

CHAPTER 3, MISHNA 17(B): A RELATIVISTIC WORLD

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Rabbi Akiva said, jesting and lightheadedness accustom a person to immorality. The oral transmission is a protective fence for the Torah. Tithes are a protective fence for wealth. Vows are a protective fence for abstinence. A protective fence for wisdom is silence.

Last week we discussed the first statement of our mishna and began to examine the second. As we discussed, the "oral transmission" refers to the many laws of the Torah which were given orally to Moses at Sinai but which were not recorded in writing. They form the explanation of the Five Books of Moses, the written part of the Torah. Without them the written Torah is exceedingly vague, consisting of inspiring stories and poetic exhortations ("Be holy for I am holy" (Leviticus 19:2)), but little detail regarding what G-d actually wants of us. The Oral Law was committed to memory by the leaders of the generation of the Exodus and was handed down orally to succeeding generations. Only many centuries later was it finally committed to writing, primarily in the forms of the Mishna and Talmud.

We concluded our previous lesson with a question. If the Oral Law is truly as integral and authentic as the Written, why did G-d not will that it be recorded in writing as well? Why trust Israel's collective memory? We are a people of a long history and a long memory, to be sure. Yet if G-d **really** wanted us to observe the Torah properly, why would He not provide us with **all** the details, in written and uncontested form? Why this odd and seemingly arbitrary combination, some parts of our tradition written and some oral, the full flavor only coming out in the combination? What is gained by keeping some parts oral? And finally, what were G-d's criteria for what was given orally and what was committed to writing?

(I write this with the awareness that sadly, there are those today who see the Oral Law as a manmade phenomenon rather than the word of G-d. G-d spoke the written law alone -- or at least with a minimum of commentary. The rest was rabbinic innovation, likely containing their own tacit agendas: consolidating rabbinic authority, making women second class citizens, etc. The very fact that it was never written by Moses "proves" that it was introduced later and is far less authentic. Well, with such a counter-thesis, however tenuous, why didn't G-d simply instruct Moses to write the entire Torah down -- perhaps into the Thirty Four Books of Moses -- and quell the opposition once and for all? (I realize it would make for very difficult "hagbah's" (lifting the Torah scroll high up during synagogue services), but that really pales before the primary issue.))

Having formulated this question as we have, I am reminded that we discussed a closely related

theme a while ago. I refer the reader to our earlier discussion ([1:1](#)). What follows will be a much more condensed version of that discussion, which we will then extend to the topic at hand.

We might say there are two types of truth. There are ironclad, black-and-white issues: animal 1 is kosher while animal 2 is not. I must not eat leaven on Passover and I must rest on the Sabbath. And there are "relative" truths. It is usually not correct for me to raise my voice, but occasionally a situation warrants it. I should befriend others and seek their well-being, yet some relationships are detrimental, some people exert a harmful influence on myself and my children, and sometimes **not** giving a helping hand is the best means of teaching another responsibility and self-respect. It is usually better to study Torah, yet if my services are needed elsewhere, I will have to close the books. Or if I'm physically or emotionally run down, taking a vacation and rejuvenating myself might be my best way of serving G-d.

Thus, there are many situations in life in which there is no single right way. There are values which must be carefully weighed and considered. Generally speaking, in the "real world" most of the decisions we face on a daily basis are not in the realm of absolute truth. They are in the muddled shades-of-gray known as relative truth: How do I talk to my spouse, to my boss or neighbor? How do I deal with a difficult relationship? How can I best instruct and educate my children -- by disciplining, by butting in, or by allowing them to learn and experience on their own? How do I harness and develop my own unique talents, and how do I best use them to serve G-d? How am I to discover G-d -- through Torah study, prayer, Psalms, song, the Sabbath table? What should my values and priorities be? Does the Torah tell me anything about what type of personality I should have? Or even more fundamentally, how should I live my life? Who should I be? Most of the true issues of life are complex indeed. There is no way they can be summed up with absolutes. It might be true that fish which have fins and scales are kosher, but this tells me very little about how to become myself.

