



Torah Shebal Peh

The Orah Torah and Jewish Tradition

by John J. Parsons

During *Shavuot* (“Pentecost”) we revisit the miracle of the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, but you might be surprised to know that Rabbinical Judaism believes that *two* Torahs were given to Moses at that time – the written Torah and the oral Torah (in Kabbalistic traditions there is even a *third* or “hidden” Torah as revealed in the *Zohar*). This brief essay considers some aspects of the oral Torah and its potential significance to us as followers of Yeshua, the Mashiach.



What is the Oral Torah?

Traditional Judaism believes that when Moses was on Mount Sinai for 40 days and nights writing down the words of the Torah, God also provided him with additional explanations that were not explicitly incorporated into the written text. This additional commentary of the written Torah is called oral Torah, or *Torah she’bal peh* (הורה שבעל פה) [from *al peh*, “by mouth”]. The words that Moses finally committed to writing in the Torah scroll (ספר הורה) is called *Torah shebikhtav* (הורה שבכתב). According to this view, there were actually *two* Torahs given to Moses on Sinai: the written Torah and the oral Torah, and together these are considered the *full revelation* of the Torah. Maimonides, a chief spokesman for this brand of Judaism, wrote: “Every commandment which the Holy One, blessed be He, gave to Moses our teacher, was given with its clarification. First, he told him the commandment (Written Torah) and then he expounded on its explanation and content including all that which is included in the Torah” (*Commentary on the Mishnah*).

This doctrine is enshrined in the opening verse of the *Pirke Avot* (“Chapters of the Fathers”), a tractate of the Mishnah: “Moses received the Torah from Sinai and transmitted it to Joshua; Joshua to the elders; the elders to the prophets; and the prophets handed it down to the men of the Great Assembly. They said three things: Be deliberate in judgment, raise up many disciples, and make a fence around the Torah (*asu seyag la-Torah*).”

Avot 1:1



מֹשֶׁה קִבַּל תּוֹרָה מִסִּינַי. וּמָסָרָהּ לְיֵהוֹשֻׁעַ. וְהוֹשֻׁעַ לְזִקְנִים.
וְזִקְנִים לְנָבִיאִים. וְנָבִיאִים מָסָרוּהָ לְאַנְשֵׁי כְנֶסֶת הַגְּדוּלָּה.
הֵם אָמְרוּ שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים. הָיוּ מְתוּנִים בְּדִין. וְהִעֲמִידוּ
תַלְמִידִים הַרְבֵּה. וַעֲשׂוּ סִגָּה לַתּוֹרָה:



The Shift to Post-Temple Judaism

It's important to understand that the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 AD caused a catastrophic upheaval for the Jewish people. How could the sages understand Judaism and practice their faith apart from the rituals and sacrifices offered by the priestly service (*avodah*)? With the Temple gone, who would be the religious authority for the Jewish people? Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai (a former pupil of Hillel) left Jerusalem after the Temple was destroyed and founded a new center of Jewish learning in Yavneh. The **Council of Yavne** (70-90 CE) subsequently “reinvented” Judaism by 1) decreeing that animal sacrifices and Temple rituals could be replaced by prayer and good deeds (*mitzvot*); 2) rejecting the Septuagint translation of the Scriptures and establishing the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures; 3) adding the so-called *Birkat HaMinim* to the daily prayers at synagogues (this “blessing” required a curse to be recited upon the *minim* (heretics) – understood primarily as Messianic Jews). The outcome of all this was that Rabbinical Judaism would become the mainstream religious system of post-Diaspora Judaism.

Yohanan ben Zakkai's disciples included the famous Rabbi Akiva (c. 50-135, a proponent of the false Messiah Shimon Bar Kochba) and Rabbi Judah haNasi (“The Prince”) who became the chief editor of the **Mishnah** (c. 200 AD) -- a collection of earlier interpretations of the sages (including accounts of the “house of Hillel” and the “house of Shammai” of the Pharisaic period).

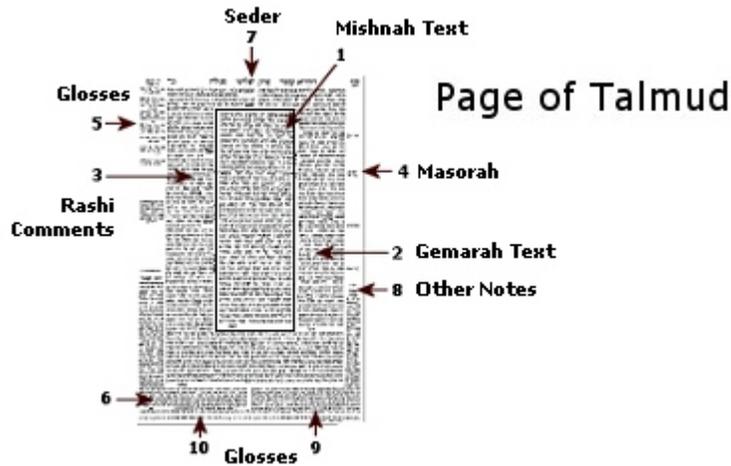
The **Mishnah** (משנה, “repetition”) essentially records the debates of the post-Temple sages from 70-200 AD (called the *Tannaim*) and is considered the first major work of “Rabbinical Judaism.” It is composed of six orders (*sedarim*) that contain several tractates each (it is sometimes called Shas (שׁ”ס), an acronym for shisha sedarim, the “six orders”). The content of the six orders of the Mishnah is topical rather than historical:

