CHAPTER 10: THE ORAL TORAH PART 3

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

Some reject the notion of the Torah's oral tradition for other, text-based reasons, as when the written text seems to differ from the traditional understanding of it or when the two seem to contradict each other. Others are bothered by more illusive inconsistencies and vagaries.

And so Ramchal offers a number of principles to explain some things. He suggests, for example, that "there are concepts that are cited in only a general way in writing", in the Torah text, "whose details are (only) explained in the (oral) tradition". And so what appears to be a vague statement in print proves to be a hint of much more to come, which the Oral Torah provides. Sometimes, Ramchal adds, the written Torah is purposefully vague or ambiguous just to allow for things to be spelled out in the oral tradition. And there are indeed some very rare occasions when the words don't seem to say what the tradition says they do, but the contradictions prove not to be as blunt as they first appeared to be when they're delved into, and most of the time both understandings are legitimate under different circumstances.

The important thing to know in the end, though, is that the oral tradition offers us the keys to understanding the written text, so when the two don't seem to be in synch, they actually are when understood in depth. For, as Ramchal put it, "G-d, the author of the Torah, wrote it in a specific style with detailed rules (of interpretation)". It follows then that we would have to "follow these rules" if we "want to understand its Author's intentions".

The art of discerning the rules is termed "Hermeneutics", and there are three famous formulations of=2 0them: Hillel's seven, Rabbi Eliezer Ben Yose HaGelilli's thirty-two, and Rabbi Yishmael's thirteen (which are recited daily in the Morning Prayer service). That's not to suggest that any one of these three teachers initiated their rules, for the fact of the matter is that they each merely enunciated the tradition they received from their teachers which ultimately derived from Moses.

Rabbi Yishmael, for example, makes these points about the written text, among others: specific forms of logic can be relied upon, particular terms are used in different contexts to imply the same idea in various circumstances, some suggestions can be relied upon while others cannot, certain very specific patterns are utilized to make precise points wh ile others are meant to make other ones, certain items are specifically listed out of context to make a point, two dissonant statements can be harmonized when seen in the light of a third, and more.

Other principles include: ribbui ("inclusion") and mi'ut ("exclusion"), which allude to specific textual

exclusions or limitations; nekudot, when the dots that are placed over certain letters in the text serve as signals to specific meanings; gematria, where identical numerical value of words and phrases speak to relationships between them; notrikon, when the letters of a word represent the initial letters of other words and thus allude to another kind of relationship; and more.

The underlying idea is that the written Torah is something of a hieroglyph -- a rich but spare coded text that alludes to a wealth of matter that's only discernable to the trained eye.

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.