

SEE THE SYMPHONY

by Rabbi Label Lam

And these are the laws that you should set before them. (Shemos 21:1)

Giant Tractates of the Talmud are generated from a few brief verses. Volumes of those discussions comprise the main diet of the Yeshiva student and most every devoted Torah learner. Why was so much of Torah relegated to the realm of Oral Torah? What benefit is there to having an Oral Torah? Would it make more sense to write it all down and leave much less up for debate!? Let us consider a few practical benefits to an Oral Law.

1 Rav Hirsch ztl. analogizes the Written Torah to the notes of a scientific lecture. Anyone who, having missed class, had the experience of studying from someone else's notes, realizes is that what is written is a brief, freeze dried, version of what was transmitted in the class. The note taker can reconstitute the experience of the lecture for another but the one studying the notes alone is involved in an exercise of futility and prone to err. Why not transcribe the entire lecture verbatim?

It would be much too cumbersome to carry such a large library from station to station through exile. Rather we have a Sefer Torah which can sometimes be no bigger than a box of cereal, and we have 5000 plus Mishnios (within reach of memorizing) the building blocks of the Oral Torah and theoretically the rest of the law can be figured out using the 13 logical principles for mapping the Mishne to its source in the Chumash. The Chumash and Mishne function as a neat handle and wheels to a large suitcase with a giant library of information that we haul throughout our history.

2 Changing material conditions make it impossible to write out details in advance of new situations that might arise. Both an agricultural society and a highly technological world must find the answers to cutting edge questions in differing circumstances. The fundamentals for dealing with all times and all places are included in the discussions of the Talmud. The applications depend greatly on the details of various situations. Shabbos is Shabbos but what about electric lights? How do we treat them?

The same Torah that worked for Moshe Rabbeinu also has to apply to the world of Moshe Feinstein. Those discussions in the Talmud reflect the complexity of life and they give us access to the principles and priorities that form the guidelines for the life we live.

3 We have been called "people of the book" which is partially true. One book is the centerpiece of our existence. However the more true title would be "the people of the discussion about the book". The Torah is not a reference book or an answer book. It is a teaching book. Good teaching requires

class participation. When people discuss matters passionately, subtle distinctions are clarified and deep concepts are internalized. The Talmud is an all-time chat room of sorts and we are participating in a discussion with the finest minds from differing times on the most important topics. If the Torah had no Oral Torah component it would sit on the shelf, cold and remote gathering dust. Instead it is alive and stimulating discussion groups even as we speak.

4 Even though the Talmud was written down for preservation sake, it was written down in such a way that it maintains its conversational quality. It cannot be learned or properly appreciated by reading it like an op-ed page. One needs a Rebbe to show him the keys to open up the Talmud. Why?

That Rebbe needed a Rebbe that needed a Rebbe that goes all the way back to Sinai. Why would we need to have a Rebbe? Learning Torah, as an academic exercise is not nearly sufficient. The Talmud tells us that servicing a Talmud Scholar is greater than learning. Reading the notes to Mozart's musical piece cannot possibly be compared to the experience of hearing a sixty piece orchestra playing it out loud. A Rebbe is a living and breathing example of the intent of Torah.

HASHEM wants us to live it and to live it fully and in order to do that it is not enough to study harmonics and music theory. For that to happen we need to have contact with a Rebbe who had a Rebbe who "saw the sounds" of Mt. Sinai so we too can **see the symphony**.