- *Zeraim* (זרעים, “seeds”) - Discussions concerning prayer, dietary and agricultural laws
- *Moed* (מועד, “festival”) - Discussions about the appointed times (holidays)
- *Nashim* (נשים, “women”) - Discussions about women and family life
- *Nezikin* (נזיקין, “damages”) - Discussions about civil law damages and compensation
- *Kodashim* (קדשים, “holy things”) Discussions regarding sacrifices, offerings, dedications, and other Temple-related matters
- *Tohorot* (טהרות, “purities”) - Discussions regarding the purities of vessels, foods, dwellings, and people

After the Mishnah was published it was studied exhaustively by generations of rabbis in both Babylonia and Israel. Over the next three centuries additional commentaries on the Mishnah were compiled and put together as the **Gemara**. Actually there are two different versions of the Gemara, one compiled by the scholars in Israel (c. 400 AD) and the other



by the scholars of Babylonia (c. 500 AD). Together the Mishnah and the Gemara form the **Talmud**, but since there are two different Gemaras, there are two different Talmuds. The Mishnah with the Babylonian Gemara form the *Talmud Bavli* and the Mishnah with the Jerusalem Gemara form the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Jerusalem Talmud). Since the Gemara functions as a commentary to the Mishnah, the orders of the Mishnah form a general framework for the Talmud as a whole (however not every Mishnah tractate has a corresponding Gemara).



With the rise of Rabbinical Judaism Torah came to mean something far more than the written words of Moses. The oral Torah was considered a *legally binding* commentary on the written Torah, interpreting and explaining how its commandments are to be carried out. The quote from Pirke Avot 1:1 is part of the reinvention of post-Temple Judaism wherein the religious authority is said to have passed from Moses, to Joshua (by *semikhah*), through various generations of elders, and eventually to the Rabbis themselves.

In its widest sense, then, oral Torah includes all the interpretations and conclusions that the sages deduced from the written Torah, as well as the regulations instituted by them. Because Rabbinical Judaism posits a line of succession from Moses to the post-Temple rabbis, some rabbis such as Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (a contributor to the Gemara) have gone so far as to claim that the essence of all the later rabbinical teachings were all “given” to Moses on the mountain (*Talmud: Peah 2:17a, Berachot 5a*).





The Case for the Oral Torah

Is there a case to be made for the existence of the oral Torah? Yes, *of course*. First it should be noted that the oral Torah is sometimes considered to be more basic than the written Torah of Moses. It is argued that since God *first* spoke the Ten Commandments to the Jews *before* Moses ascended Sinai to get the details, oral Torah actually *preceded* the giving of the Torah at Sinai. The same point can be made, incidentally, regarding God's instructions given to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and even Moses himself before he was commanded to write down the laws for Israel given on Mount Sinai.

When Moses descended from Sinai (the second time), he verbally explained the specific *mitzvot*, *mishpatim*, and *chukkim* to the 70 elders of Israel, thereby passing on oral Torah to the leadership of Israel. When Moses' father-in-law Jethro saw how the people came to Moses to help them interpret the meaning of the Torah, he advised that Moses appoint various judges (*shofetim*) to interpret the written Torah to specific cases (Ex. 18:20, Deut. 16:18, Deut. 17:8-11). Later Moses anticipated the need for these judges to be appointed in every city in the Promised Land to decide civil, domestic, and even religious controversies. This is the origin of the *Bet Din* and Jewish law court system, and it is based on the fundamental idea of oral Torah.

