and a larger purpose are held together here, rather than treated as opposites?

THE PRACTICE

Isaiah 40 — “Comfort, comfort My people” — is read as the haftarah on Shabbat Nachamu, the Sabbath of Comfort immediately following Tisha b'Av, opening a run of seven haftarot from Isaiah that carry the community from mourning toward Rosh Hashanah.

TRY THIS

Read Isaiah 2:1–4 (swords into plowshares) slowly, out loud if you can. Write down, in Your Notes, one thing in the world today you'd most want turned into something less destructive.

STILL ECHOING

The comfort Isaiah offers exiled Judah echoes forward into Ketuvim, Part Three of this book: Lamentations mourns the very fall Isaiah warned of, and the Psalms are full of both the despair Isaiah answers and the hope he promises.

Your Notes — Isaiah

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

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“Isaiah holds the hardest warning and the deepest comfort in the same book, on purpose — because they were always meant to answer each other.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain the difference between “First” and “Second” Isaiah, and why scholars distinguish them.
- ☐ I can describe the Servant passages and name at least one way Jewish tradition has read them.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Isaiah left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Isaiah moves between warning and comfort across a whole century of crisis. Jeremiah narrows the lens to one person, living through the very end of that crisis — the last years before Jerusalem falls, seen up close, by a prophet nobody wanted to listen to.

Jeremiah

Yirmeyahu

READ

Jeremiah, chapters 1, 20, 29, and 31 at minimum — the whole book if you can.

THE STORY

Jeremiah prophesies through the last four decades of the kingdom of Judah, watching, in real time, the collapse Isaiah had warned might come. He is, more than any other prophet, personally present in his own book — his “confessions” (scattered through chapters 11–20) are raw, first-person complaints to God about the cost of the job: “You have deceived me... I am a laughingstock all day long” (20:7). He is imprisoned, thrown into a cistern, and accused of treason for insisting Jerusalem will fall and that resistance is futile — a deeply unpopular message that turns out, painfully, to be accurate. His scribe, Baruch, writes down his prophecies on a scroll that a king literally burns, piece by piece, as it's read to him — and Jeremiah simply dictates it again.

In the middle of Jerusalem's final siege, with Babylonian troops outside the walls and the city's fall a matter of weeks away, Jeremiah does something that looks almost absurd: he buys a field back home in Anathoth, carefully witnessed and notarized (chapter 32), reasoning that “houses and fields and vineyards shall again be purchased in this land” (32:15). It's an act of hope executed as a legal transaction, made by a man who has spent his career being right about disaster, choosing this moment to bet, on paper, that disaster won't be the end of the story.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named *Yirmeyahu*, the prophet's own name, meaning roughly “the LORD exalts” or “the LORD loosens [the womb],” depending on how the root is read. Jeremiah is also, by tradition, credited with the book of Lamentations, read every year on Tisha b'Av in memory of the very destruction he spent his career warning about.

Not everything in Jeremiah is grief. After Jerusalem falls, he writes a letter to those already exiled in Babylon with strikingly practical, forward-looking advice: build houses, plant gardens, marry, and “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you” (29:7) — a foundational text for how later Jewish communities in the Diaspora would come to understand their obligations to the places they lived. And chapter 31 contains one of the most quoted lines in the book, a vision of a “new covenant” written not on stone tablets but directly on the heart. Jeremiah closes with the fall of Jerusalem recorded in full — the same event Kings ends with, seen this time from the inside, by someone who spent his whole career trying, and failing, to prevent it.

Jeremiah is also unusually personal for a prophetic book: several passages, scholars call them his “confessions,” record him arguing bitterly with God about the cost of his own calling — cursing the day he was born (20:14-18) in language as raw as anything in the book of Job. Chapter 18 supplies the image later tradition returned to again and again: God as a potter reworking a spoiled vessel on the wheel, reshaping rather than discarding it — a rare note of possibility inside a book otherwise dominated by warnings that mostly went unheeded.

Early in his career, Jeremiah stands at the Temple gate itself and delivers what's become known as the Temple Sermon (chapter 7): a direct challenge to the popular belief that the Temple's presence guaranteed the city's safety no matter how the people behaved. “Do not trust in the words of lies, saying: the Temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD, the Temple of the LORD, are these” — the phrase repeated three times, mimicking the very slogan he's dismantling. The sermon nearly gets him killed by an angry crowd on the spot (chapter 26), a sign of exactly how unwelcome the message was.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Jeremiah	A prophet who warns Judah for decades that resistance to Babylon is futile, and is imprisoned and mocked for saying so.
Baruch	Jeremiah's scribe, who writes down his prophecies — twice, after the first scroll is burned.
King Zedekiah	Judah's last king, who privately consults Jeremiah while publicly ignoring his warnings.

THE QUESTION

When King Jehoiakim hears Jeremiah's warnings read aloud from a scroll, he doesn't debate them — he cuts the scroll into pieces with a knife and burns it in a brazier, column by column, unmoved (36:22-23). Jeremiah simply dictates it all again to Baruch, this time with more added, undeterred by having watched his own words burned in front of him.

That cost was literal, not just emotional: at one point officials lower Jeremiah into an empty cistern to die by starvation, sinking into the mud at the bottom, until a court official intervenes and has him pulled out with rags to cushion the ropes (38:1-13). Few prophetic books make the physical price of the message this concrete.

Jeremiah spends his whole career telling people something true that they urgently do not want to hear, at real personal cost. Has there been a time you knew something unwelcome was true and had to decide whether to say it anyway? What did that decision cost you, and was it worth it?

THE PRACTICE

The three Shabbatot before Tisha b'Av are known as the “Three Haftarot of Affliction,” drawn from Jeremiah 1–2 and Isaiah 1 — a deliberate run-up, in the yearly cycle, to the fast day that mourns the very destruction these chapters foresee.

TRY THIS

Jeremiah's letter to the exiles (29:4–7) tells people in a hard, unchosen situation to build real lives anyway rather than just waiting for it to end. Name one place in your own life where you've been “waiting it out” rather than building — and write one small thing you could plant there this week.

STILL ECHOING

Jewish tradition credits Jeremiah with the book of Lamentations, read every year on Tisha b'Av — a stop you'll reach in Ketuvim, Part Three of this book, where the same catastrophe Jeremiah spent his career warning about is mourned in poetry instead of prophecy.

Your Notes — Jeremiah

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Jeremiah is what it costs to keep telling the truth to people who have already decided not to listen.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe what a “confession” passage in Jeremiah sounds like, and why they’re unusual for a prophetic book.
- ☐ I can explain the advice Jeremiah gives the exiles in chapter 29, and why it mattered for later Jewish life.
- ☐ I’ve written at least one question Jeremiah left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Jeremiah watches Jerusalem fall from the inside, in real time. Ezekiel is already gone by then — prophesying from among the exiles in Babylon, watching the same catastrophe unfold from a distance, in visions stranger and more vivid than anything the Tanakh has offered so far.

Ezekiel

Yechezkel

READ

Ezekiel, chapters 1, 18, and 37 at minimum — the whole book if you can.

THE STORY

Ezekiel prophesies from Babylon, already among the first wave of exiles, watching Jerusalem's final fall from a distance rather than up close the way Jeremiah does. His book opens with one of the most famous and strangest visions in the entire Tanakh — a chariot-throne borne by four living creatures, wheels within wheels, later called the Merkavah, which would go on to inspire centuries of Jewish mystical speculation (carefully, deliberately set aside in this workbook, as noted back in the Apertura). Ezekiel doesn't just speak his prophecies; he performs them — lying bound on his side for over a year to enact the length of Israel's exile, eating food cooked over unclean fuel, refusing to publicly mourn his own wife's death — a prophet whose entire body becomes part of the message.

Before he speaks a single word of prophecy, Ezekiel is told to eat a scroll covered, front and back, with words of lament and mourning and woe — and finds it, startlingly, “sweet as honey” in his mouth (3:1-3). It's a strange, embodied image for what the whole book will keep doing: absorbing a message before delivering it, letting hard truth become part of the prophet himself rather than something he simply reports from a safe distance.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named Yechezkel, roughly “God strengthens” — fitting for a prophet repeatedly called “son of man” and told, bluntly, to steel himself for how unwelcome his message will be among “a rebellious house.”

Chapter 18 marks one of the clearest ethical turns in the Tanakh: against a proverb the exiles had been repeating — “the fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge,” blaming their suffering on their ancestors' sins — Ezekiel insists that each person is responsible for their own choices, not their parents': “the soul who sins, only it shall die.” And in the book's best-known image, chapter 37, Ezekiel is set down in a valley of dry, scattered bones and told to prophesy to them; they rise, reassemble, and come back to life — a vision of national restoration so vivid it has outlived its original audience by two and a half thousand years. The book closes with an enormous, detailed vision of a rebuilt Temple, down to precise measurements — restoration imagined in the most concrete terms Ezekiel has.

Ezekiel opens with one of the strangest and most influential visions in the entire Tanakh: four living creatures, wheels within wheels, and a throne of sapphire blazing above them (chapter 1) — a vision so dense with imagery that later Jewish mystical tradition built an entire discipline, Ma'aseh Merkavah, “the work of the chariot,” around interpreting it, and rabbinic law eventually restricted its study to a small number of qualified, mature readers. It sets the tone for a book that communicates as often through startling images and symbolic acts — lying on his side for over a year, shaving his head with a sword — as through ordinary speech.

Ezekiel is also given one of the Tanakh's most distinctive job descriptions: God appoints him a “watchman” for the house of Israel (chapter 33), responsible for warning the community of danger even when no one wants to hear it — and explicitly not held responsible for those who hear the warning and ignore it anyway. It's a formula that reframes the prophet's entire, often thankless task: not to guarantee outcomes, but to make sure no one can say, later, that they were never told.

WHO'S WHO

Who	Why They Matter Here
Ezekiel	A priest-turned-prophet among the Babylonian exiles, known for visionary experiences and enacted, physical prophecies.
“The exiles”	The book's real audience throughout — a community trying to make sense of catastrophe from far outside the land.
King Jehoiachin	Judah's exiled king, deposed and taken to Babylon before Ezekiel's ministry begins; the book dates nearly every vision by the years of Jehoiachin's exile rather than by any king still on a throne.

