

Jewish Contemporary Ethics Part 9: The Written and Oral Torah

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The last article introduced the idea that God's Divine morality is not simply imposed on humanity, but requires an eternal covenant and ongoing relationship between God and mankind. The next

animals which were "ritually clean" and just one pair of animals which were "not ritually clean" into the Ark (Bereishit 7:2). The Talmud explains that Noach studied the laws of the kashrut of animals, and that he needed more kosher animals in order to offer them to God after leaving the ark (Zevachim 116a).

section of this series will try to analyse the nature, meaning and mechanics of that covenant.

The Talmud notes that Avraham himself deduced both the existence of God and the mitzvot, and kept the entire Torah (Yoma 28b). Avraham then taught Torah to his family, who also kept its laws (see Bereishit 18:19 and 26:5). This generates a number of fascinating conundrums where the actions of our forefathers appear to contradict Torah law. While a detailed resolution lies beyond the scope of this series, it shows that Avraham not only recognised the Unity of God, but that he was the progenitor and advocate of pre-Sinaitic Torah, which was Monotheistic.

When we refer to 'the Torah' we often mean the Five Books of Moshe. The word itself derives from the Hebrew root ירה, which in this form means to guide or teach (see Vayikra 10:11). Yet the commentators write that the concept of 'the Torah' is much deeper and more complex.

More importantly, it shows that Torah is more than just the Five Books of Moshe. It is God's Divine wisdom, which defines objective human ethical behaviour, the absolute truth of which is cosmically woven into the reality of creation. The next article will explore how God's Divine universal ethics are comprehensively applicable to all mankind in all generations and how Avraham and Sarah became the first ones to disseminate it globally.

We may be used to thinking that the Torah was given to the Jewish people via Moshe at Mount Sinai (see part 11 for more details on this topic). This is true, but the Torah did not originate at Mount Sinai. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (d. 1746) explains that the Torah is God's Divine wisdom, crystallised into a finite text. The study of Torah therefore connects mankind to God's infinite thought, for although there are a finite number of words in the written Torah, they contain an infinite depth of understanding. Therefore, Torah in its purest definition means God's wisdom. Since God is not bound by time, His wisdom is eternal and unfettered by any historical event. This is what the Talmud means when it describes how the angels were reluctant to allow the Torah to be released from Heaven and given over to mankind.

The existence of Torah in the form of God's wisdom before Mount Sinai also explains the statements of our Talmudic sages which declare that many Biblical personalities studied and kept the Torah generations before the revelation at Sinai. For example, the Torah describes God's command to Noach to bring seven pairs of