The written Torah, like all other writing, is subject to *interpretation*. For example, consider this statement in the written Torah: "This shall be for you the beginning of months" (Ex. 12:2). But *which month* is being referred to here? The Torah is silent and the matter must be settled by oral Torah. Or consider the prohibition to "work" on the Sabbath to keep it holy. How are we to define the idea of work or promote the idea of holiness? The written Torah only provides commandments against lighting a fire, cutting down a tree, plowing and harvesting, but does sanctifying the Sabbath mean just refraining from just these things? The oral Torah enjoins us to read the weekly Torah portion, to light Sabbath candles, and to attend synagogue to offer prayer. Consider further the laws of inheritance or the execution of the various civil laws of Israel. The Torah assumes people will get married but it does not provide any details about the marriage ceremony itself. Or consider the commandment to wear "tefillin" on the arm and on the head between the eyes (Deut. 6:8). There are no textual details regarding what tefillin are, how they are made, or how they are to be worn. The only way we know about them is through oral Torah. The same could be said regarding affixing a mezuzah upon your doorposts and gates (Deut. 6:9) What - exactly - should be written, and where should it be affixed? The same could be said regarding affixing a mezuzah upon your doorposts and gates (Deut. 6:9) What - exactly - should be written, and where should it be affixed? In short, it's impossible to understand the commandments of the written Torah without making interpretative decisions about issues not explicitly addressed in it.

Now think about the Holy Temple. King David did not find explicit commandment in the written Torah to build the Temple, but he nonetheless planned it (with divine approval) after the model of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle). Consider further that his son, King Solomon, later dedicated the court of the Temple by *personally* offering sacrifices to the LORD (1 Kings 8:64). But how could this have been acceptable to God if the written Torah forbade



sacrifices apart from a priest's mediation? The same point could be made regarding Elijah's sacrifice on Mt. Carmel (1 Ki. 18:3-38, cp. Deut. 12:13-14). Finally, consider how the prophet Haggai tested the priests by asking them questions about purity laws -- the answers of which are not explicitly revealed in the written Torah (Hag. 2:12-13).

Even the extant manuscripts of Hebrew Scriptures themselves are directly influenced by oral Torah. Without the *masorah* (Jewish tradition) of the *soferim* (scribes), we would not understand how to punctuate or vocalize the sacred text. Nor would we be able to properly define the usage of various obscure words found in the written text. The combined efforts of the Masoretic scribes helped preserve the Scriptures to this day, yet there is no explicit commandment regarding the various laws of *soferut* (scribal laws) found in the written Torah scrolls themselves.

There is a story that illustrates this point. A pagan came to Hillel seeking to convert but was troubled with the idea of the Oral Law. The first day, Hillel taught him the correct order of the Hebrew Alphabet. The next day he reversed the letters. The convert was confused: "But yesterday you said the opposite!" Hillel replied, "You now see that the Written word alone is insufficient. We need the Oral Tradition to explain God's Word."

The interpretation of God's words could "fill the world with books" (Eccl. 12:12, John 21:25), and therefore the oral Torah is considered infinite, just as the ways of the LORD are considered infinite. This explains why the oral Torah (as expressed in the two Talmuds) is at least 50 times the size of the written Torah. This also explains the importance of dialog and community in understanding Torah. Indeed, the written Torah is considered to be an abridgment or *subset* of the much more vast oral Torah. Since the sum of Torah could never be completely written down in a scroll, we therefore have the role of oral Torah as the authoritative expression of the Jewish interpretative tradition. "Torah," then, does not refer to the written scroll of Moses or to ongoing commentary and discussion of these writings among the Jewish community: it refers to *both*.

Questions and Concerns

Now that we have heard the arguments for the validity of the oral Torah, what are we to make of them, especially as Messianic Jews (and Christians)? Some questions include: Is the oral Torah to be considered as "divinely inspired?" Did Moses actually receive a divine commentary while up on the mountain? Does final interpretative authority rest with oral tradition and the rabbis? Did Yeshua and His followers accept the oral Torah? And what are we to make of some of the fabulous stories (and outright errors) we read in the Talmud and Midrash? Are such stories and imaginative interpretations of the written Torah to be taken seriously, and if so, in what way? Finally, what about the Kabbalah (i.e., the "hidden Torah") and mystical traditions? Are these also part of the oral Torah?

First it should be noted that the notion that there was an unbroken succession of (oral) Torah from Moses to the rabbis (Sanhedrin) is an article of faith that (at first sight) seems to contradict the testimony of Scripture itself. The written Torah makes the explicit claim



that “Moses wrote **all** the words of the LORD” (כָּל־דְּבָרֵי יְהוָה אֵת מֹשֶׁה כָּתַב) before reading it to the people (Ex. 24:3-7). Now while it’s true that the word “all” here might be qualified to mean “all the words *that God commanded* Moses to write,” there is still a question about how the claim that the oral Torah was given might be substantiated. After all, the only appeal for its occurrence is a self-referential appeal contained within oral tradition itself, the very point at issue. Moreover, Moses’ great successor Joshua was likewise commanded to abide exclusively by the book of the Law written by Moses (Josh. 1:8, 8:30-34, 23:6) *without* reference to oral Torah. It should also be noted that the written Torah itself warns not to add or subtract to any of its words (Deut. 4:2, 12:32, Prov. 30:5-6), yet Jewish tradition regards the oral Law as equally authoritative in matters of faith and practice, thereby effectively “adding” to its words.

