

# bookSMART



**JLI FLAGSHIP  
LESSON 4  
—WINTER 5783**

## *Key Points*

1. ***The Field of Halachah.*** Halachah—meaning “going” and “the way”—is the bottom line of Torah. The field of Halachah is where the biblical commandments, rabbinical ordinances, and Talmudic learning translate into the dos and don'ts of daily life. Halachah addresses every part of a Jew's life, from waking to bedtime, from birth to burial, and from everyday activities to the most extraordinary situations and dilemmas.
2. ***The Emergence of Specialized Branches of Torah.*** The Tanach, the Talmud, and the Midrashim are “generic” works of Torah, in which various types of teachings—historical, legal, philosophical, moral, mystical, etc.—are incorporated in the same book and woven into the same narratives. Following the completion of the Talmud at the end of the 5th century CE, Torah learning underwent a transition from being exclusively teacher-based to an increased reliance on books as sources of Torah knowledge. This resulted in the creation of more specialized Torah works, including books of Halachah.
3. ***Types of Halachic Works.*** Halachic works fall under four general categories: (1) Halachic digests of the Talmud, which isolate the final Halachic rulings from the plethora of opinions and deliberations in the Talmudic text; (2) Halachic codes, which arrange the Torah's laws by topic and are designed to serve as a Halachic guide for the “end user”; (3) Halachic commentaries, which explain, debate, supplement, and

compare between other Halachic works; (4) Halachic responsa, which address specific queries in Torah law.

4. **Major Halachic Codes.** Two central Halachic codes are: (1) The 14-volume *Mishneh Torah*, authored by Maimonides in the 12th century, which was the first work that systematically codified all the laws of the Torah. (2) The *Shulchan Aruch*, which combines two monumental Halachic works representing, respectively, the Sefardic and Ashkenazic Halachic traditions: the code of law compiled in 1563 by Rabbi Yosef Caro, and the “glosses” appended to it by Rabbi Moshe Isserlis in 1571. The *Shulchan Aruch* was accepted by all Jewish communities as the fundamental “code of Jewish law,” and it became the baseline work on which many subsequent Halachic commentaries and codifications were written.
5. **A Case Study of the Halachic Process.** The Halachic process applies the macro-principles of the Torah to the particulars of everyday life. A case in point is the absolute value that the Torah places on human life, which results in a number of Halachic rules that may, at times, conflict with each other. The Halachic process navigates these conflicts, addressing a number of scenarios in which saving one life results in the loss of another, to determine how a person should act in each case.
6. **Focus on Action.** This case study emphasizes the Torah’s conception of moral choice as action-based rather than consequence-based, with the focus being on what a person should or should not do in a given situation.