

CHAPTER 10: THE ORAL TORAH □ PART 2

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Before we see how Ramchal depicts the dynamics behind the Oral Torah, let's delve into the idea of an oral tradition a bit more just to bolster its authenticity to those who still doubt.

We know for certain that there have been oral traditions among various peoples throughout the ages. Modern anthropologists very often depend on native oral reports of things they explore for their accounts of the past, which they termed "local lore" or "popular depictions". It has long been known that ancient civilizations, like Greece for example, were oral societies in large measure despite their literary output; in fact it's well known that Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were originally oral poems that were only written down many centuries later. And Bible scholars have long depended on local Arabic place-names and lore about ancient Jewish sites and phenomena in Israel. So there's clearly evidence for and actual reliance on unwritten traditions.

What's most telling of all about the fact of a Jewish oral tradition is the story of the ancient heretical Jewish sect known as The Karaites, who flourished from the 8th to 12th centuries. They accepted the authority of the written Torah all right, but they rejected the oral tradition and derived their practices from the literal meaning of Torah verses. In the process of time, though, they came to realize that the written text couldn't provide them with a living practice, so they created an "oral tradition" of their own making to sort of fill in the gaps that an actual oral tradition provided.

In any event, Ramchal depicts the fact of an Oral Torah as a purposeful decision on G-d's part.

"G-d didn't want to word the Torah in a way for it to be clear enough (on its own) to not need an explanation" he said. "On the contrary, G-d used many very unclear terms" in it, like Tefillin, Tzitzit, Mezuzah, Sukkah, and the like, "just so no human being could possibly know the Torah's true meaning without an explanation ... that emanated from G-d Himself", its Author.

That implies that G-d wanted the text to be ambiguous enough to raise questions, but He also purposefully provided answers elsewhere (i.e., orally). That way, one would have to find a teacher who knew the answer to the questions based on the true traditions, and no one could come up with his own depiction of Tefillin, Tzitzit, Mezuzah or the like. (You'll notice that no one claims to have another form of Tefillin for example, or to have a more authentic layout of a Sukkah other than the one we use to fulfill the mitzvah.)

Understand as well that the Torah uses ambiguous, nuanced phrases for other reasons having nothing to do with the mitzvah system. And that is so the text could allow for a wealth of allegorical

meanings down through the ages, since the Torah is immortal and speaks to eternity. That way each generation's teachers could use the text to inspire the age with lessons freshly drawn for the needs of the times.

Rabbi Yaakov Feldman has translated and commented upon "The Gates of Repentance", "The Path of the Just", and "The Duties of the Heart" (Jason Aronson Publishers). His works are available in bookstores and in various locations on the Web.