Jesus and Oral Torah

What about Yeshua (Jesus)? Did He support the idea of oral Torah? Well, *yes and no*.

On the one hand Yeshua agreed with much of the prevailing thinking of the Pharisees. When asked what was the greatest commandment of the LORD, Yeshua quoted the *ve’ahavta* portion of the Shema: *ve’ahavta et Adonai eloheykha be’khol-levavkha, u’vekhol nafshekha, u’vekhol me’odekha*, “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5), and then He added the commandment, *v’ahavta l’re’akha kamokha*, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). Both of these commandments were the “agreed upon answer” to the question according to the oral Torah of His day (at least from the perspective of the “house of Hillel”). Yeshua’s formulation of the “Golden Rule” (Matt. 7:12) is quite similar to the (negatively stated) “Silver Rule” of Hillel: “Do not do to others as you would not have them do to.” Yeshua also agreed with the Pharisees regarding the resurrection from the dead, the existence of angels and demons, the coming of the Mashiach, and the necessity of preserving the Law (Matt. 5:17-20).

Yeshua also willingly subjected himself to the religious authority of His day, the Sanhedrin. When He was commanded by the High Priest to confess his identity during his “trial,” Yeshua apparently complied (Matt. 26:63-64). Yeshua did this in order to fulfill the requirement of the Torah and to become a sacrificial victim on behalf of Temple Judaism (for more information, see: *Yeshua’s Pidyon ha-ben* ceremony).

The Last Passover of Yeshua also indicates that He observed elements of the oral traditions. When He blessed the bread and Cups, He was following the general pattern of the Seder that was endorsed by the sages of His day. Yeshua also apparently wore *tzitzit* (Mark 6:56, Matt. 9:21), recited *Haftarah* in the synagogue on the Sabbath according to the *parashah* divisions developed by Ezra and the members of the Great Assembly (Luke 4:16-22), referred to the Bible in the threefold division of Torah, Writings, and Prophets (i.e., the Tanakh, also developed by Ezra the Scribe); and so on. Yeshua’s teaching methodology (the use of parables, the master-disciple relationship, and so on).



On the other hand, Yeshua regularly violated various Pharisaical rules and regulations by eating bread without first washing his hands (Matt. 15:1-3), gathering grain on the Sabbath day (Luke 6:1-4), associating with sinners (Mark 2:16), touching lepers (Matt. 8:2-3), healing on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:10), etc. In fact, He went beyond the authority of Moses -- *who spoke in the Name of YHVH* -- by saying things like: “You have heard that it was said to those of old,” which prefaced each of his pronouncements (Matt. 5:21-43). He called Himself “Lord of the Sabbath” (Luke 6:1-11) and accused the scribes and Pharisees of misinterpreting the truth intent of the Torah. Throughout his public ministry he fiercely rejected the concept of “putting a fence around the Torah” by adding extra-Scriptural religious customs and traditions (Matt. 15:1-9; 23:13-30, Mark 7:1-22, etc.).

Certain Messianic believers suggest that Yeshua actually endorsed Rabbinical authority. As a proof text, they cite Matthew 23:2-3:

The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses’ seat, *so practice and observe whatever they tell you* - but not what they do. For they preach, but do not practice.

At first glance it seems that Yeshua is saying that His followers are to practice and observe the Jewish traditions as expounded by the scribes and Pharisees. However, when we closely read the context of this passage we note that these words undoubtedly indicate irony and scorn for their outward shows of righteousness (Matt 23:13-36). If Yeshua had seriously meant for His followers to practice and observe what the scribes and Pharisees had taught, why would He go on to berate them as hypocrites who “shut up the kingdom of heaven against men,” making a “pretense” of their prayers and going out of their way to make one convert who is “twice the child of hell” than themselves? Would Yeshua have you and I practice and observe these sorts of things? On the contrary, the overall context of this passage indicates that the follower of the Messiah should not become subject to their authority. This interpretation is further made evident by Yeshua’s statement that we are to be subject to Him alone as Teacher and are to call **no one** “rabbi” (Matt 23:8).





Paul and Oral Torah

The Apostle Paul likewise had a mixed view of the role of the authority of the oral Law. On the one hand we need to remember his training as a Rabbi when he quotes the Scriptures in his writings. Paul was at one time a student of Gamaliel the Elder, the grandson of the renowned Rabbi Hillel, and therefore familiar with the sages and their interpretations (Acts 5:34-40). For example, when he wrote, “And all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Christ” (1 Cor. 10:4), he was quoting from a story later recorded in the Talmud (i.e., that from the time that Moses struck the rock at Horeb and brought forth water until the death of Miriam (Ex. 20:1), this water-giving rock “followed the children of Israel through the desert and provided water for them each day” (*Taanit, 9a and Bava Metizia, 86b*)). In addition Paul was careful to observe various Torah restrictions during his life. Even after his conversion, he took the Nazirite vow (Acts 18:18), lived “in observance of the Torah” (Acts 21:23-24), and even offered sacrifices in the Jewish Temple (Acts 21:26). Paul asked, “Do we then nullify the Law through faith? May it never be! On the contrary, we establish the Law” (Rom. 3:31).