In the above-referenced class, we used this concept to explain why the Torah and Sages are so vague regarding such issues as character development, interpersonal relationships, and self-fulfillment. When it comes to the really tough issues of life, the Torah can never spell out for us every last detail. How we should behave every moment of our lives depends on who we are, what situations we find ourselves in, and myriads of other factors. There is in fact very little the Torah can state unequivocally about such topics. It provides us with advice and general value statements, but the Torah can be no more specific. There is no simple "right" or "wrong" in a relativistic world. For better or worse, life is rarely that simple. And so, the Torah offers us many statements of advice about such issues as character development and interpersonal relationships -- many of them appearing right here in Pirkei Avos -- yet it can never spell out for us exactly who we should be and what we should make of ourselves. Only we can truly know ourselves sufficiently to make the really tough decisions of life.

This week I'd like to extend this theme to explain the topic at hand. The Written Torah relates to the world of absolute truth. Its verses are recorded in writing and set in stone. They are unchanging and

unchangeable. And accordingly, the Written Torah contains such laws and statements of truth which apply at all times. Every Jew must observe the Sabbath and fast on Yom Kippur (save life-threatening situations, which the Torah itself excludes). There is nothing relative or subjective about such laws. They are absolutes: statements of G-d's unbending and eternal truth.

In fact, the Torah at times even writes statements of truth which are **too** absolute for relativistic man. The Torah **seems to** prescribe the punishment of "an eye for an eye" (Exodus 21:24) for the person who blinds his fellow's eye. The Talmud (Bava Kama 84a) makes it quite clear that this is not to be taken too literally and is not done in practice. (And here too the Torah's self-appointed critics are all too eager to jump in and dismiss the Torah's cruel, primitive justice system.) Yet, the Torah prescribes it -- more as a statement of what justice truly is than as a practical guide for administering justice in a relativistic world. True expiation results only from absolute and uncompromising justice. Yet our Oral Tradition tempers this. Relativistic man is not always able to live in a world of absolute justice. (Based in part on the explanation of my teacher [R. Yochanan Zweig](#).)

How does the Torah relate to the relativism of the world we know? Through the Oral Law. It was not recorded in writing -- not because its laws are fluid or discretionary, but because the Torah had to be a living document. The world is a relative place. People change, situations change, societies change. And no two people are alike. The Torah had to be in a form in which its truths could be applied and related to infinite people in infinite situations. All future generations would study the Torah's eternal truths, integrate its teachings, and apply it to new and ever-changing situations and eras.

And so, the Oral Law could never be written out. There is no way every possible application of every single law could be put into writing. G-d was not about to record in the Torah the laws of electricity on the Sabbath -- yet He provided us with the eternal principles which modern-day scholars have been able to apply to the most recent technological innovations. And likewise, how to behave in every possible interpersonal relationship could never be recorded in writing. Yet the Oral Law provides us with the keys to self-fulfillment. Only we can take its principles and apply them to our lives.

Because of this, much of the real trick to living a spiritual life -- in behavior, character development and interpersonal relationships -- is relegated to the Oral Law and not the Written. There is no verse which states: "And the L-rd said to Moses, saying: Speak unto the Children of Israel saying, thou shalt not yell at your wives," or "thou shalt offer everyone a cheerful 'good morning'," etc. Is that **always** true -- at all times and in all situations? Certainly, the Sages recommend, "One should not place excessive fear on his household" (Gittin 7a), and likewise: "Receive every person with happiness (earlier, [Mishna 16](#)). But the Written Torah contains rigid and absolute truth. It simply cannot write anything of less than infinite duration.

And thus, we are given a Torah of both written and oral components. We need G-d's masterful

combination of absolute and relative truth to live in a relativistic world, yet adhere to absolute and unyielding standards. And even more significantly, the Torah cannot spell out for us who we should really be and what is our own personal path to self-fulfillment. It provides us with much advice and direction, but it cannot tell each and every one of us how we must live our own lives. Only we can truly discover ourselves and discern the Torah's personal message for us. For only we can discover our own path to greatness.

(Based in part on thoughts heard from my teacher R. Yaakov Weinberg of blessed memory.)

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