

# bookSMART



**JLI FLAGSHIP  
LESSON 5  
—WINTER 5783**

## Key Points

1. ***The Philosophy and Psychology of Judaism.*** Notwithstanding its emphasis on action and behavior (Halachah), the Torah is a holistic guide to life that also aims to enlighten our mind, refine our character, and nourish the inner life of our soul. In fact, many of the *mitzvot* can be properly fulfilled only through an in-depth understanding of the principles of Judaism and a systematic program of character development. Hence, Torah literature includes the field of Musar, the psychology of Judaism; and the field of Chakirah, the philosophy and theology of Judaism.
2. ***The Era of Specialization.*** In the Bible, Talmud, and Midrashim, the philosophical and psychological teachings of Judaism are, for the most part, subsumed within the general Torah narrative. Other than a few notable exceptions, we do not find works dedicated to a specific “genre” of Torah. It is only in the post-Talmudic era that we see the development of specialized fields of study such as Musar and Chakirah.
3. ***Major Works of Musar and Chakirah.*** The first Torah work to systematically present a philosophy of Judaism was *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, authored by Rabbi Saadia Gaon in 933. In 1080, Rabbi Bachya ibn Pakudah wrote one of the most fundamental works of Jewish ethical philosophy, *Duties of the Hearts*, which is a classic of both Musar and Chakirah. Other classics of Jewish philosophy and

theology are Rabbi Yehudah Halevi's *Kuzari* (1139) and Maimonides's *Guide for the Perplexed* (1190), as well as works by Ibn Gabirol (11th century), Ralbag (1288–1344), Rabbi Chisdai Crescas (early 15th century), Rabbi Yosef Albo (c. 1380–1444), Maharal (1520–1609), and Ramchal (1707–1746). Ibn Gabirol and Ramchal also composed works in the field of Musar, as did authors such as Rabbi Yonah Gerondi (d. 1263) and Rabbi Eliyahu de Vidas (1518–1587).

4. **The Modern Musar Movement.** In 1845, Rabbi Yisrael Salanter founded the modern Musar movement. The teachings of Rabbi Salanter and his disciples brought a new emphasis on ethical behavior, character refinement, and spiritual self-improvement to the *yeshivot* of eastern Europe, and to the Jewish world as a whole.
5. **Creation.** From the standpoint of Jewish philosophy, the statement “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth” is fundamental to the Torah's view of reality. An eternally preexisting world—which was the prevailing scientific view until less than a century ago—negates the possibility of miracles, free choice, and hope for a better future. In contrast, the Torah asserts that G-d created all that exists, including the very laws of existence. This means that everything that is, is that way only because G-d desires that it should so be, and that G-d can obviously change the way it is—and empower us to do so.
6. **Bitachon.** The conception of G-d as absolute creator nourishes a mindset of *bitachon*, trust in G-d. *Bitachon* is a unique worldview that rejects both the hubris of self-reliance and the passivity of fatalism, in favor of proactive participation in Divine providence, confidence in G-d's goodness, and awareness of the purposefulness of every event and experience of our lives.
7. **Anger.** Most negative traits have certain positive applications. The emotion of anger, however, is seen by the masters of Musar as utterly irredeemable, and even as a subtle form of idolatry. This is because anger signifies a lapse of *bitachon*—of our trust in G-d's providence and in the Divine purpose of everything we experience.

8. **The Biblical Source.** Like everything in the Oral Torah, the ideas expounded in Chakirah and Musar are rooted in the Written Torah. The same is true of the principles of creationism, *bitachon*, and the psychology of anger, which can be discerned in the biblical narrative of how Joseph responded to the shame and guilt expressed by his brothers by saying, "It is not you who sent me here, but G-d."