On the other hand, Paul was tireless in his fight against legalism and the idea that true spirituality involves attaining personal merit and religious self-righteousness. The book of Galatians is his sustained argument against the Judaizers. He warned: “There are many who are insubordinate, empty talkers and deceivers, especially those of the circumcision party.... Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to Jewish myths and the commands of people who turn away from the truth” (Titus 1:11-14; see also 1 Tim 1:4-8).

The Karaites and Oral Torah

Karaite Judaism rejects the authority of Rabbinical interpretations and the oral Torah because the Mishnah (i.e., the written down form of the oral Torah) quotes different opinions that contradict one another. Their words are those of men living in the 2nd-5th centuries AD. and their writings do not attest of divine authority like the prophets who speak “Thus saith the Lord,” but rather “rabbi so-and-so said to rabbi so-and-so...”

The Karaites also note that the oral Torah is not mentioned anywhere in the Scriptures, and indeed the very word “Torah” is singular, not plural. When the Torah was lost for 50 years and later restored by the priests (2 Kings 22:8; 2 Chron. 34:15), it is doubtful that the oral Torah could have been retained, especially since it is based on the written Torah.



Other Concerns

Contrary to the view that the complete written Torah was given to Moses at Sinai, it must be understood that only part of it was actually recorded at that time. Only the *sefer habrit* was written at the time of giving of the Ten Commandments at Sinai; the rest of it was compiled and written during the 40 years in the desert.

Practically speaking, the idea of oral Torah essentially invites us to relegate the study of the written Torah to a (glorious) footnote of Jewish history. True, written Torah is considered foundational, but it is merely the historical starting point for the greater discussion about what Torah means to us today. Hence we see in some forms of Jewish observance a minimal interest in the actual words of the written Torah, with added emphasis on the the *shiurim* (lessons) and discussions of various rabbis. There is a tendency, then, to gradually move away from the clear revelation of Scripture into a closed system of speculations among the sages, different schools of thought, etc. Without the written Torah as the central focus, however, it's difficult to know where to draw the line in terms of what we are to do and how we are to respond to God's commandments.

A more serious charge against the idea of oral Torah is that the Talmudic revisionism of post-Temple Judaism transformed Moses from being God's direct mediator into "*Moshe Rabbeinu*" - Moses our Rabbi. The same "conversion" can be seen in the rabbinical reinvention of the prophets, King David, and even the Messiah into advocates of the Talmud and the rabbis. Indeed, even God Himself is sometimes seen as being subject to the authority of the rabbis! For example, in the Talmud Bavli, *Baba Metzia 59b*, we read the story of the "Oven of Akhnai." In this story R. Eliezer had argued a point of doctrine the truth of which was attested to by miracles. His rabbinical opponents, however, dismissed his various proofs. Finally we read:

In response, R. Eliezer said to the Sages, "If the Halakhah agrees with me, let it be proved from heaven." Sure enough, a divine voice cried out, "Why do you dispute with R. Eliezer, with whom the Halakhah always agrees?" R. Joshua stood up and protested: "The Torah is not in heaven!" (Deut. 30:12). We pay no attention to a divine voice because long ago at Mount Sinai You wrote in your Torah at Mount Sinai, 'After the majority must one incline'. (Ex. 23:2)"

R. Nathan met [the prophet] Elijah and asked him, "What did the Holy One do at that moment?" Elijah said, "He laughed [with joy], saying, 'My children have defeated Me, My children have defeated Me.'"

The revisionism of the Talmud ascribes sole authority to the rabbis in Jewish life. Rabbinical consensus and interpretation now trumps all. Perhaps this explains why it is so difficult to share the gospel message with practicing Jews today. To point out how Yeshua is revealed in the Torah, the Writings, and the Prophets is often met with a "screening" mentality: Every proof-text in the Hebrew Scriptures will be given an alternative interpretation that accords with the Yeshua-rejecting Rabbinical tradition... In other words, since the rabbis have not accepted Yeshua as Israel's Mashiach, that's the



final word on the subject. Perhaps the “fence around the Torah” was intended to obscure access to the plain sense of Scripture, and to hide the fact that Rabbinical authority itself is without divine sanction...

