

WITHOUT THE SAGES, THE TORAH IS A CLOSED BOOK

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemini

Without the Sages, The Torah Is A Closed Book

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Weekly Portion Torah Tapes: Tape # 412, Minhagim Of the days of Sefirah. Good Shabbos!

A pasuk [verse] in this week's parsha contains the phrase "Darosh Darash Moshe" -- Moshe inquired thoroughly [Vayikra 10:16]. According to a masoretic note found in some Chumashim, the words "Darosh Darash" are found in opposite halves of the Torah based on word count. Parshas Shmini thus marks the midpoint of the Torah.

The sefer Succas Dovid says that the fact that these words, indicating a thorough inquiry (Darosh Darash), are the words marking the midpoint of Chumash, hint at the fact that the Written Torah cannot be understood without reference to the Oral Tradition. By itself, the Written Torah is an "incomplete" work. We cannot understand what it is talking about based only the intrinsic interpretation.

It is difficult to comprehend how anyone can claim to practice Judaism without "believing in the Oral Law". How do we know what Tefillin are? There is no clue on earth that reveals a definition for Tefillin from a literal reading of Chumash. Only via the Oral Law and the traditions received by Moshe from Sinai can we interpret "And you shall bind them as a sign upon your arm and let them be totafos between your eyes" [Devorim 6:8].

The Rabbis, who have preserved the Torah she'b'al peh [Oral Tradition] and the ability to expound correctly the pasukim based on the hermeneutic principles that are part of that tradition, are the key to Torah understanding. Judaism is not based on fundamentalist Biblical interpretation. For example, "An eye in place of an eye; a tooth in place of a tooth; a hand in place of a hand, a foot in place of a foot" [Shemos 21:24] are not to be applied literally. All of this is symbolized by "Darosh Darash" --

thorough analysis and exposition as interpreted by our Sages through Oral Tradition.

I would like to cite a related insight I heard in the name of the Ostrovtzer Rebbe.

The Torah states that when a person violates a prohibition for which he deserves lashes "Forty you shall strike him" [Devorim 25:3]. The Oral Law explains the verse is not to be interpreted at face value; rather the correct number of lashes is 39. The Talmud comments regarding this interpretation: "These foolish people -- they stand up in the presence of a Sefer Torah, but they do not stand up in front of a great people. What would the Torah be without the great people -- the Rabbis explain to us that the pasuk 'Forty you shall strike him' actually only means 39?" [Makkos 22b].

The Ostrovtzer Rebbe asks: Why did the Talmud need to go all the way to Sefer Devorim [Deuteronomy] to cite an example of the greatness of the Rabbis, that they take a pasuk in the Torah which states 40 and they interpret it as 39? There is an earlier Rabbinic exposition in the Torah, which should illustrate the same greatness! Namely, we are taught [Vayikra 23:16] to count fifty days between Pesach and Shavuot and the Rabbis come and interpret it to mean only 49 days.

The Ostrovtzer Rebbe answers that the fact that the Sages have the authority to expound and interpret the actual meaning of the Torah does not suffice to give them the title "Gavrah Rabbah" [Great Men]. The reason why they are called great men in the case in Makkos is because through their exposition, a Jew is spared an extra lash of the whip. Saving a Jew the pain of an extra lash makes the Rabbis into great men. "Gavrah Rabbah" does not merely describe an ivory tower-caliber intellectual prowess that tells us the true intent of Torah pasukim. The title "Gavrah Rabbah" is given because of their transmission of the Oral Law's mercy, and the responsibility and sharing of pain that the Sages feel for their fellow Jews. Using the power of "Darosh Darash" to expound in a way that lessens the suffering of a Jew earns the Rabbis the title "Great Men".

This write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah Portion. The halachic topics covered for the current week's portion in this series are:

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