

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 12: The Written and Oral Torah IV

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The previous article discussed the nature of God's revelation at Mount Sinai and the method by which His Divine message has been transmitted through each generation up to

the present day. It is important to understand precisely what this message included.

Apart from the Ten Commandments (Shemot 20), the Torah tells us that "*Chukim* (statutes), *Mishpatim* (ordinances) and *Torot* (laws)" were all given by God at Mount Sinai (Vayikra 26:46). The Midrash explains that 'statues' actually refers to the *midrashim* – ideas related through stories, the 'ordinances' are the commandments themselves and the word *Torot* implies that two 'laws' were given, one written, the other oral.

The Written Torah contains references to laws that are not elucidated or explained, which implies that their details were taught orally to Moshe. The importance of this cannot be overstated. It is appropriate for a Torah scholar to derive general spiritual and ethical teachings from the Written Torah - these are called *derashot*, from the Hebrew word לדרוש, meaning to expound or interpret. However, deriving actual laws (*halachot*) from the Written Torah is entirely different. The idea that God gave Moshe the Written Torah and then allowed mankind free rein to interpret each verse as one sees fit is a fallacy that risks undermining the true message of God's wisdom.

When it comes to matters of Jewish law, it is the Oral Torah given by God to Moshe on Mount Sinai which is the foundation stone of Jewish practice. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (d. 1746) explains that: "It is necessary to know that the main laws involved in both the positive and the negative commandments were received from Moshe. Nevertheless, our Sages had a tradition

that concepts contained in the Oral Torah are also alluded to in the Written Torah in various ways, according to various techniques known to them".

The Ramchal attests to the importance of both the Written and the Oral Torah as well as the fundamental relationship between the two. There could be aspects of the Torah which initially seem difficult to comprehend; yet when looked at together with the Oral Torah, the picture may appear different than at first glance.

The charge is often made that Torah laws given over 3,300 years ago are archaic and outdated. Some even justify this approach by applying bogus reasons to laws they view to be obsolete. They argue that since the reasons no longer apply in contemporary times, the law can be ignored. Apart from being dishonest and wrong, this simply makes no sense. God knows everything, including the future of mankind and He is eternal, unrestricted by time. Therefore, 3,300 years ago God knew precisely the kind of technological, social and cultural norms that would exist for Jewish people today. It seems both illogical and absurd that the eternal wisdom of the eternal God should have some sort of use-by date.

As we continue our journey, the next article will explain why God chose to reveal His wisdom in this way.