The Relative Importance of the Oral Torah

Despite these serious objections to the idea of oral Torah as a source of divine authority, we need to ask if there is any value for us to study Talmud and the oral traditions? *Yes indeed*, especially since the Talmud often provides invaluable insights into much of the written Torah, including many of the teachings and discussions about the meaning of Scripture that were prevalent at the time of Yeshua. The Talmud also provides details about the social life of Israel, the origins of various customs, and Temple activities that are not explicitly mentioned in the writings of Moses. Often additional insights from the Jewish sages make Scriptural passages clearer to the reader. Frequently the rabbi’s knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, and even Greek shed new light on important words and grammatical constructions. The task of doing Messianic Biblical Theology would be unthinkable without consulting the collected wisdom of the Jewish Torah sages.

The Talmud helps us *contextualize* some of the power struggles between Jesus and the Pharisees (and Sadducees). For example, it records some of the theological debates between the followers of Hillel (Bet Hillel) and the followers of Shammai (Bet Shammai) that were well-known to Yeshua’s audiences. Generally speaking, Hillel was more liberal and Shammai was more conservative regarding their respective interpretations of Torah. At times Yeshua sided with Shammai’s interpretation, and at other times he sided with Hillel. For example, regarding divorce, he agreed with Shammai’s view that it is always illegal (Matt. 19:3-9), whereas regarding the greatest commandment he sided with Hillel (Matt. 22:36-40).

Christians (even those who hold to the Protestant idea of “Sola Scriptura”) regularly resort to various commentaries of the Scriptures from scholars within the Church tradition, and this can sometimes be of real benefit. When it comes to understanding the Torah of Moses, however, *there is no better source than the Jewish sages*.

What about Aggadah and Midrash?

But what about the various legends and midrashim about the Torah embedded within Jewish tradition? Are these to be taken seriously or to be disregarded as myth or nonsense?



The word “midrash” is a general term that simply means *searching* the text. There is no single book called “The Midrash,” but only various compilations composed and edited over the course of more than a millennium. Midrash can apply to matters of Jewish law (called *midrash halakhah*) or narrative matters (called *midrash aggadah*). When someone says, “It says in the midrash...” they usually mean the midrash aggadah (the *Midrash Rabbah* is a collection of such stories taken from the two Talmuds). The various extra-biblical “tall tales” are intended to reinforce Jewish values, provide moral exhortation, instill a sense of reverence or inspiration, and to generally inculcate Jewish “hashkafah” (perspective). In the Talmud, these stories are called aggadic literature (from אגדה, *aggadah*, literally “telling” or “story”).

Aggadic literature is often considered allegorical of truth embedded within the written Torah (תורה שבכתב). Regarding Aggadah the Jewish scholar Maimonides wrote, “The sages presented their drashot in a style by which the mind of a fool will reject them because of his way of thinking; it is improper to assign any deficiency to the drash; if anyone is devoid of understanding, it is the reader” (*Commentary on the Mishnah*). In other words, such legends should be understood as parables intended to express truth found in the written Torah. Such storytelling is sometimes justified as a counterbalance to halakhic (legal) punctiliousness that tends to mark serious Jewish thinking about the Law. (If interested, *Ein Yaakov* is a collection of the aggadic material found in the Talmud.)



Now that we know what midrash and aggadic literature is about, let’s take a look at some of the more popular *aggadot* (legends) that concern the giving of the Torah to Israel at Sinai, as well as some other stories about the importance of the Torah for the Jewish people. In charity to the authors of these stories, ask yourself how the story or legend supports other truths you understand from the written Torah.

Torah Offered to the 70 Nations

A famous story (Peskim 21) says that from the time of creation until the time of the Exodus the LORD offered the Torah to each of the 70 nations, but they all refused it. For example, God came to the descendants of Esau and said to them, “Will you accept the Torah?” They asked, “Master of the universe, what’s written in it?” He answered, “Do not commit murder.” They replied, “This is the legacy our father left us; as it says, ‘And upon your sword you shall live’ (Gen. 27:40); therefore we cannot accept the Torah.” God went from nation to nation and heard their excuses for not accepting Torah (He did this so that the nations might have no excuse to say, “Had the Holy one, blessed be He,



desired to give us the Torah, we should have accepted it”). Finally the LORD turned to the children of Israel, the least of the nations, and asked them, “Will you accept the Torah?” They said to Him, “What is written therein?” He answered, “Six hundred and thirteen commandments.” They replied in unison: *Na’aseh venishmah* - “All that the Lord has spoken will we do and be obedient” (Ex. 24:7).



God as the Eager Groom

Another story says that God originally planned to give the Torah to the Jews the day after they left Egypt -- but on second thought He decided to wait for fifty days. God wanted to make sure Israel would accept Torah for the right reasons -- not because of the miracles, signs and wonders He performed to secure their redemption from Pharaoh... Other versions of this story have it that God delayed giving the Torah so as not to appear like a groom who jumps too hastily into marriage or because the people needed to be free from their defects (49 levels of *tumah*) before receiving the defect-free Torah. Therefore God healed all the sick of Israel between the Exodus and the arrival at Sinai. The journey to Sinai was likened to God “courting” His betrothed. God treated Israel as a king who properly wooed his beloved by showering her with many gifts (i.e., health, miraculous water and manna, the bread from Heaven). The Torah itself was God’s *ketubah* (marriage contract) signed after the ceremony at Sinai.