THE QUESTION

Ezekiel is commanded not to publicly mourn even his own wife's sudden death — no weeping, no funeral rites — and told to explain, when people ask why, that this is exactly how the exiles will find themselves unable to properly mourn the Temple's coming destruction (24:15-24). It's one of the most personally costly enacted prophecies in the book, the prophet's private grief conscripted directly into his public message.

Ezekiel 18 rejects the idea that later generations should be blamed for their ancestors' failures — a genuinely radical claim in its own time. Where in your own family or community do you see old patterns still being treated as inherited sentences, rather than choices each generation gets to make freshly for itself?

THE PRACTICE

The valley of dry bones (Ezekiel 37) is read as the haftarah for the Shabbat that falls during the intermediate days (Chol HaMoed) of Passover in many communities — a vision of national resurrection paired with the festival of Israel's founding liberation.

TRY THIS

Ezekiel is told to prophesy to bones that look completely beyond hope. Think of one situation in your own life that currently feels like “dry bones” — and write, in Your Notes, one small first sign of life you could realistically look for this month.

STILL ECHOING

Ezekiel's insistence, in chapter 18, that each generation answers for its own choices resurfaces almost word for word in a principle already stated as law back in the Torah: “concerning children, they shall not be put to death for the fathers” (Deuteronomy 24:16) — a value Deuteronomy states as law, and Ezekiel restates as theology, centuries apart.

Your Notes — Ezekiel

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

“Ezekiel insists that even what looks completely finished — dry bones in a valley — isn't necessarily the end of the story.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe the vision that opens the book, and the vision of the dry bones in chapter 37.
- ☐ I can explain, in my own words, the shift Ezekiel 18 makes about individual responsibility.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Ezekiel left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Ezekiel closes Nevi'im's run of major prophetic voices with a vision of a rebuilt Temple, precise down to the measurements. The Twelve — the next and final stop in this part — turns to twelve shorter, older, and newer prophetic voices, some barely a page long, preserved together for exactly the reason their name suggests: so none of them would be lost.

The Twelve

Trei Asar — “The Twelve”

READ

At minimum, the book of Jonah in full (it's only four chapters), plus Amos 5 and Micah 6. All twelve, if your week allows it.

THE STORY

The last stop in Nevi'im is not one book but twelve — Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Individually, most of them are short: Obadiah is a single chapter, Haggai only two. Copied together onto one scroll since ancient times so that none would be lost to damage or neglect, Jewish tradition has always counted them as a single book of the Tanakh. They span roughly four centuries, from the 8th-century-BCE warnings of Amos and Hosea to the 5th-century-BCE closing words of Malachi, addressing crises as different as Assyrian threat, Babylonian exile, and the difficult, unglamorous work of rebuilding a community after return.

Micah supplies one of the Tanakh's most quoted single verses, a compressed answer to what God actually requires: “to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8) — three demands, deliberately, rather than an ever-growing list of ritual requirements. Hosea, right at the collection's opening, stages his own marriage to an unfaithful wife as a lived metaphor for Israel's relationship with God, making the case that steady love toward someone who keeps straying is itself a kind of prophecy, acted out rather than only spoken.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew these twelve are called Trei Asar, “The Twelve” — traditionally copied onto a single scroll precisely because so many of them, on their own, would be too short and fragile to survive as separate books. This workbook follows that same logic: one stop, twelve voices.

THE TWELVE AT A GLANCE

Book	In One Line
Hosea	Israel's unfaithfulness pictured as a broken marriage — and a love that keeps pursuing it anyway.
Joel	A locust plague becomes a warning of a larger “day of the LORD” still to come.
Amos	A shepherd from Judah confronts the wealthy north: “let justice roll down like waters.”
Obadiah	The shortest book in the Tanakh — one chapter, holding Edom accountable for abandoning a brother nation.
Jonah	A reluctant prophet, a repentant enemy city, and a God whose mercy makes Jonah furious.
Micah	“Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly” — one of the Tanakh's most quoted ethical summaries.
Nahum	A second word about Nineveh, a century after Jonah — this time, judgment instead of mercy.
Habakkuk	A prophet who argues openly with God about injustice, and waits for an answer.
Zephaniah	Warning before Josiah's reforms, and a rare closing vision of joy restored.
Haggai	Two short chapters urging a discouraged post-exilic community to finish rebuilding the Temple.
Zechariah	Visionary hope for the rebuilt community, rich in symbol.
Malachi	The last prophetic voice in the Tanakh — closing with a promise that Elijah will return before “the great and terrible day of the LORD.”

Two of the twelve are worth knowing a little better. Amos, a shepherd with no prophetic pedigree, walks into the wealthy Northern Kingdom and accuses it of trampling the poor while performing elaborate religious festivals — “I hate, I despise your feasts... let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (5:21–24), a line later quoted by voices as different as Reform rabbis and Martin Luther King Jr. And Jonah, alone among the Twelve, is a story rather than a collection of oracles: a prophet who flees his own assignment, is swallowed by a great fish, finally delivers a five-word warning to Nineveh, and then — astonishingly — gets angry when the city repents and is spared. The book ends not with resolution but with a question God asks him directly, left open for the reader to sit with.

THE QUESTION

Jonah is the one prophet in the Twelve who actively runs from his assignment — boarding a ship in the opposite direction rather than warn Nineveh, Israel's enemy, and ending up swallowed by a great fish until he reconsiders (chapters 1–2). When he finally does deliver the warning, Nineveh repents immediately and completely, and Jonah, rather than celebrating, sits outside the city furious that mercy actually worked.

The Twelve include both Jonah's fury at an enemy's forgiveness and Amos's fury at his own people's complacency — mercy and justice pulling in different directions, sometimes within the same page. Which of those two furies comes more naturally to you, and which one do you have to work harder to hold onto?

THE PRACTICE

The entire book of Jonah is read as the haftarah on Yom Kippur afternoon — the holiest fast of the year closing not with a tidy resolution but with an open question, read aloud to a congregation that has spent the whole day asking for exactly the kind of mercy Jonah resents Nineveh receiving.

TRY THIS

Read the book of Jonah in one sitting — it really is only four chapters. Notice that it ends on a question, not an answer. Write your own answer to God's closing question to Jonah in Your Notes.

STILL ECHOING

Amos's demand that justice “roll down like waters” and Micah's “do justice, love mercy, walk humbly” both distill, in one line, the same ethical core Leviticus 19 laid out chapter and verse back in the Torah — the Twelve aren't introducing a new value here, they're insisting Israel actually live the one it already had.

Your Notes — The Twelve

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“The Twelve prove a prophetic voice doesn't need many pages to matter — Obadiah is one chapter long, and Jewish tradition still copied it out, word for word, for twenty-five hundred years.”

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can name at least four of the Twelve and one thing each is remembered for.
- ☐ I can explain why Jonah gets angry at the end of his own book.
- ☐ I've written at least one question this stop left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Nevi'im ends here, with Malachi's closing promise that Elijah will return before “the great and terrible day of the LORD.” Ketuvim — Part Three of this book — turns from prophetic warning to something different: poetry, wisdom, and lived experience, opening with the prayers and praises collected in the book of Psalms.

Psalms

Tehillim — “Praises”

READ

Psalms 1, 23, 30, 90, 137, and 150 at minimum — a wide sample, since the book itself is 150 poems long.

THE STORY

Psalms collects 150 poems, traditionally organized into five books that echo the five books of the Torah, and spans nearly every register prayer can take: songs of praise and thanksgiving, communal and individual laments, royal psalms tied to the Davidic monarchy, wisdom psalms weighing how to live, and psalms of pure, unguarded complaint. Roughly seventy-three carry the heading “of David,” and Jewish tradition has long credited him as the book's central voice, though the text itself also names Asaph, the sons of Korah, Solomon, and even Moses (Psalm 90) among its contributors — and modern scholarship situates the collection's poems across many centuries, not one reign. If the Tanakh kept a diary, Psalms would be it: Psalm 23's quiet confidence (“the LORD is my shepherd”) and Psalm 22's raw despair (“my God, my God, why have You forsaken me?”) sit within the same book, sometimes the same page, because both are treated as legitimate ways to speak to God.

A cluster of fifteen psalms (120–134), the Songs of Ascents, were traditionally sung by pilgrims climbing toward Jerusalem for the three pilgrimage festivals — their imagery of ascent doubling as the literal climb up to the Temple and a figurative one toward its presence. Psalm 137, by contrast, is sung from the opposite direction entirely: “By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat and wept, when we remembered Zion” — grief for a Temple its exiled singers can no longer climb toward at all, two very different relationships to the same holy city held inside one collection.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named *Tehillim*, “praises” — a title that describes the collection's overall use in worship more than every individual poem's tone, since a large share of the 150 are laments, not praises. The English “Psalms” comes from the Greek *psalmoi*, “songs sung to a plucked instrument,” a description of performance rather than content.

THE QUESTION

Most of the individual laments in Psalms follow a recognizable arc: an unguarded complaint, a specific request, and then, often abruptly, a turn toward trust or praise — sometimes within the same handful of verses, with no explanation offered for how the speaker got from despair to confidence. Scholars debate whether that turn reflects a change of heart mid-prayer or a priestly response delivered between the lines we can no longer hear. Either way, the psalms never ask the worshipper to arrive already composed.

Psalms permits a range of prayer that many people don't grant themselves — not just gratitude and praise, but confusion, exhaustion, and outright anger at God, voiced directly and without apology (Psalm 13: “How long, LORD? Will You forget me forever?”). Do you let your own prayer, or reflection, or honest self-talk range that widely, or do you edit out the parts that don't sound grateful enough?

THE PRACTICE

Hallel — Psalms 113–118 — is recited on Rosh Chodesh (the new month) and on festivals, one of the oldest continuously used liturgical units built directly from this book. The Kabbalat Shabbat service that opens Friday evening worship is likewise built from a run of psalms (95–99 and 29), welcoming Shabbat with the same words Jewish communities have used for centuries.

TRY THIS

Skim the table of contents of Psalms (or a list of first lines) and pick one that matches your actual mood today — not the mood you think you should have. Read it slowly, once, before turning to Your Notes.

