

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 15: The Written and Oral Torah VII

by Rabbi Dr Moshe Freedman, New West End Synagogue



The previous article noted that the Oral Torah requires its students to engage their social, intellectual and imaginative faculties to acquire an understanding of Divine wisdom and discover novel ideas. On the other

hand, we have also noted that the Oral Torah, which contains the basis for practical Jewish law, was given by God to Moshe at Mount Sinai. If Divine law was systematically transmitted from teacher to student, what room is there for genuine innovation?

One of the primary themes in the *magnum opus* of Rabbi Yeshayahu Horowitz (known as the *Shelah* d. 1630) entitled '*Shnei Luchot HaBrit*' is the unity between God, the Torah and the human soul. He explains that since Torah is God's Divine wisdom and that every human soul emanates from God's essence (see Bereishit 2:7), it follows that the spiritual core of both mankind and the Torah are cut from the same cloth. This implies the potential for a harmonious, resonant interaction between mankind and Divine wisdom, which can be actualised through the learning of Torah. Rabbi Horowitz describes this as igniting the fire of the soul through the power of engrossing ourselves in Torah.

This explains why so many fundamental legal and theological aspects of Judaism are not made explicit by God in the Written Torah. God wanted to give every individual the transformative opportunity to partner with Him and engage their *neshamah* (soul) by learning Torah to reveal those hidden concepts through their own novel ideas.

Furthermore, he cites '*mekubalim*' or Jewish mystics, who state that there are 600,000 letters in the Torah, which reflects the 600,000 foundation souls from which the soul of every Jew originates. However, a count of the letters in the Written Torah reveals only 304,805 letters.

The Midrash describes the Torah given to Moshe as a "parchment of white fire with letters of black fire" (Devarim Rabbah 3:12). While there are only 304,805 black letters, by law each letter must be surrounded by parchment – this requirement is called *mukaf gevil*; if two letters are touching, the whole sefer Torah is invalid (Talmud Menachot 29a). This surrounding space, which the Midrash calls the 'white fire' represents the hidden aspects of Torah referred to by the *Shelah*. These spaces constitute the remainder of the 600,000 letters that the *mekubalim* refer to.

The *Shelah* therefore restricts the concept of innovation to revealing what God has hidden. Yet the implication of the *Shelah* is that each one of us has a unique 'letter' or aspect of Torah that only we can uncover. Without the engagement of every Jew, something is not only missing from our people, but from the Torah itself.

The next article will look more closely at rabbinic innovation and the development of *machloket* (disagreement) between the Talmudic sages and later authorities.



Answer: they were no longer given straw to make cement with and had to gather straw themselves.