God Created the Universe for Israel’s Acceptance of Torah

Another midrash says that God created the universe solely on the condition that Israel would accept the Torah when it was offered to them. Should Israel refuse, God would return the world to *tohu v’vohu* (chaos and void, Gen 1:2). The very universe itself depended upon the Jew’s acceptance of the Torah, and even today, the world is sustained on account of *Lamed-Vav Tzaddikim* (ל”ו צדיקים) -- the 36 hidden righteous saints who keep the world from being destroyed on account of their virtue and piety (*Sanhedrin 97b; Tractate Sukkah 45b*). Shimon the Righteous said, “Upon three things the world stands: the Torah; the worship of God; and the bestowal of lovingkindness” (*Pirke Avot 1:2*):

שְׁמַעוֹן הַצַּדִּיק הָיָה מְשִׁירֵי כְּנִסַּת הַגְּדוּלָּה. הוּא הָיָה אוֹמֵר
עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה דְבָרִים הָעוֹלָם עוֹמֵר. עַל הַתּוֹרָה וְעַל הָעֲבוּדָה
וְעַל נְמִילוֹת הַחַסְדִּים:





God Suspended Mount Sinai

Yet another legend states that when the children of Israel had gathered at Mount Sinai and took their places (literally) at “the foot of the mountain” (Ex. 19:17), God suspended the the mountain above their heads and said: “If you accept the Torah, all will be well. If not, you will be buried here.” Nature stood still; the seas were quieted and not a creature stirred on the face of the earth, waiting for Israel’s answer... It was quite different at Mount Sinai, however. God bent the heavens and shook the earth. Rivers suddenly ran backwards. The air reverberated with thunder and shofar blasts. Finally at about noontime the words “I AM THE LORD YOUR GOD” boomed out from the summit of Sinai. These words were understood not only by the terrified Israelites but by all the peoples of the earth (and even by the souls of unborn Jewish generations). In other versions of this story, the mountain was lifted up as a *chuppah* (wedding canopy) for the big day.



Black Fire on White Fire

Then there is the legend that the Torah was written with letters of “black fire on white fire” (“the flame alphabet”). According to some, this refers to the “two Torahs” -- the white fire is the “written Torah” (*shebikhtav*) whereas the black fire is the “oral Torah” (*sheb’al peh*). Others say the black fire denoted Divine Mercy while the white fire represented Divine Justice....

Hebrew Letters as Spiritual Powers

Still other legends concern the words and letters found in a Torah Scroll. For example, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev said, “There are 600,000 souls in Israel, and there are 600,000 letters in the Torah. Thus we can say that the Torah and Israel are one and the same, each Jew representing one letter of the Torah” (*Kedushat Levi, Bamidbar*). This is a puzzling statement, especially since we know there are 304,805 letters in a STA”M sefer Torah (kosher Torah scroll), with 79,847 words found in 5,845 *p’sukim* (verses). To those steeped in the Gnostic doctrines of Kabbalah, however, words and letters have special powers associated with them, and Torah mastery means tapping into secret knowledge of the Scriptures. The Zohar (a classic text of Jewish mysticism) puts it this way: “Just as wine must be in a jar to keep, so the Torah must be contained in an outer garment. That garment is made up of the tales and stories; but we, we are bound to penetrate beyond.” Hence we see much writing about gematria, scribal oddities, “sod-



level” mysteries, etc. Indeed, Torah is considered a sort of metaphysical “blueprint” for creation, and some Jewish mystics envision it as a sort of law that even God Himself must “obey.” The words and letters of Torah -- regardless that they are now written in *Ketav Ashurit* (Aramaic square script) rather than the original *Ketav Ivrit* script) are seen as “divine emanations” that constitute the manifestation of God’s will being exercised in the universe.

Aleph before Bet



In another story about the Hebrew letters, the (personified) letter Aleph (א) complained that the Torah did not begin with him. “Master of the universe, I am the first of all letters. Why did you not create the world with me?” The LORD answered, “You must understand the entire world was created for the sake of Torah. When the time comes for me to give the Torah to my children, I will begin with you.” The midrash goes on to explain that God made it up to Aleph by beginning the Ten Commandments: *Anochi Adonai Elohekha* (“I am the LORD your God”). The moral of the story is that the Holy One rates the giving of the Torah more highly than the creation of the universe (because the story of creation begins with the letter Bet (ב) in *Bereshit*).

What to make of all this?