STILL ECHOING

Psalms is traditionally divided into five books, deliberately echoing the five books of the Torah — a structural nod suggesting this collection of prayer was meant to sit alongside the Torah's teaching as its own kind of instruction, in a different key.

Your Notes — Psalms

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Psalms proves that prayer doesn't have to be tidy to be real.”

FACES TO KNOW

David — credited with roughly seventy-three psalms and long treated as the book's central voice, though far from its only one.

Asaph and the sons of Korah — Levitical singers named as authors of dozens of psalms, evidence the book was compiled from more than one circle.

Moses — named as author of Psalm 90, the only psalm attributed to him, meditating on human frailty against God's eternity.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can name at least two different moods or genres Psalms contains (for example, praise and lament).
- ☐ I can explain why Psalms is traditionally divided into five books.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Psalms left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Psalms speaks mostly in one direction — from the reader toward God, in prayer. Proverbs turns to address the reader directly instead: practical wisdom for how to live, not how to pray.

Proverbs

Mishlei — “Proverbs”

READ

Proverbs, chapters 1–9 and 31 at minimum — the whole book if you can, since most of the middle chapters read quickly, verse by verse.

THE STORY

Proverbs is a collection of short, practical wisdom sayings on the texture of ordinary life — work, speech, money, friendship, discipline, anger, and humility — traditionally credited to Solomon, though the book itself names other contributors too, including Agur and “the mother of Lemuel” in its final chapters. It opens (chapters 1–9) not with proverbs but with extended poems personifying Wisdom (Chokhmah) as a woman calling out in the public square, urging passersby to choose her over the seductive, ultimately destructive voice of “Woman Folly.” The book closes on one of the Tanakh’s most beloved poems, Eshet Chayil, “a woman of valor” (chapter 31) — a 22-line acrostic praising a capable, resourceful, hardworking woman, still sung in many Jewish homes at the Shabbat table on Friday nights, often by a husband to his wife.

The book closes (31:10-31) with an acrostic poem in praise of “a woman of valor” (eshet chayil) — each line beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet, describing a capable, resourceful woman running a household, trading in the marketplace, and caring for the poor. Still sung today in many homes on Friday night before the Shabbat meal, it functions as the book’s closing argument in miniature: wisdom, all 31 chapters insist, is proven less by what someone says than by what they actually do with their hands and their time.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named *Mishlei*, from *mashal*, a comparison, parable, or terse saying — the same root behind the individual proverbs themselves. The English “Proverbs” comes from the Latin *proverbium*, a saying passed publicly from mouth to mouth — a fairly close match, for once, between the Hebrew and English titles.

THE QUESTION

Chapters 1–9 stage Wisdom and Folly as two women calling out from the same street corner, each inviting the same passerby in — Wisdom offering a harder path toward a longer life, Folly an easier one that, the text warns bluntly, leads to the grave. The book frames its whole project as a choice repeated daily, not a lesson learned once and settled.

Proverbs largely promises a confident, orderly world: live wisely and you'll prosper; act foolishly and you'll suffer the consequences. Most people's actual experience is messier than that. Where has this book's confident cause-and-effect matched your own life, and where has it clearly not?

THE PRACTICE

Eshet Chayil (Proverbs 31:10–31) is sung in many homes on Friday night before the Shabbat meal begins. In some communities, Proverbs is also studied alongside Pirkei Avot, the classical rabbinic collection of ethical teachings, during the weeks between Passover and Shavuot.

TRY THIS

Pick one proverb — just one line — and try to actually live by it for the next few days, not just agree with it. Write down in Your Notes what changed, if anything.

STILL ECHOING

Proverbs 31's “woman of valor” gives concrete, admiring shape to a value the Torah states more abstractly — that capability and character, not appearance or status, are what the text chooses to celebrate at length, the same instinct behind Genesis's insistence that being chosen was never about being flawless.

Your Notes — Proverbs

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

“Proverbs is confident that wisdom pays off — which makes the next stop, where that confidence gets tested, land even harder.”

FACES TO KNOW

Woman Wisdom (Chokhmah) — wisdom personified as a woman calling out in the public square, urging passersby to choose her.

Woman Folly — her counterpart, seductive and ultimately destructive, embodying every shortcut Wisdom warns against.

Agur and the mother of Lemuel — lesser-known contributors named in the book's final chapters, alongside the traditional attribution to Solomon.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe the “Woman Wisdom” and “Woman Folly” imagery from the book's opening chapters.
- ☐ I can recite or paraphrase one proverb from memory after this stop.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Proverbs left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Proverbs promises that wisdom and righteous living lead to reward. Job is the book that takes that promise and tests it against a single, devastating case where it doesn't seem to hold at all.

Job

Iyov

READ

Job, chapters 1–3, 38–42 at minimum — the whole book if you can, though the middle debate (chapters 4–37) can be skimmed.

THE STORY

A short prose frame opens and closes this book around a long poetic core. Job is introduced as blameless, wealthy, and faithful — and then, in a wager between God and “the satan” (Hebrew for “the accuser” or “adversary,” a prosecutorial role here, not yet the personal devil of later tradition), loses his children, his wealth, and his health in rapid succession, to test whether his righteousness depends on his prosperity. Three friends — Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar — arrive to comfort him, then spend chapter after chapter insisting, with increasing impatience, that his suffering must be deserved. Job refuses to accept that explanation and instead demands, repeatedly and audaciously, that God answer him directly. A younger voice, Elihu, adds one more speech before God finally does answer — not with a reason for Job's suffering, but with an overwhelming tour of creation's scale and wildness (“where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?”). Job is restored at the book's end; his friends, notably, are the ones rebuked for their theology, not Job for his protest.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

The name Iyov may be related to a Hebrew root meaning “enemy” or “one who is treated with hostility” — fitting for a man whose entire story is a test of what happens when the world turns against someone who did nothing to deserve it. “The satan” in this book (ha-satan, “the accuser”) is a title and a role in the heavenly court, not a proper name.

THE QUESTION

When God finally answers Job directly, out of a whirlwind, the response isn't the explanation Job spent the whole book demanding — it's a sweeping tour of creation's scale and strangeness, from the foundations of the earth to wild animals no human hand will ever tame (chapters 38–41), decisively out of proportion to any answer a person could actually use. Job's own reply is brief and famously ambiguous: he says he now sees God “with my own eyes” and repents “in dust and ashes” (42:5-6) — of what, exactly, the text leaves for each reader to decide.

Job's friends are eventually rebuked, not for being unkind, but for being too certain — for insisting suffering always has a tidy explanation. Have you ever offered someone a tidy explanation for their pain because sitting with the not-knowing felt harder than saying something, anything, that sounded wise?

THE PRACTICE

Passages from Job are read in the house of mourning during shiva in some communities, and its themes shape parts of the traditional Jewish funeral liturgy — a book about unexplained loss, still turned to by people living through loss themselves.

TRY THIS

Reread God's speech from the whirlwind (Job 38–39) and notice what it doesn't do: it never explains Job's suffering. Write in Your Notes whether you find that satisfying, frustrating, or both.

STILL ECHOING

Job takes Proverbs' confident promise — righteousness brings reward — and tests it to destruction, without ever fully resolving the tension; both books sit inside Ketuvim's larger refusal, described back in the Apertura, to smooth over real disagreement rather than preserve it.

Your Notes — Job

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

“Job doesn't answer why bad things happen to good people — it insists the question deserves to be asked out loud, without a tidy answer waiting on the other side.”

FACES TO KNOW

Job — a blameless, wealthy man whose losses test whether his righteousness was ever conditional on his prosperity.

Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar — three friends who arrive to comfort Job, then spend chapters insisting his suffering must be deserved.

Elihu — a younger voice who adds one final speech, impatient with both Job and his friends, just before God answers.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can summarize the wager that opens the book, and who it's really testing.
- ☐ I can explain why Job's friends, not Job, are rebuked at the end.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Job left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Job spends forty-two chapters inside devastating loss. Song of Songs, the next stop, is a sharp turn in the opposite direction — unguarded, sensuous love poetry, with barely a shadow of suffering anywhere in it.

Song of Songs

Shir HaShirim — “The Song of Songs”

READ

Song of Songs, in full — it's only eight short chapters.

This stop opens a run of five short books — Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther — known together as the Five Megillot, “the Five Scrolls.” Each is tied to a specific festival on the Jewish calendar and is still read there in full today, traditionally from its own scroll. This workbook takes them one at a time, in the order they fall across the Jewish year, starting here, with Passover's scroll.

THE STORY

Song of Songs is a sequence of love poetry exchanged between two lovers, sensuous and entirely unembarrassed, structured as dialogue rather than narrative — voices calling to each other, describing each other, searching for each other. It is, uniquely among the Tanakh's twenty-four books, a text in which God's name never once appears. Traditionally attributed to Solomon (its opening line reads “the song of songs, which is Solomon's”), it was, according to a famous account, defended into the canon by Rabbi Akiva with some of the most emphatic words any rabbi has used about any biblical book: “the whole world is not worth the day on which Song of Songs was given to Israel... all the Writings are holy, but Song of Songs is the holy of holies.” Jewish tradition has long read the book allegorically — the love between God and the people of Israel — while also preserving, without embarrassment, its plain sense as human erotic poetry, among the most direct in the ancient world.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named Shir HaShirim, “the song of songs” — a Hebrew grammatical construction (like “king of kings” or “holy of holies”) meaning “the most excellent song,” its own opening line making the claim before any reader gets to judge for themselves.

THE QUESTION

Chapter 8 supplies the book's most quoted line outside the opening: “set me as a seal upon your heart... for love is as strong as death, passion as fierce as the grave” (8:6) — language intense enough that later readers, uncomfortable leaving it as only human poetry, found it easier to defend as a book about God after all. Whichever reading a person favors, the verse itself makes no such distinction; it simply insists love is a force on the same scale as the largest things a person can name.

The poem never settles who exactly is speaking at any given moment — the lovers' voices interweave without stage directions, and a refrain repeated across the book, “I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine” (2:16, 6:3), sounds almost like a vow exchanged between two people who trust each other completely. Read one way, it's simply that: two lovers speaking. Read another way, generations of Jewish readers have heard the same refrain as Israel and God speaking to each other in the same terms.

