

CHAPTER 10: THE ORAL TORAH □ PART 4

by Rabbi Yaakov Feldman

The essential thing to understand, as Ramchal puts it, is that "the key laws involved in both the imperatives and prohibitions (i.e., mitzvot we're to fulfill and sins we're to avoid) were all handed down from Moses". That is, the overall structure of the mitzvot and their components were already in place from the first; and while there were certainly additions and deletions along the way to adjust for ever-changing realities, the gist of each mitzvah has remained the same all the while as it was revealed at Mount Sinai.

For as Moses charged us, we're always to "recall the day (we) stood before G-d (our) L-rd at Horeb" when G-d told Moses to assemble the people so that G-d would be able to "let them hear (His) words". For indeed, "G-d spoke to (us) out of the midst of the fire" then, and we "heard the sound of the words", and G-d "commanded (Moses) ... to teach (us) statutes and ordinances", referring to the mitzvot (see Deuteronomy 4:10-14), which were then taught to us by the Cohanim who served as our first teachers and by all subsequent teachers and sages.

Now, all this raises a legitimate question. Why did Ramchal decide to address the whole issue of the Oral Torah in the first place in this work, and why specifically here, at the end? After all, until now we'd been discussing such erudite and metaphysical subjects as G-d, the spiritual world, Torah and mitzvot, the Divine merit-system, heaven and hell, Divine providence, Moses and prophecy, the redemption, miracles and more. So, what role does the Oral Torah -- a fundamental aspect of the Jewish Tradition to be sure, but seemingly off-topic -- play here?

In fact it fits perfectly well. It brings the whole work "down to Earth", if you will. For Ramchal will now illustrate how the Oral Torah leads to practical Halacha, which is to say, how it applies to and nourishes day- after-day holiness. For his point here is that G-d has spoken to us at Mount Sinai, He spelled out His wishes in writing to us there and allowed for a system to explain all the nuances, implications, and ramifications of those wishes (the Oral Torah), and we've thus come to the point where we might honestly ask "But, where do we go from here?".

The answer is that we're to apply it to our lives and use it all to grow close to G-d as He wants us to (see Ch. 3 above). For each point of Halacha that derives from all this helps us to apply it to our lives. And that's why Ramchal decided to discuss it at this juncture.

So we'll now explore how Halacha trickles downward from G-d's intentions, to the text, and then onto the living tradition as taught to us by our sages and teachers.

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.