

Thoughts On Shavuot

Northwest Yeshiva
High School

5760

Rebbe Elazar says about the Torah that the major portion of it is written and the minor portion is an oral tradition.... And Rebbe Yochanan says that the major portion of the Torah is an oral tradition and the minor portion is written. (Talmud, Tractate Gitten 60B)

The festival of Shavuot celebrates the revelation of the Torah at Sinai. The Torah received at Sinai is composed of two parts. It includes a written portion and an oral portion. The written portion is recorded in the five volumes of the Chumash. The Oral Torah was also received from Moshe at Sinai. This Oral Torah is an elaboration on the material in the Written Torah. It was not originally recorded. Instead, it was taught as an oral tradition and communicated through the generations by teacher to student. Eventually, a brief synopsis of this body was recorded as the Mishne. Later, a more detailed written account of the Oral Torah was created. This is the Gemarah. Over the centuries, an enormous body of writings has supplemented these early records of the Oral Torah. These works include all of the interpretations and elaboration on the basic material in the Written Torah. It is the product of the insights of Sages throughout the generations.

The text above recounts a dispute between two Sages. Rebbe Elazar asserts that the major portion of the Torah is contained in the Written Torah - in the Chumash. The Oral Torah is the smaller of the two components of the Torah. Rebbe Yochanan disagrees. He contends that the majority of the Torah is contained in the Oral Torah. The Written Torah is the smaller component of the Torah.

This is a perplexing dispute. One merely needs to look at any library of Torah works to under-

stand the problem. The Written Torah is recorded in the five books of the Chumash. This work can be contained in a single volume. The Oral Torah fills endless volumes. It is true that the published material has grown over the centuries. During the time of Rebbe Elazar and Rebbe Yochanan, the published or written portion of the Oral Torah was quite limited. Nonetheless, the body of material encompassed in this Oral Torah surely was larger than the five books of the Chumash.

There is another problem with this dispute. Both Rebbe Elazar and Rebbe Yochanan were great Torah scholars. They certainly had disagreements. However, they studied the same Torah. They were both fully aware of the scope and detail of the Torah. Yet, the disparity between their positions is immense. How could they present such radically different accounts of the material they studied?

In order to answer these questions we must ask one more important question. How does one measure the relative "sizes" of the Written and Oral Torah? The Written Torah has a size. It has a material form. We can measure the number of words or letters required to record it. But how do we even measure the Oral Torah? We can count the number of words required to record it. However, this is not its true measurement. The Oral Torah existed before it was recorded in writing. It is a set of ideas. How does one assign a size to a set of ideas? How big is the theory of relativity? Is it larger or smaller than the Newtonian mechanics? These are absurd questions! Concepts do not have size.

It is apparent from this last question that Rebbe Elazar and Rebbe Yochanan are not disputing the relative material size of the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. This is not the basis for comparison. We have also shown above that even if we make the questionable assumption that the Oral Torah can be

assigned a size based on the words required to transcribe it, the dispute between the Sages remains enigmatic. They would both have to agree that the Oral Torah fills more volumes than the Written Torah. So, what are they disputing?

In order to understand the dispute between these two Sages we must consider the relationship between the Written Torah and the Oral Torah. We will begin by outlining two fundamentally different possibilities.

The first possibility can be understood though imagining the following scenario. Consider an immense library. Some poor soul has been assigned the enormous task of preparing a single work that summarizes the knowledge contained in this entire library. How might he proceed in accomplishing this task? Let us propose the following. First, he should divide the library into sections. One section would be works on agriculture. Another section might contain all works on business and finance. Once the library has been so divided, these sections will be divided into smaller subsections. The business and finance section would include an accounting section and investment section. Once the sections and subsections are created, the real work can begin. A brief summary should be prepared of each volume in the library. Based on these summaries, a summary will be created of the works in each subsection. The subsection summaries will then be used to create a summary of each section. Finally, using the section summaries, a summary will be created that encompasses the entire library.

The Torah can be understood through applying a similar scheme. Each Tractate of the Talmud can be viewed as the summary of a large subsection of Torah concepts. The Mishne of the Tractate is a summary of the Tractate. The Written Torah is a brief summary of the summaries contained in the Mishne. In other words, the Written Torah can be viewed as the summary of an immense body of knowledge. This body encompasses all areas of the Torah - the entire Oral Torah.

There is an alternative way to characterize the relationship between the Written and Oral Torah. Again, let us consider an analogy. Shakespeare is probably the most thoroughly studied playwright or author. Let us consider just one of his works - Hamlet. Countless articles and books have been written analyzing and critiquing this work. These books and articles are commentary on Hamlet. They expand upon the issues and insights that the play reveals.

This description can also be used to characterize the relationship between the Written and Oral Torah. The Written Torah can be viewed as the more fundamental component and the Oral Torah as a commentary and elaboration on the Written Torah. The Oral Torah explores the meaning and significance of each passage and nuance of the Written Torah. It reveals the Written Torah's full meaning.

These two relationships are very different. If the Written Torah is a summary of the entire Torah, it is - by its very definition - smaller than the Oral Torah. The summary is a condensation of the body it describes. However, if the Oral Torah is a commentary on the Written Torah, it is the less fundamental of the two works. Again, this is a result of its very definition. The commentary is an elaboration on the more fundamental work it explains.

We can now understand the dispute between Rebbe Elazar and Rebbe Yochanan. They do not dispute the relative sizes of the Written and Oral Torah. The issue they debate cannot be resolved through taking some measurement. They disagree over the relationship between these two elements. According to Rebbe Elazar, the major portion of the Torah is written. He maintains that the Oral Torah is a commentary and elaboration on the Written Torah. In this relationship, the Written Torah is the fundamental of major component. The Oral Torah plays a secondary role. Rebbe Yochanan asserts that the major portion of the Torah is Oral Torah. He understands the Written Torah as a summary of the entire body of knowledge contained in the Oral Torah. In this relationship, the Oral Torah is the major element or partner in the relationship.