Jewish tradition reads this book on two levels at once — human love and divine love — without treating either reading as the “real” one that cancels out the other. What would it mean to let a text mean two true things simultaneously, the way Genesis's two creation accounts already asked you to consider back in Part One?

THE PRACTICE

Song of Songs is read in full on Passover, its springtime imagery (“the winter is past, the rain is over and gone... the time of singing has come,” 2:11–12) paired with the festival's own themes of renewal and liberation.

TRY THIS

Song of Songs describes love almost entirely through concrete images — gardens, spices, doves, pomegranates — rather than abstract statements. Write, in Your Notes, one concrete image (not just a word like “love”) that captures something real in your own life.

STILL ECHOING

This is the second of only two books in the entire Tanakh where God's name never appears — the other is Esther, three stops ahead — as if to test, from two completely different angles, whether the sacred can still be present in a text that never says so directly.

Your Notes — Song of Songs

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Song of Songs proves the Tanakh trusts its readers with more than one way to read the same words.”

FACES TO KNOW

The two lovers — unnamed voices who call to, describe, and search for each other throughout the book's eight chapters.

Solomon — the book's traditional attribution, named in its opening line, though the text itself is really a dialogue, not a single author's statement.

Rabbi Akiva — the sage who, tradition holds, defended the book's place in the canon as "the holy of holies" among the Writings.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain why Song of Songs is unusual among the Tanakh's twenty-four books.
- ☐ I can describe both the traditional allegorical reading and the plain-sense reading of the book.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Song of Songs left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Song of Songs closes without a single mention of loyalty tested by hardship. Ruth, the next of the Five Megillot, is entirely about exactly that.

Ruth

Rut

READ

Ruth, in full — it's only four short chapters.

THE STORY

Ruth is a quiet, deliberately small story set “in the days when the judges ruled” — the same turbulent era Judges itself describes, though nothing here resembles that book's chaos. Naomi, an Israelite woman, loses her husband and both sons while living in Moab, and prepares to return home to Bethlehem alone. Her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth refuses to leave her, in words that have become one of the most quoted declarations of loyalty in world literature: “wherever you go, I will go... your people shall be my people, and your God, my God” (1:16). Back in Bethlehem, Ruth gleanes grain in the fields of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's late husband, who treats her with notable generosity; through a carefully negotiated legal process, Boaz redeems the family's land and marries Ruth. Their great-grandson, the book's final verses reveal, is David — meaning Israel's greatest king descends, in part, from a Moabite woman, in a book that quietly complicates a nation's story about its own boundaries.

Back in Bethlehem, Ruth gleanes in the fields of Boaz, a relative of Naomi's late husband, and Naomi engineers a bold, carefully coded proposal at the threshing floor that invokes an old legal institution: the goel, or redeemer, a near relative obligated to marry a widow and preserve a dead man's name and property. Boaz accepts, formalizing it before the town elders at the city gate (chapter 4) — and the son born from the marriage, Obed, becomes the grandfather of David, meaning Israel's greatest king descends, a few generations back, from a Moabite widow who chose loyalty over safety.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

The book is simply named *Rut*, after its central figure, in the same pattern as Joshua, Samuel, and several other *Nevi'im* books. Her name's meaning is debated — possibly related to “friend” or “companion,” fittingly, for a story built entirely around her loyalty to Naomi.

THE QUESTION

Naomi, arriving back in Bethlehem after losing her husband and both sons, tells the women who greet her to stop calling her Naomi (“pleasant”) and call her Mara (“bitter”) instead (1:20) — grief stated plainly, without any pious softening, right at the book's opening. It's Ruth's quiet loyalty across the chapters that follow, not a divine speech or a miracle, that eventually answers that bitterness.

The Torah, elsewhere, restricts relations with Moab quite sharply (Deuteronomy 23:3). Ruth doesn't argue against that law directly — it simply tells the story of a Moabite woman whose loyalty becomes the ancestral line of Israel's greatest king. What does it mean that the Tanakh preserves both the boundary and the story that quietly crosses it, in different books, without reconciling them for you?

THE PRACTICE

Ruth is read in full on Shavuot, connecting the book's harvest setting to the festival's own agricultural roots, and Ruth's own choice to join the people of Israel to the holiday's commemoration of Israel receiving the Torah at Sinai — one convert's story, read on the day that marks the whole people's founding commitment.

TRY THIS

Ruth's line — “wherever you go, I will go” — is often quoted at weddings, but it's actually said between two women, one generation apart. Think of one person in your own life this line could just as truly describe, and write their name in Your Notes.

STILL ECHOING

Ruth's welcome into Israel echoes Rahab's back in Joshua — two women from outside the community, in two very different books, whose loyalty becomes central rather than incidental to the story. Between them, they complicate any simple insider-outsider reading of the Tanakh's own boundaries.

Your Notes — Ruth

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Ruth is proof that loyalty, not birth, is what this book treats as the real inheritance.”

FACES TO KNOW

Ruth — a Moabite widow whose refusal to leave Naomi becomes one of the most quoted declarations of loyalty in world literature.

Naomi — Ruth's Israelite mother-in-law, who loses her husband and sons in Moab and guides Ruth's return to Bethlehem.

Boaz — a kinsman of Naomi's late husband who redeems the family's land and marries Ruth, becoming David's great-grandfather.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can retell the plot of Ruth in three or four sentences.
- ☐ I can explain why it matters that Ruth is a Moabite, and who her great-grandson turns out to be.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Ruth left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Ruth ends in a wedding and a genealogy leading to David's throne. Lamentations, the next of the Five Megillot, mourns everything that throne and its city eventually lost.

Lamentations

Eikhah — “How”

READ

Lamentations, in full — it's only five short chapters.

THE STORY

Lamentations is five poems of mourning for the destruction of Jerusalem and the First Temple in 586 BCE, traditionally attributed, like the Still Echoing note back in Jeremiah already mentioned, to the prophet who spent his career warning it was coming. Four of the five poems are acrostics — each stanza beginning with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order, chapter 3 even tripling the pattern, three stanzas per letter — a controlled, formal structure imposed on raw, specific grief, as if the discipline of the alphabet itself were the only way to keep devastation from spilling out completely shapeless. The book doesn't stay in despair without interruption: chapter 3 turns, briefly and famously, toward hope — “the LORD's mercies... are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness” — before the final chapter returns to unresolved lament, ending on a genuinely open question rather than a comforting close.

Chapter 2 contains some of the most theologically unflinching lines in the whole Tanakh: rather than blaming only human enemies, it describes God directly as having “become like an enemy” (2:5), drawing back a protecting hand and letting the disaster happen. Lamentations doesn't soften the theology to make the grief easier to bear — it holds God responsible in the same breath as it mourns, refusing to separate faith from the anger faith can also produce.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named *Eikhah*, “how,” its own opening word: “How lonely sits the city that once was full of people.” Like several other books in Ketuvim, it's named for its first word rather than its subject — the same naming convention the Torah uses for its own five books, back in Part One.

THE QUESTION

Rashi, the great medieval commentator, noted a connection Hebrew makes almost by accident: the word that opens this book, Eikhah (“how”), shares its consonants with Ayeka, the question God asks Adam in the garden after he hides — “where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Rashi read the echo as deliberate: exile from Eden and the fall of Jerusalem become, in this reading, versions of the same question repeated at a different scale.

Scholars who study the ancient Near East have long noted that Lamentations belongs to a known ancient genre — the city lament — with surviving parallels from Sumerian literature mourning the destruction of cities centuries earlier. Israel didn't invent the form; it inherited a shared ancient language for describing catastrophe and made it its own, turning a genre used elsewhere for describing the fall of a city as fact into something read, every year since, as a still-open wound.

Lamentations uses a strict, formal structure — the alphabet, letter by letter — to hold something that could otherwise feel too large and shapeless to survive. Has a structure like that (a ritual, a routine, a form of writing) ever helped you get through something that otherwise felt too big to hold?

THE PRACTICE

Lamentations is read in full on Tisha b'Av, the fast day mourning the destruction of both Temples, often chanted by dim or candlelight, with mourners seated low, on the floor or on low stools, as a physical expression of grief.

TRY THIS

Read chapter 3's turn toward hope (3:19–24) on its own, then read it again inside the chapter's full context of grief on either side. Write in Your Notes whether the hope reads differently once you see what surrounds it.

STILL ECHOING

Lamentations mourns precisely the destruction Second Isaiah later comforts (“Comfort, comfort My people,” read on the Shabbat right after Tisha b'Av) and that Jeremiah spent his career warning about — three books, three angles, on the same catastrophe.

Your Notes — Lamentations

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Lamentations proves grief can be given a shape without being made smaller.”

FACES TO KNOW

The poet — traditionally the prophet Jeremiah, mourning the very destruction he spent his career warning was coming.

Zion — the city of Jerusalem itself, repeatedly personified as a grieving, abandoned woman throughout the book's five poems.

The reader — addressed directly in chapter 1's opening question, "is it nothing to you, all who pass by?", refusing to let grief go unwitnessed.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain what an acrostic structure is, and why Lamentations uses one.
- ☐ I can locate the book's turn toward hope in chapter 3, and describe what surrounds it.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Lamentations left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Lamentations sits inside loss without offering an exit from it. Ecclesiastes, the next of the Five Megillot, sits inside something different but related — the impermanence of everything, grief or otherwise — and searches for how to live with that honestly.

Ecclesiastes

Qohelet

READ

Ecclesiastes, chapters 1–3 and 12 at minimum — the whole book if you can, since it's short.

THE STORY

A speaker identified only as “Qohelet, son of David, king in Jerusalem” — traditionally Solomon, though the book's Hebrew shows linguistic features scholars generally date centuries later — surveys every plausible source of lasting meaning available to a wealthy, capable person: wisdom, pleasure, massive building projects, accumulated wealth, even a hard-earned legacy. Each one, in turn, is judged hevel — a word usually translated “vanity” but more literally “vapor” or “breath,” something that cannot be grasped or held onto, however tightly you close your hand. The book's most quoted passage, chapter 3's “a time for everything” (“a time to be born, and a time to die... a time to weep, and a time to laugh”), reads less as comfort than as plain observation: nothing lasts, including the good things. Qohelet's own conclusion isn't despair, though — it's a repeated, almost startled insistence on simple, ordinary enjoyment: eating a meal, doing honest work, keeping good company, while you have the chance.