What are to make of such stories and legends contained in Jewish tradition? Well, certainly these charming tales add color to our reading of the Torah, and they sometimes provide additional insight and commentary regarding the text itself. Understanding homiletic and imaginative interpretations of the Torah can help us become better attuned to the insights of those who know the writings of the Torah best, namely, the Jewish sages over the millennia. The parables, hyperbole, and other literary devices add emotional interest to our reading, allowing us to more fully savor the truths of Torah. A good story *is* a good story, and sometimes these can impart genuine truth to us. Maimonides had it right: the aggadot are not intended to replace the truths of the written Torah but to supplement our appreciation of them.

Nonetheless there appears to be a tendency in these fabulous “oral traditions” to gradually move away from the clear revelation of Scripture into fanciful speculations. Like other aspects of the oral Torah, the minute we start doing this, however, it’s difficult to know where to draw the bounding line. Legends about the Scriptural accounts can lead to inferences away from the original intent of the authors of the writings themselves. Perhaps the ultimate expression of this tendency can be seen in Kabbalistic writings,



where, for instance, there the Sacred Name of G-d is no longer understood as YHVH (יהוה), but Ein Sof (אין סוף), “without limit,” a panentheistic term that is nowhere to be found in the Scriptures themselves. The same can also be seen in the Kabbalistic speculations regarding creation: the *ten sephirot* (ספירות), the threefold view of the soul, the afterlife, reincarnation, etc.



Tentative Conclusion: Not Losing Our Way

It should be clear that a distinction must be made between 1) reasoning from the written Torah and reaching consensus within the community, and 2) the notion that God Himself gave the oral Law as a divine commentary/explanation to Moses on Mount Sinai. These are *two very different things*, and how we decide upon this will affect the relative importance we give to the idea of oral Torah.

For Messianic Jews (and Christians) it is evident that we are no longer under the authority of the Rabbis who rejected Yeshua as Israel’s Mashiach. We are under no obligation to accept the idea that oral Torah was given to Moses, at least in the way that Rabbinical Judaism would want us to believe. There is no “fence around the Torah” since Yeshua is the fulfillment of Torah’s inner meaning and message. The “keys of the kingdom” are not in possession of the rabbis but in the possession of the followers of Yeshua. All authority in heaven and on earth is in the possession of the risen King Mashiach Yeshua, and one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that He is Adonai (Phil. 2:8-10). All this derives from the nature of the New Covenant itself. For the Messianic Jew (at least a grace-based one), Torah is understood as a function of covenant, and the nature of the God’s covenantal intervention changed for all time when Yeshua came and offered Himself up on the cross as our atonement for sin. We are now related to the terms of the older covenant the way a widow is related to her deceased husband (Rom. 7:1-4). We do not have a renewed covenant -- one in which Jesus died so that we all be enabled to now follow Moses -- but we rather have a new covenant (ברית חדשה) and an altar of which those who serve in the Tabernacle have no right to eat (Hebrews 13:10). The very word Torah means “teaching” and has always been a description of our responsibility to the LORD in light of the covenantal actions He performed on our behalf. The Messianic Jew looks toward Zion, heavenly Jerusalem, and no longer to the slavery of Sinai (Gal. 4:21-5:1). A lot more can be said regarding this,



chaverim, but the point is that Yeshua sets us free to become the children of God, not followers of the traditions of men...

According to the rabbis, the overriding intent of the oral Law is to elucidate the teaching of the written Law. No written Torah, no oral Torah. This undertaking, however, eventually leads back to the greater question regarding the “point” or “goal” of the written Torah. I have written about this elsewhere, but the central concern resolves to an ethic of love: first, love for God and then for one another. This is summarized in the famous Shema as well as statements from the New Testament:

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:8-10).

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Gal. 5:14)

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” (Matt 22:40)

The first occurrence of the word love in the Scriptures (אהבה, ahavah) (Gen 22:2) refers to a father’s love for his “only” son who was offered as a sacrifice on Moriah (the very place of the crucifixion of Jesus), a clear reference to the gospel message (John 3:16). Some scholars have noted that the word ahavah comes from a two-letter root (אה) with Aleph (א) as a modifier. The root means “to give” and the Aleph indicates agency: “I give. Love is essentially an act of giving... The quintessential passage of Scripture regarding love (αγαπη) in the life of a Christian is found 1 Corinthians 13: “Love seeketh not its own...” The antithesis of love is selfishness, the root of pride, fear, etc.

Love is about commitment: a willingness to put another person’s needs ahead of one’s own interests. Love embraces what is real and offers up healing. In relation to sinful human beings, then, love is inextricably connected with grace and forgiveness, especially as demonstrated by the sacrificial life of the Mashiach Yeshua, who gave up His life to restore us to abiding hope. Blessed be He, the true Torah and Wisdom of God.

[*To be continued, IY”H . . .*]