

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 11: The Written and Oral Torah III

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So far in this series, we have established the importance of God's Divine intervention in providing an objective moral framework through which mankind can choose to become a partner with

God in perfecting His Universe.

Mankind's encounter with God came through the sealing of His covenant at Mount Sinai with the giving of the Torah. When we think of God's revelation at Sinai, an event which took place 3,331 years ago, it may seem distant – perhaps more of a biblical legend than historical fact, detached from our present day reality. Can we guarantee its authenticity? Perhaps the mists of ancient time have distorted God's intended message?

The American mathematician, engineer and cryptographer Claude E. Shannon (d. 2001) is considered the forefather of a branch of mathematics called Information Theory, which models how information can be transferred from one place to another in the presence of interference or noise. Information Theory draws on a variety of scientific disciplines and underpins the science behind all modern telecommunications systems. But it can also be used to strengthen the claim that God's revelation at Sinai is a historical fact and that the Torah we have today is authentic.

The Divine message spoken by God and heard by every Jew (Shemot 20:15-19 and Talmud Shabbat 88b) was the initiation of the transmission of Torah by God to Moshe, who then taught Yehoshua, who in turn taught the elders, and so on until the entire people had been educated (see Pirkei Avot 1:1). In each subsequent generation, students have ultimately become teachers, children have grown up to be parents, who go on to teach their own children, and so the Torah has been transmitted by the Jewish people through time (see an article that

I wrote on this: '*Parallel Thinking: Science, Torah, and Cognitive Dissonance*' in *Morasha Kehillat Yaakov*, pp. 273-295 for a detailed discussion).

There have been approximately 34 generations between Moshe and the present day (assuming 25 years per generation, over 3,331 years). In terms of living testimony, meaning grandparents living long enough to teach and inspire their grandchildren, this yields only 67 generational gaps (approximately) throughout the transmission process

Family units who operate within a wider community form a tight network allowing ideas, stories and experiences to be passed through the generations. This also provides inbuilt mechanisms to ensure the accuracy of such messages and the reliability of their transmission. While one could theoretically fabricate an individual prophetic experience, it is practically impossible to convince an entire community, let alone a nation, that they collectively experienced something that never actually happened. Just as families develop a shared history through shared experiences, which is maintained and conveyed through stories and anecdotes, the revelation at Sinai and the Torah learned forms a key part of our national history and shared national experiences.

Faith in the veracity of God's Divine message is therefore not irrational or blind. Our shared national experience is of God directly relating His Divine moral code. Our elders, who share their story with our young, bridge those generational gaps. This chain of transmission is called *mesorah*, from the Hebrew verb לְמַסֵּר – to pass on, and it will be the subject of the next three articles.