Chapter 3 opens with the book's most famous passage, a poem built entirely from paired opposites: “a time to be born, and a time to die... a time to weep, and a time to laugh... a time to keep silence, and a time to speak” (3:1-8). Rather than resolving into one lesson, the poem simply insists that every experience, including the painful ones, has its proper season — a structure of time itself that no amount of striving can override or skip past.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

Qohelet means roughly “one who assembles” or “one who addresses an assembly” — possibly a gatherer of wisdom sayings, or a speaker before a gathered crowd. The Greek translation rendered it Ekklesiastes, “one who addresses an assembly,” which passed into English as “Ecclesiastes.”

THE QUESTION

Qohelet opens by declaring that there is “nothing new under the sun” (1:9) — that every apparent achievement or beginning has already happened before, to someone else, who is now forgotten. It's a deliberately deflating opening line for a book that will spend its remaining chapters testing whether anything at all can stand up against that verdict.

Qohelet's answer to hevel — the ungraspable impermanence of everything — isn't a grand philosophical system. It's a meal, honest work, good company, noticed and enjoyed while they're actually happening. Is that a satisfying answer to impermanence, an evasion of it, or something else entirely, in your own experience?

THE PRACTICE

Ecclesiastes is read in full on Sukkot, the festival where families eat and sometimes sleep in a deliberately temporary, roofless booth (a sukkah) for a week — a lived, physical enactment of the book's core insight that nothing built by human hands lasts, paired with a holiday otherwise known as “the season of our joy.”

TRY THIS

Qohelet keeps circling back to ordinary pleasures — food, work, companionship — as the real answer to impermanence. Name one ordinary pleasure you regularly rush past without actually noticing, and pay real attention to it once this week.

STILL ECHOING

Qohelet's refrain that “there is nothing new under the sun” sits in quiet tension with Genesis's opening claim that the world itself had a beginning — two books, on opposite ends of the Tanakh, offering two different instincts about time: one that starts a story, one that questions whether anything really changes at all.

Your Notes — Ecclesiastes

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

“Ecclesiastes doesn't solve impermanence — it just refuses to let you pretend you didn't notice it.”

FACES TO KNOW

Qohelet — “one who assembles,” the book's speaker and traditionally Solomon, though the Hebrew itself points to a later era.

“Son of David, king in Jerusalem” — the royal identity Qohelet claims, giving the widest possible authority to test every source of meaning available to him.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain what hevel means, and why “vanity” is only a partial translation.
- ☐ I can describe Qohelet's own answer to the problem the book raises.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Ecclesiastes left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Ecclesiastes searches for meaning in the quiet, ordinary texture of a life. Esther, the next of the Five Megillot, turns to something louder and more dramatic — a hidden threat, a hidden identity, and a rescue that unfolds entirely through human courage and timing.

Esther

Ester

READ

Esther, in full — it's only ten chapters, and reads like a fast-paced short story.

THE STORY

Set in the Persian court under King Ahasuerus (widely identified with Xerxes I), Esther tells of a Jewish woman who becomes queen while concealing her identity, at the quiet urging of her cousin and guardian, Mordecai. When Haman, the king's chief minister, is publicly humiliated by Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, he persuades the king to authorize the destruction of the Jewish people throughout the empire. Esther, at genuine risk to her own life, approaches the king uninvited, reveals both the plot and her own hidden identity, and turns the danger back on Haman, who is executed on the very gallows he built for Mordecai. The book closes with the Jewish community granted the right to defend itself and a new festival, Purim, established to commemorate the reversal. Uniquely among the Tanakh's books alongside Song of Songs, God's name never appears in Esther even once — every turn in the story happens through coincidence, timing, and human courage, with no open miracle anywhere in the text.

The book actually opens with a queen who refuses: Vashti, Ahasuerus's first queen, will not appear before his drunken banquet to be put on display, and is deposed for it (chapter 1) — the vacancy that eventually brings Esther to the palace. Her defiance gets one paragraph and then the story moves on without her, an absence some later Jewish and feminist readers have found as worth sitting with as anything that happens to the queen who replaces her.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

Esther's Hebrew name is given as Hadassah, “myrtle”; “Esther” may derive from the Persian word for “star,” or echo the name of the Mesopotamian goddess Ishtar — a Persian name for a Jewish woman living a double identity, fittingly. Jewish tradition has long connected her name to the Hebrew *hester*, “hiding,” and to the phrase *hester panim*, “the hiding of the face” — God's presence at work without ever announcing itself directly.

THE QUESTION

When Esther hesitates to risk approaching the king unsummoned, Mordecai presses her with the line that becomes the book's thematic hinge: “who knows whether you have attained royalty for just such a time as this?” (4:14) — a suggestion that her unlikely position might not be coincidence, even though, famously, this is the one book in the Tanakh that never once uses God's name to say so directly.

Esther is the Tanakh's clearest case for providence that never announces itself as providence — no burning bush, no parted sea, just timing, courage, and coincidence that, looked at together, add up to something larger. Can you recognize meaning or purpose in events in your own life that never came with a clear, religious-sounding label attached?

THE PRACTICE

Esther is read in full on Purim, traditionally with noisemakers (graggers) drowning out Haman's name each time it's read aloud, festive costumes, and — uniquely on the Jewish calendar — an explicit obligation to celebrate joyfully and without restraint.

TRY THIS

Esther has to decide whether to risk everything by speaking up, or stay silent and safe. Think of a smaller version of that choice you've faced yourself, and write in Your Notes what you chose, and what you'd choose now.

STILL ECHOING

Esther is the second of only two books in the Tanakh, alongside Song of Songs back at this part's third stop, where God's name never appears — two very different books testing, from opposite directions, whether the sacred needs to be named outright to still be present.

Your Notes — Esther

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Esther is what faith looks like when nothing announces itself as a miracle.”

FACES TO KNOW

Esther — a Jewish woman who becomes queen while concealing her identity, then risks her life to reveal it and save her people.

Mordecai — Esther's cousin and guardian, whose refusal to bow to Haman sets the whole plot in motion.

Haman — the king's chief minister, humiliated by Mordecai, who persuades the king to authorize a massacre and is executed for it.

Ahasuerus — the Persian king (widely identified with Xerxes I), whose court and decrees drive the story without his ever fully grasping what's at stake.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can retell the plot of Esther in a few sentences, including Haman's plot and its reversal.
- ☐ I can explain what's unusual about how God is (or isn't) present in this book.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Esther left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Esther closes the run of Five Megillot on a note of reversal and rescue. Daniel, the next stop, returns to exile and foreign power — but faced by someone determined to hold onto his identity without any of Esther's political maneuvering to help him.

Daniel

Daniel

READ

Daniel, chapters 1–6 at minimum — the visions in chapters 7–12 if your week allows it.

THE STORY

Daniel splits cleanly into two halves. The first (chapters 1–6) tells court tales, in the same family as Joseph's story back in Genesis: Daniel and three companions, young Judean exiles serving in the Babylonian and Persian courts, hold onto their identity and practice under real pressure to assimilate — refusing the king's food, interpreting dreams no one else can, and, most famously, surviving a fiery furnace and a den of lions rather than compromise. The second half (chapters 7–12) shifts registers entirely into apocalyptic vision: strange symbolic beasts representing a succession of empires, cryptic calculations of how long the current crisis will last, and — uniquely explicit in the Tanakh — a clear statement of bodily resurrection and lasting judgment (12:2), making Daniel a bridge toward the apocalyptic literature that would flourish in the centuries after it. Notably, part of the book (roughly 2:4 through the end of chapter 7) is written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew, one of only two books in the Tanakh (with Ezra) to use both languages.

The book's second half turns from court stories to symbolic visions: four strange beasts rising from a stormy sea, representing a succession of empires, followed by a scene where “one like a son of man” approaches “the Ancient of Days” and is given everlasting dominion (chapter 7) — imagery so dense that Daniel himself, in the text, says it left him “deeply disturbed” and unable to fully grasp it. Long after Daniel's own moment, both Jewish and Christian tradition would return to this chapter's imagery again and again to make sense of later upheavals.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

The name Daniel means “God is my judge.” The book's two languages reflect its setting: Aramaic, the common administrative language of the Babylonian and Persian empires, appears exactly where the narrative turns to matters of imperial power and cosmic judgment — as if the book itself is code-switching along with its own characters.

THE QUESTION

The book's very first test is almost domestic in scale: Daniel and his three companions request permission to eat only vegetables and water rather than the rich food and wine from the king's own table, worried about violating dietary law in a foreign court (1:8-16) — and after ten days, they look healthier than everyone who ate the royal fare. It's a small, low-stakes-looking choice that the book treats as the template for every larger test of identity that follows.

Daniel and his friends hold onto real, specific practices under real pressure to blend in completely. If you're raising a family across more than one tradition or background, you may know something about that pressure firsthand — not from a foreign king, but from a world that often rewards blending in over standing out. What's one specific thing, not an abstract value but an actual practice, you'd want your own family to hold onto the way Daniel held onto his?

THE PRACTICE

Daniel carries no fixed festival reading of its own. Its themes — faithfulness under foreign power, refusing quiet assimilation — echo informally around Hanukkah for many readers, even though Hanukkah itself commemorates a later conflict than Daniel's setting.

TRY THIS

Daniel's first act of resistance is small and almost domestic — refusing a specific food, not staging a rebellion. Name one small, specific practice (not a grand gesture) that helps you hold onto something that matters to you, and write it in Your Notes.

STILL ECHOING

Daniel's court tales deliberately echo Joseph's story back in Genesis — a young man exiled to a foreign court, resisting pressure, rising through interpreting dreams no one else can read — the same shape reused, centuries apart, for a very different empire.

Your Notes — Daniel

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

“Daniel is what it looks like to hold onto who you are when almost everything around you is asking you to blend in.”

FACES TO KNOW

Daniel — a young Judean exile who rises through interpreting dreams no one else can read, without compromising his practice along the way.

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah — Daniel's three companions (better known by their Babylonian names, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), who survive the fiery furnace rather than bow to an idol.

