

WHAT IS TORAH?

by Rabbi Dovid Green

Fortunate is the man who has not walked in the council of the wicked, and in the ways of the sinful he has not stood, and in the seat of the scornful he has not sat. But rather in the Torah of G-d is his desire, and in His Torah he meditates day and night. He will be like a tree set into the ground near streams of water, which gives its fruit in its time, and his leaf does not wither; and all that he does will succeed. Not so are the wicked, but rather like the chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore, the wicked will not stand up in the judgment, nor will the sinful in the assembly of the just. For G-d knows the way of the just, and the way of the wicked will be lost. (The words of King David in Psalms Chapter 1)

When we read the words of King David we are moved to admire and wish for the life of the just. We picture the beautiful life promised to them, and we picture ourselves there as well. When G-d created the world, He created the prescription for a just life. That prescription, The Torah, was given to us on Mount Sinai. Over the millennia The Jewish People have kept and treasured the Torah. We have exalted in its assiduous study, and the meticulous performance of its commandments. We have clung to G-d through our Torah observance, and our prayer.

"Torah learning is great, for it brings to action," say our sages. Torah learning elevates our standards, broadens our vistas, and refocuses us on things of true substance. Over time it refines us, and enhances our capacity to transcend self-centeredness, to even emulate our Creator, who is the epitome of the selfless giver.

We feel very fortunate to say to there are now close to 15,000 subscribers to dvartorah, and the subscriptions are thankfully continuing to increase. With many new subscribers we must sometimes reiterate some of the basics. It has been some time since we explained what we mean when we refer to Torah, so it is appropriate to reprint an article which we printed several years ago. If you remember it, thank you for your indulgence.

What is Torah?

While we are on the topic of Torah, it is worth while to delineate what Torah is. The source of the 248 positive commandments (do's), and the 365 negative commandments (don'ts), is the Pentateuch (The Five Books of Moses), as it is commonly known. They are known as the Torah in written form (as opposed to oral teachings). The subsequent books of the Scriptures consist of the books of the Prophets, and the Writings. We only derive Torah Commandments from the Pentateuch. The

subsequent books are sometimes used as sources which reveal to us how Torah laws were observed, and sources for customs as well, but we don't derive laws from them. There are many other ethical lessons which we derive from the subsequent scriptures. Most importantly, the subsequent scriptures do not come to change or contradict anything which is stated in the Pentateuch. The books which are called "The New Testament" are not part of the Jewish Scriptures, and are contrary to Jewish tradition.

In addition to the "Written Torah," is a large body of legal and anecdotal writings known as the Talmud. The Talmud is known as the Oral or Memorized Law. The reason is that it was studied and transmitted orally for over a thousand years until Roman oppression forced the Sages to record it lest it be forgotten. This was initially recorded as the Six Orders of Mishnah. Much of the body of Oral Law was still transmitted orally in the form of explanations of the Mishnah. However, in the subsequent 300 years even the explanations were recorded in the Talmud. Even though Roman oppression made life for the Jews unpredictable and full of suffering, scholarship in Torah study continued. Nevertheless, the difficulties the Jews lived through left their impressions in the form of many interpretational disputes between the students of Torah, as the Romans took away the prerequisite stability which would enable them to transmit and receive the teachings as they had in more peaceful generations.

The chain of the transmission of Torah has never been broken since the time of Moses. In Yeshivas spanning the globe students study the texts which have representation from The Scriptures, Post Biblical scholars, Medieval scholars, and continuing and flourishing until this very day. The codification of the Talmud took place throughout medieval times. The Shulchan Oruch, the work of Rabbi Yosef Karo (16th cent.) deals with laws of everyday life from the blessings we make each day, to the detailed laws of ownership, family purity, and thousands of others. Each generation is blessed with people who continue to become experts in the challenging application of Torah Law in the ever-changing milieu of the generations in which they live. Torah study and publication in all languages is growing by leaps and bounds, and is more and more available to all who wish to take part. It is truly a miracle in the context of the events of this century, and indeed, the events of the diaspora we have found ourselves in for the past 2,000 years.

We'll end with the words of the prayer which we say at the end of the silent meditation. "May it be Your will (G-d) that the Holy Temple be rebuilt speedily in our days, and give our portion in Your Torah." We all have a portion in Torah learning. May we all relate to and find satisfaction in Torah!

Good Shabbos!

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