



# Our Little Secret

*Why is the Oral Torah the Oral Torah? And what does it say about our relationship with G-d?*

## The Talmud or the Bible?

Every so often, we hear about someone who insulted Islam and a resulting uproar. Often, the issue revolves around the koran. There was once a Newsweek article about the US military interrogators throwing a copy of the Koran into the toilet to break the prisoners' spirits. Do you remember what an uproar it caused in the Muslim world? The demonstrations and riots got so bad that the newspaper even tried retracting its statements. That didn't help at all.

There was once an article in the USA Today by a religion expert who was trying to describe just how terrible defacing the Koran is to Muslims. He explained that the commonly used comparison of the Koran to the Bible is not correct. The Koran is much more revered by the Muslim than the Bible is to the Jew. A more appropriate comparison, he said, would be to the Talmud which the Jews revere even more than the Bible itself!

Initially I became indignant. How can he say that the Talmud is more important to us than the Bible? But I realized that sometimes we must learn from our enemies. Numerous times throughout our history the Christians publicly burned the Talmud, not the Bible, for they knew that this would hurt us worst of all.

People always asked why G-d didn't command us to put the oral law

into writing. This would have saved us from countless sorrows. The Saducees believed only the written Torah and rejected the Oral Law and later the Karaites behaved similarly.

Even today, whenever I mention something from the Oral Torah, someone will jump all over it, demanding to know where it is written in the real Torah!

Not only didn't G-d command us to write the Oral Law down, G-d actually forbids us to do so! The sages upheld this rule, never publishing a written account of the Oral Law, until the strains of exile weakened our minds threatening to cause the Jewish people to forget their learning. Only then, for the sake of preservation, were the Talmud and, finally, all of the Oral Law put to print.

## **The Personal Relationship**

But why did G-d not want the Oral Law to be recorded in writing when it could have spared us so much grief?

The nature of people is not to share their personal feelings with others. When your buddy comes back from vacation he'll tell you all about the wonderful time he had and that it was such a wonderful experience. But when he gets home to his wife, he will tell her a whole different story. She will get to hear how he really felt about everything that happened, the good as well as the bad.

He does this, not because he has anything to hide; rather, it is simply human nature to reveal your personal feelings only to the very closest people.

The same applies to our relationship with G-d. When we 'married' Him at Mt. Sinai on Shavuot, G-d made a public statement for all the nations to hear. This statement was printed and titled "the Bible." It is now available for purchase at your local bookstore. The rights to this statement have even been claimed by many other peoples, the

Christians, the Muslims etc. The truth is that the message of the public statement was meant for them too. Even the laws of Shabbat, which non-Jews are forbidden to keep, help them remember the Creator of this world and His purpose for it.

But there is more to our relationship than that. There are intimate feelings between us, and this is not for everyone's ears. It was therefore G-d's wish that it not be made available to just anyone. It was to remain an Oral Tradition. No one else was supposed to know what we say to each other.

The Midrash asks, during the forty days that Moses was up on Mt. Sinai how did he know the difference between day and night? The answer is that during the day G-d would teach him the Written Torah, you know, the stuff that everyone could know about. But at night G-d would teach him the Oral Law, the intimate secrets that nobody else could hear. (Tanchumah, Tisa 36)

Another Midrash relates that Moses actually wanted to print the Mishnah, but G-d did not allow it for He knew that pagans would have the Torah translated into Greek and claim to be G-d's children too. But G-d would tell them, "My children are those who know my secrets," and those secrets are in the Mishnah. (Tanchuma Buber Vayera 6:2).

## **The Hidden Secrets**

So you see the Talmud (Mishnah included) is a collection of the secrets G-d shares with us, his wife and children. It is the secrets in the Talmud that make our relationship with G-d more special than any other nation.

I'll take one example from this week's Parsha. Our Parsha discusses the reward for keeping the mitzvos and the punishment for not following G-d's will. However, there is no mention of Heaven, Gan Eden or the resurrection in our Parsha. It is all about physical and monetary

reward and punishment, but not a word about the real reward that awaits the truly righteous.

The answer is that spiritual reward and punishment is not something that everyone can understand. The spiritual reward is a personal thing between G-d and us. G-d therefore did not include it in His public statement. Instead, G-d secretly worked it into the words of Torah. For example, "Honor your Father and Mother so that your days will be long and it will be good for you." Our sages told us the secret. "Your days will be long" means you will come to the world where it is always day, where there is no night. "And it will be good for you" means you will come to a world that is entirely good.

To the world it looks like G-d has promised us only physical reward, but the true reward for all of our tzaros will be in a world which is entirely good, where Tzaddikim sit and enjoy G-d's presence. As King David said, "How great is the goodness that you have hidden for those who fear you."

Now you know the rest of the story – but don't tell anyone!