Nebuchadnezzar and Darius — the Babylonian and Persian kings under whom Daniel and his friends serve, each eventually forced to acknowledge a power greater than their own.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe one court tale from Daniel 1–6 and what it shows about Daniel's character.
- ☐ I can explain what changes in tone and content between chapters 1–6 and 7–12.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Daniel left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Daniel holds onto identity from inside exile. Ezra–Nehemiah, the next stop, picks up after exile ends — the difficult, unglamorous work of actually rebuilding a home to return to.

Ezra–Nehemiah

Ezra v'Nechemiah

READ

Ezra 1, 9; Nehemiah 1–2, 8–9 at minimum — the whole book if you can. (Jewish tradition counts Ezra and Nehemiah as a single book, printed today as two for length.)

THE STORY

Ezra–Nehemiah picks up exactly where Chronicles' final verses point: the Persian king Cyrus decrees that the exiled community may return and rebuild. The book's first half follows the return under Zerubbabel and the rebuilding of the Temple, then Ezra's own later mission, bringing renewed Torah scholarship and a series of controversial reforms — including, in chapters 9–10, requiring Israelite men to divorce the foreign wives they had married. It's a genuinely hard chapter to sit with, and this workbook won't smooth it over: most historians read it as the anxious response of a small, fragile community worried about surviving at all after exile, not as a template later Jewish law would simply repeat — halakhah on intermarriage and conversion developed very differently, and much further, in the centuries that followed. Nehemiah, a Persian court official, returns separately to rebuild Jerusalem's walls against real opposition, institutes economic reforms canceling debts (chapter 5), and stages, with Ezra, a public reading of the Torah to the assembled community (chapter 8) — an event many historians treat as a founding moment for Torah study as a practice belonging to the whole people, not only the priesthood.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

Ezra and Nehemiah were originally counted as one book in Jewish tradition, much like Samuel and Kings — two figures, a shared story of return and rebuilding, later split into two named volumes mainly for length.

THE QUESTION

Nehemiah's own portion of the book is largely a construction story under threat: rebuilding Jerusalem's walls while local officials mock, threaten, and eventually plot violence against the project, to the point that the workers, the text says, built “with one hand... and with the other held a weapon” (4:17). The wall goes up in fifty-two days despite the opposition — a concrete, almost logistical kind of faithfulness, well before the book turns to its harder, more contested chapters.

This is another stop, like Joshua back in Nevi'im, where the text is genuinely hard to sit with — especially if you're part of a mixed or interfaith family yourself. Reading chapters 9–10 honestly, in their own anxious historical moment, rather than skipping past them, is exactly what this workbook's disclaimer promises to help with: a place to meet the whole text, hard chapters included, alongside — never instead of — your own community's guidance on what it means for your own life today.

THE PRACTICE

Nehemiah 8's public Torah reading, led jointly by Ezra and the Levites, is echoed today in Tikkun Leil Shavuot, the custom of staying up all night studying Torah on the festival of Shavuot — communal Torah study as an act of recommitment, the same instinct behind the original ceremony.

TRY THIS

Nehemiah 5 describes canceling debts that had pushed people into desperate poverty — a concrete act of communal repair, not just a stated ideal. Name one concrete (not abstract) act of repair you could actually do this month, and write it in Your Notes.

STILL ECHOING

Ezra–Nehemiah's public Torah reading in chapter 8 answers something Deuteronomy set up generations earlier: the command (Deuteronomy 31:10–13) to gather the whole people, every seven years, to hear the Torah read aloud — a practice this book shows finally being revived after exile, not invented from scratch.

Your Notes — Ezra–Nehemiah

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

“Ezra–Nehemiah is the unglamorous, necessary work of actually rebuilding a home, wall by wall and law by law, after the story of loss is over.”

FACES TO KNOW

Ezra — a priest and scribe who brings renewed Torah scholarship back to Jerusalem, and leads the community's most difficult reforms.

Nehemiah — a Persian court official who returns separately to rebuild Jerusalem's walls and institutes debt-cancellation reforms.

Zerubbabel — leader of the first wave of returnees under Cyrus's decree, overseeing the Temple's initial rebuilding.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can describe what Ezra and Nehemiah each rebuild, and in what order.
- ☐ I can explain, in my own words, why chapters 9–10 are difficult, and how modern scholars read them.
- ☐ I've written at least one question this stop left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

Ezra–Nehemiah ends with a community rebuilt but still small and uncertain of its own future. Chronicles, the final stop in this workbook's twenty-four, looks back across that entire story one more time, from Adam to the very same decree that opens this book.

Chronicles

Divrei HaYamim — “*The Words of the Days*”

READ

1 Chronicles 1, 17, 29; 2 Chronicles 36 at minimum — the whole book if you can. (Chronicles is one book in Jewish tradition, split into two volumes for length.)

THE STORY

Chronicles retells the story of Israel from Adam — by way of nine dense chapters of genealogy — through David and Solomon and the kings of Judah, down to the Babylonian exile, almost entirely skipping the Northern Kingdom's own line of kings, already covered at length back in Kings. It is, deliberately, a retelling rather than a fresh account: much of its content overlaps with Samuel and Kings, but reshaped and re-emphasized for a different moment and a different purpose. David is idealized here far more than in Samuel — the Bathsheba affair goes almost entirely unmentioned — and enormous attention is given to the Temple, its construction, and the priestly and levitical personnel who staff it, reflecting the concerns of the later, post-exilic community looking back at its own origins and asking what mattered most to preserve. Chronicles, and with it the entire Tanakh in the traditional Jewish order, closes on the same note Ezra opens with: Cyrus's decree permitting the exiles to return home. The last word of the Hebrew Bible, in this order, is “go up” — an invitation, not an ending.

A WORD WORTH KNOWING

In Hebrew this book is named *Divrei HaYamim*, “the words” or “events of the days” — essentially, “annals.” The English “Chronicles” actually comes down through a different tradition entirely: the Greek Christian canon called these books *Paralipomena*, “things left out” (of Samuel and Kings) — two very different ways of describing the same material's purpose.

THE QUESTION

Buried inside the nine chapters of genealogy that most readers skim past sits a two-verse prayer from an otherwise unknown figure named Jabez, asking God to “enlarge my territory” and keep him from harm (4:9-10) — a small, personal request tucked into a list of names, later revived in very different form by a 21st-century bestseller. Chronicles's genealogies, easy to dismiss as filler, occasionally do exactly what genealogies are for: preserve someone who would otherwise have left no trace at all.

Chronicles tells a story its first audience already knew, from Samuel and Kings, but tells it differently — leaving things out, adding new emphasis, focused on what a struggling post-exilic community most needed to remember about itself. Is retelling your own history with a different emphasis, at a different moment in your life, dishonest — or is it simply what every generation, including this one, has always done with its own past?

THE PRACTICE

Chronicles carries no dedicated festival reading of its own; its role in this workbook is thematic rather than liturgical — a meditation on memory, retelling, and what a community chooses to preserve of its own story.

TRY THIS

Tell one piece of your own family's history twice, out loud or in Your Notes — once the way you usually tell it, and once emphasizing something you normally leave out. Notice what changes.

STILL ECHOING

Chronicles' closing word — go up, permission to return home — answers Lamentations' opening word, eikhah, “how,” all the way back at this part's fifth stop. The Tanakh's third movement, exactly as the Apertura promised, doesn't resolve grief so much as it finally, quietly, makes room to leave it behind.

Your Notes — Chronicles

Use this space for whatever the reading brought up — a question, a phrase that stuck, something you want to ask someone else.

[illegible]

ONE LINE TO REMEMBER

“Chronicles proves that retelling your own story, with your own emphasis, is not the same thing as getting it wrong.”

FACES TO KNOW

David — idealized here far more than in Samuel, with the Bathsheba affair going almost entirely unmentioned.

Solomon — given extensive attention as the Temple's builder, the book's central architectural and religious achievement.

Cyrus — the Persian king whose decree permitting return closes both this book and, in the traditional Jewish order, the entire Tanakh.

BEFORE YOU MOVE ON

- ☐ I can explain what Chronicles emphasizes that Samuel and Kings do not (or leave out).
- ☐ I can name the decree that closes both Chronicles and the traditional Jewish order of the Tanakh.
- ☐ I've written at least one question Chronicles left me with in Your Notes.

LOOKING AHEAD

This is the twenty-fourth and final stop. Chronicles closes Ketuvim, and with it, all three parts of the Tanakh this workbook set out to map. What comes next isn't another book — it's the Closing: a chance to look back at the whole map you've just walked, cover to cover, and decide what you want to carry forward from it.

You've Reached the End of the Map

Twenty-four stops ago, the Author's Note made you a promise: you would not finish this book knowing everything, but you would have something more useful — a working map of the whole library, a sense of where each book sits and why, and a stack of your own notes to prove you actually walked the path yourself.

If you're reading this page, you kept your side of that bargain. Genesis to Chronicles, in order, one stop at a time — through a creation story told twice, a law code that turns out to be about freedom, forty years between a promise and its fulfillment, kings measured by one honest standard, laments that refuse to look away, and a woman of valor sung at Friday tables for generations. That is not a small thing to have done.

This closing section is not another stop. It's a place to stand still for a moment and look back at the whole shape of what you've read, before you decide what to carry forward from it.

“You will not finish this book and know everything. What you will have is a working map of the whole library.”

The next few pages give you that: the whole journey compiled in one place, all twenty-four questions gathered for a second look, an honest account of what this book was never meant to be, a few places to go from here, a glossary of the Hebrew you now know without necessarily noticing you learned it, a second tracker for the year you decide to walk this path again, and a certificate worth actually signing.

BY THE NUMBERS

Twenty-four books. Twenty-four stops. Roughly one hundred fifty pages, read at whatever pace actually fit your life — a week at a time, a month at a time, or slower still. This workbook only ever supplied the map; every note in the margins from here is yours.

Your Whole Journey

PART ONE — TORAH

Five books, narrowing from the whole universe down to one people standing at the edge of a promised land.

1. Genesis

Bereshit — “In the Beginning”

“Election in Genesis is never about being flawless — it's about being chosen anyway.”

2. Exodus

Shemot — “Names”

“Exodus insists that freedom and structure are not opposites — they're partners.”

3. Leviticus

Vayikra — “And He Called”

“In Leviticus, holiness is not kept separate from daily life — it's built into it.”

4. Numbers

Bemidbar — “In the Wilderness”

“Numbers is the story of what has to happen between a promise and being ready for it.”

5. Deuteronomy

Devarim — “Words”

“Deuteronomy is what it looks like to pass on a story you won't get to see the ending of.”

Torah ends without an ending — Moses dies within sight of the land he never enters, and the story hands itself off to whoever comes next. Notice, looking back across all five books at once, how often the throughline was never perfection: Genesis chose a flawed family, Exodus built structure out of freedom rather than against it, and Deuteronomy closed on a leader who never got to finish the job himself. That pattern didn't stop at the Torah's last page.

THE CLOSING

PART TWO — NEVI'IM

Eight stops covering the rise and fall of a nation, and the voices who kept telling it the truth.

6. Joshua

Yehoshua — “The LORD Saves”

“Joshua is the story of a promise moving from words into land — complicated ground and all.”

7. Judges

Shoftim — “Judges”

“Judges is what happens in the gap between a promise kept and a people not yet ready to keep their end of it.”

8. Samuel

Shmuel

“Samuel holds a promise and an accountability in the same hands, about the same king, and refuses to let either one cancel out the other.”

9. Kings

Melakhim — “Kings”

“Kings keeps asking the same question of every ruler it introduces: does power here have anything to do with faithfulness?”

10. Isaiah

Yeshayahu — “The LORD Is Salvation”

“Isaiah holds the hardest warning and the deepest comfort in the same book, on purpose.”

11. Jeremiah

Yirmeyahu

“Jeremiah is what it costs to keep telling the truth to people who have already decided not to listen.”

12. Ezekiel

Yechezkel

“Ezekiel insists that even what looks completely finished — dry bones in a valley — isn't necessarily the end of the story.”

13. The Twelve

Trei Asar — “The Twelve”

“The Twelve prove a prophetic voice doesn't need many pages to matter.”

THE CLOSING

PART THREE — KETUVIM (I OF II)

Eleven stops of poetry, wisdom, and lived experience — the most varied part of the Tanakh, on purpose.

14. Psalms

Tehillim — “Praises”

“Psalms proves that prayer doesn't have to be tidy to be real.”

15. Proverbs

Mishlei — “Proverbs”

“Proverbs is confident that wisdom pays off — which makes the next stop, where that confidence gets tested, land even harder.”

16. Job

Iyov

“Job doesn't answer why bad things happen to good people — it insists the question deserves to be asked out loud.”

17. Song of Songs

Shir HaShirim — “The Song of Songs”

“Song of Songs proves the Tanakh trusts its readers with more than one way to read the same words.”

18. Ruth

Rut

“Ruth is proof that loyalty, not birth, is what this book treats as the real inheritance.”

19. Lamentations

Eikhah — “How”

“Lamentations proves grief can be given a shape without being made smaller.”

THE CLOSING

PART THREE — KETUVIM (II OF II)

20. Ecclesiastes

Qohelet

“Ecclesiastes doesn't solve impermanence — it just refuses to let you pretend you didn't notice it.”

21. Esther

Ester

“Esther is what faith looks like when nothing announces itself as a miracle.”

22. Daniel

Daniel

“Daniel is what it looks like to hold onto who you are when almost everything around you is asking you to blend in.”

23. Ezra–Nehemiah

Ezra v'Nehemiah

“Ezra–Nehemiah is the unglamorous, necessary work of actually rebuilding a home, wall by wall and law by law.”

24. Chronicles

Divrei HaYamim — “The Words of the Days”

“Chronicles proves that retelling your own story, with your own emphasis, is not the same thing as getting it wrong.”

Chronicles' last word, in the traditional Jewish order, is “go up” — an invitation, not an ending. Fittingly, so is this page.

The Questions You Carried

Every stop left you with one question, and this book never printed a single correct answer to any of them — that was deliberate. Here they all are again, gathered in one place, in case your answer has changed since you first sat with them.

PART ONE — TORAH

1. Genesis — What does it change to imagine the text holding two true things at once, without smoothing the seam between them?

Today, I'd answer: _____

2. Exodus — What would it mean to treat structure as a form of freedom rather than its opposite?

Today, I'd answer: _____

3. Leviticus — What might change if you held “I did something wrong” and “I am in a state that needs addressing” as two separate ideas?

Today, I'd answer: _____

4. Numbers — Is there a promise in your life you've been impatient with, expecting readiness to arrive faster than it can?

Today, I'd answer: _____

5. Deuteronomy — What does it cost — and what might it be worth — to invest fully in an outcome you won't personally witness?

Today, I'd answer: _____

A question you can still answer differently a year from now was never a comprehension check — it was always meant to grow with you.

THE CLOSING

PART TWO — NEVI'IM

6. Joshua — How do you sit with a genuinely hard chapter honestly, without either skipping it or letting it have the last word?

Today, I'd answer: _____

7. Judges — Where do you draw your own line between healthy independence and “everyone for themselves”?

Today, I'd answer: _____

8. Samuel — What does it mean to you that this text preserves both the promise and the accountability, about the same person?

Today, I'd answer: _____

9. Kings — What would it mean to judge leadership by one consistent standard, even when it's not everyone else's standard?

Today, I'd answer: _____

10. Isaiah — What does it mean that suffering and a larger purpose are held together here, rather than treated as opposites?

Today, I'd answer: _____

11. Jeremiah — Have you ever known something unwelcome was true and had to decide whether to say it anyway?

Today, I'd answer: _____

12. Ezekiel — Where do you see old patterns still treated as inherited sentences, rather than choices each generation gets to make fresh?

Today, I'd answer: _____

13. The Twelve — Which comes more naturally to you — Jonah's fury at mercy, or Amos's fury at complacency — and which do you have to work harder to hold onto?

Today, I'd answer: _____

THE CLOSING

PART THREE — KETUVIM

14. Psalms — Do you let your own prayer or honest self-talk range as widely as Psalms does, or do you edit out the parts that don't sound grateful enough?

Today, I'd answer: _____

15. Proverbs — Where has this book's confident cause-and-effect matched your own life, and where has it clearly not?

Today, I'd answer: _____

16. Job — Have you ever offered someone a tidy explanation for their pain because sitting with the not-knowing felt harder?

Today, I'd answer: _____

17. Song of Songs — What would it mean to let a text mean two true things simultaneously?

Today, I'd answer: _____

18. Ruth — What does it mean that the Tanakh preserves both a boundary and the story that quietly crosses it, without reconciling them?

Today, I'd answer: _____

19. Lamentations — Has a structure — a ritual, a routine, a form of writing — ever helped you hold something too big to hold on your own?

Today, I'd answer: _____

20. Ecclesiastes — Is Qohelet's answer to impermanence — a meal, honest work, good company — satisfying, an evasion, or something else?

Today, I'd answer: _____

21. Esther — Can you recognize meaning or purpose in events in your own life that never came with a clear, religious-sounding label attached?

Today, I'd answer: _____

22. Daniel — What's one specific, actual practice — not an abstract value — you'd want your own family to hold onto?

Today, I'd answer: _____

23. Ezra–Nehemiah — What would it take to do the unglamorous, necessary work of rebuilding something in your own life, wall by wall?

Today, I'd answer: _____

24. Chronicles — Is retelling your own history with a different emphasis, at a different moment, dishonest — or simply what every generation does?

Today, I'd answer: _____

What This Book Is Not

It's worth being just as clear now, at the close, as the very first pages tried to be — because twenty-four stops in, it's easy to start treating a workbook like more than it ever claimed to be.

IT IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR YOUR COMMUNITY

This workbook is a complement, never a substitute, for the guidance of a synagogue, a rabbi, or a house of Jewish learning. Nothing in these pages was meant to settle a question that belongs, properly, to your own rabbi or community — only to make sure you arrived at that conversation having actually read the text yourself.

IT IS NOT A CODE OF JEWISH LAW

Where a stop's Practice page mentioned a custom, a festival reading, or a liturgical use, it was describing how a passage is lived today — not issuing a halakhic ruling. For questions of Jewish law and practice, this book points you toward your community, not away from it.

IT IS NOT A COURSE IN HEBREW, AND NOT A COMPLETE COMMENTARY

You now know a few dozen Hebrew words and book titles by sound and meaning — that's a beginning, not fluency. And Pardes, the layered method this book borrowed back on page 8, has four traditional layers; this workbook only ever walked you through the first three. Remez's fuller reach and Sod's mystical depth were left, honestly, for another book and another teacher.

IT IS NOT A RELIGIOUS CREDENTIAL

The certificate waiting for you a few pages from now is worth signing, but it isn't a substitute for formal Jewish education, conversion study, or b'nei mitzvah preparation, and it doesn't certify anything beyond exactly what it says: that you read all twenty-four books, stop by stop. If this workbook is part of a larger path toward any of those things, treat it as a genuinely useful first leg of that path, and take the next steps with the teachers who are actually qualified to walk it with you.

THE CLOSING

IT IS NOT NEUTRAL ABOUT BEING SIMPLIFIED

Twenty-four books, written across roughly a thousand years, in more than one voice, compressed into four pages each — something is always lost in that compression. Where this workbook drew on scholarship, including the Jewish Study Bible, Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary, and Marc Zvi Brettler's *How to Read the Bible*, it did so to inform its own words, not to replace the fuller conversations those works actually hold.

IT DOES NOT MAKE YOUR FAMILY'S DECISIONS FOR YOU

If you read this book as part of a mixed or interfaith family, you may have noticed that stops like Joshua and Ezra–Nehemiah didn't try to soften genuinely hard chapters, and stops like Ruth and Daniel didn't try to resolve questions of belonging and identity on your behalf either. That was intentional. This book's job was to make sure you met the whole text, hard parts included — what you and your family decide to do with any of it was never this book's decision to make.

In short: this book was a map, not a destination, and a companion, not an authority.

For Going Further

If twenty-four stops left you wanting more depth rather than less, here is honestly where this workbook's own words came from — and where yours can go next.

THE JEWISH STUDY BIBLE (JSB)

A full translation of the Tanakh with scholarly introductions and notes for every book, plus substantial essays on Jewish interpretation, history, and practice. If you only add one book to your shelf after this one, this is the one this workbook would point to first.

ETZ HAYIM: TORAH AND COMMENTARY

The standard Conservative movement Torah commentary, combining the Hebrew text, translation, running commentary, and additional essays — especially rich if Torah, specifically, is where you want to go deeper first.

HOW TO READ THE BIBLE, MARC ZVI BRETTLER

An accessible introduction to the historical-critical method — how modern scholars actually date, contextualize, and read these texts. Several of this workbook's more difficult conversations, including how to sit with Joshua's conquest narrative, leaned on Brettler's approach directly.

None of the three requires the others — each stands on its own. But together, they cover the three directions this workbook could only ever gesture at in four pages a book: the text itself in full, a specific tradition's sustained commentary on it, and the scholarly lens for reading it critically. Most serious home libraries on this subject eventually hold all three.

THE CLOSING

BEYOND THE SHELF

A local synagogue's adult education classes are, for most people, the single best next step — a place to read this material out loud, in community, with someone trained to answer the questions a workbook can only ever raise.

Sefaria.org offers a free, searchable digital library of the Tanakh alongside centuries of classical Jewish commentary, in Hebrew and in translation side by side — a genuinely deep well, if you ever want to see how a single verse has been read across generations.

A chevruta — a study partner, traditionally studying the same text together out loud — turns solitary reading into something closer to how this text was designed to be studied in the first place. If a stop's Question stayed with you, it was probably built for exactly that kind of conversation.

Pirkei Avot, the classical rabbinic collection of ethical teachings already mentioned back in Proverbs' stop, is a natural next read for anyone who found The Practice pages more compelling than The Story pages — shorter, more aphoristic, and squarely about how to live.

Wherever you go from here, the same instinct that got you through all twenty-four stops of this book will serve you well: read the text itself first, let the commentary help afterward, and treat a good question as something worth keeping rather than rushing to close.

Glossary

Every Hebrew word this workbook introduced along the way, gathered in one place — a small dictionary of a language you now know a little better than you did twenty-four stops ago.

Aggadah — The non-legal strand of rabbinic literature — narrative, folklore, ethical teaching, and theology, as distinct from Halakhah.

B'nei Mitzvah — The coming-of-age milestone marking a child's obligation to Jewish commandments — bar mitzvah for a boy, bat mitzvah for a girl — traditionally around age thirteen.

Chevruta — A study partner, traditionally reading and arguing over the same text out loud together rather than studying alone.

D'rash — The interpretive layer of Pardes: what a passage asks of the reader today, beyond its plain, original context.

Diaspora — Jewish communities living outside the Land of Israel, and the broader historical experience of dispersion.

Eshet Chayil — “A Woman of Valor,” the acrostic poem closing Proverbs, still sung in many homes at the Friday-night Shabbat table.

Haftarah — A passage from Nevi'im read alongside the weekly Torah portion, traditionally chosen for a thematic echo between the two.

Halakhah — Jewish law — the legal, prescriptive strand of tradition, as distinct from Aggadah.

Hallel — Psalms 113–118, recited on Rosh Chodesh and festivals — among the oldest continuously used liturgical units in Jewish practice.

Hester Panim — “The hiding of the face” — God's presence at work without ever announcing itself directly, the idea behind Esther's name.

Hevel — Ecclesiastes' central word, usually translated “vanity” but more literally “vapor” or “breath” — something ungraspable.

Glossary, continued

Kabbalat Shabbat — The psalms and songs traditionally recited to welcome the Sabbath on Friday evening, just before the evening service.

Ketuvim — “Writings,” the third part of the Tanakh — eleven books of poetry, wisdom, and lived experience.

Meghillot — “Scrolls” — the five short books (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther) each read in full at a specific festival.

Mitzvah — A commandment; plural mitzvot — the traditional 613 obligations Jewish law derives from the Torah.

Nevi'im — “Prophets,” the second part of the Tanakh — eight books covering a nation's rise, fall, and the voices who kept telling it the truth.

Parashah — The weekly portion of Torah read on the annual cycle, beginning and restarting each year at Simchat Torah.

Pardes — Hebrew for “orchard,” and the traditional name for Jewish tradition's layered way of reading: P'shat, Remez, D'rash, and Sod.

P'shat — The plain-sense layer of Pardes: what a passage says in its own original context, before any later interpretation is added.

Purim — The festival commemorating Esther's story, read in full from its own scroll, marked by costumes and unrestrained celebration.

Remez — The “allusion” layer of Pardes: a hint or connection a passage makes beyond its plain, surface meaning.

Rosh Chodesh — The new month, marked in the Jewish calendar and, among other observances, by the recitation of Hallel.

Rosh Hashanah — The Jewish New Year, marked by the sounding of the shofar and, in the liturgy, a reading of Hannah's prayer.

Sefer — Hebrew for “book” or “scroll” — the root behind many of the Hebrew titles used throughout this workbook.

THE CLOSING

Glossary, continued

Seder — The ritual meal and retelling of the Exodus story held on Passover, built around reading the Haggadah.

Shabbat — The weekly Sabbath, from Friday evening to Saturday evening, traditionally marked by candles, wine, and rest.

Shavuot — The festival commemorating the giving of the Torah at Sinai, when Ruth is read and Tikkun Leil Shavuot is observed.

Shofar — A ram's horn sounded on Rosh Hashanah and at other points in the Jewish calendar, among Judaism's oldest ritual instruments.

Simchat Torah — The festival marking the completion of the annual Torah-reading cycle and the immediate start of the next one.

Sod — The “mystery” layer of Pardes — a passage's hidden or mystical meaning, left largely untouched by this workbook.

Sukkot — The harvest festival marked by eating in a temporary booth (sukkah), when Ecclesiastes is read in full.

Tanakh — An acronym for Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim — the twenty-four books of the Hebrew Bible, by the traditional Jewish count.

Tikkun Leil Shavuot — The custom of staying up all night studying Torah on Shavuot, echoing Nehemiah 8's public Torah reading.

Tisha b'Av — The fast day mourning the destruction of both Temples, when Lamentations is read in full, often by dim light.

Torah — “Teaching,” the first part of the Tanakh — five books from the creation of the world to the edge of the Promised Land.

Vezot HaBerakhah — The final weekly Torah portion, read on Simchat Torah in the same service that immediately restarts the cycle at Genesis.

Yom Kippur — The Day of Atonement, the holiest fast of the Jewish year, observed with a full day of fasting and prayer.

Your Second Year

The Tanakh doesn't change; you will. Come back to this same copy in a year, or five, and walk the same twenty-four stops again — you will very likely notice things you missed the first time, simply because you'll be a different reader by then.

PART ONE & PART TWO — TORAH AND NEVI'IM

Part	#	Book	Done	Date / Note
Torah	1	Genesis	☐	
Torah	2	Exodus	☐	
Torah	3	Leviticus	☐	
Torah	4	Numbers	☐	
Torah	5	Deuteronomy	☐	
Nevi'im	6	Joshua	☐	
Nevi'im	7	Judges	☐	
Nevi'im	8	Samuel	☐	
Nevi'im	9	Kings	☐	
Nevi'im	10	Isaiah	☐	
Nevi'im	11	Jeremiah	☐	
Nevi'im	12	Ezekiel	☐	
Nevi'im	13	The Twelve	☐	

TRY A DIFFERENT ORDER THIS TIME

Your first pass went in order, Genesis to Chronicles, and that's the right way to meet the Tanakh's own shape. A second pass doesn't have to. Try reading by theme instead — every book's Question page back to back, or every Still Echoing note, tracing one thread (grief, leadership, identity under pressure) across all twenty-four stops at once.

THE CLOSING

PART THREE — KETUVIM

Part	#	Book	Done	Date / Note
Ketuvim	14	Psalms	☐	
Ketuvim	15	Proverbs	☐	
Ketuvim	16	Job	☐	
Ketuvim	17	Song of Songs	☐	
Ketuvim	18	Ruth	☐	
Ketuvim	19	Lamentations	☐	
Ketuvim	20	Ecclesiastes	☐	
Ketuvim	21	Esther	☐	
Ketuvim	22	Daniel	☐	
Ketuvim	23	Ezra–Nehemiah	☐	
Ketuvim	24	Chronicles	☐	

If your answer to a stop's Question has changed since your first pass, that's not inconsistency — that's exactly what a text worth returning to is supposed to do to a reader over time.

IF YOU'RE READING WITH A CHILD WHO'S GROWN

A stop you read together when a child was six will land completely differently once they're sixteen, and differently again once they're the one explaining it to someone younger. Consider this same copy, the same twenty-four checkboxes, as something that grows up alongside whoever you're reading it with — not a book you outgrow, but one that keeps meeting you where you actually are.

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLETION

This certifies that

(name)

has read all twenty-four books of the Tanakh —
Torah, Nevi'im, and Ketuvim, cover to cover —
stop by stop, in the company of this workbook.

(date completed)

“Turn it, and turn it again, for everything is in it.” — Pirkei Avot 5:22, on the Torah, said of the whole of study

A Blessing to Close With

You opened this book, twenty-four stops ago, standing a little outside a text that was, in some sense, already yours to inherit. Whatever brought you here — a child's question you couldn't yet answer, a partner from a different tradition, your own curiosity, or simply the plain wish to stop feeling behind — you did the actual work: you read the text, not just about it, twenty-four times over.

May the stops that unsettled you keep unsettling you productively, long after this book is back on the shelf. May the stops that moved you find their way into how you actually live, not just what you know. And may the questions you carried through these pages stay open long enough to keep being worth asking again.

May you close this book a little more at home in a text that was, in some sense, already yours to inherit.

If you came to this book as the parent standing a half-step outside this tradition, know what you actually did over these twenty-four stops: you didn't just learn a text secondhand so you could explain it to someone else later. You met it yourself, directly, in your own reading and your own handwriting — which means whatever your family carries forward from here rests on something firsthand, not borrowed.

This copy is yours now — worn, underlined, argued with in the margins, exactly as it was meant to be. Whenever you're ready, Genesis is waiting again, on page one, exactly where you left it.

THE CLOSING

Notes

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THE CLOSING

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