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Maimonides' Eighth Principle: The Divinity of the Torah

by Rabbi Mordechai Blumenfeld

Every letter of the Written and Oral Torah transmitted through Moshe Rabbeinu was of Divine origin.

Based on a series of lectures by Rabbi Yaakov Weinberg, of blessed memory.

We believe that the entire Torah in our possession was given [to us] by the Almighty through Moshe Rabbeinu, by means of the medium we metaphorically call "speech." No one knows the real nature of this communication except Moshe, to whom it was transmitted. He was like a scribe receiving dictation. He wrote the history, the stories, and the commandments. Therefore he is called "[the] inscriber."

There is no difference between "And the sons of Ham were Cush, Mizraim, Phut, and Canaan" (Genesis 10:6), "And his wife's name was Mehetabele, the daughter of Matred, the daughter of Meizahav" (Genesis 36:39), "And Timna was concubine to..." (Genesis 36:12), and "I am God, your Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 5:6), and "Hear O Israel, God is our Lord, God is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4). For it is all from God; it is all God's perfect Torah, pure, holy and true.

He who says that these verses and stories were invented by Moshe is considered by our Sages and prophets to be more heretical and misleading than any other heretic. For he believes that the Torah contains both relevant and irrelevant verses, and he sees the historical passages as useless, and as Moshe's innovations. [He is included among those who say that] the Torah is not from God. [Even] he who believes that the entire Torah was given by God except for one verse (which Moshe wrote) has "disgraced the word of God" (Numbers 15:3). May God rise above the words of the heretics.

Every word in the Torah has wisdom and wondrous insights for those who understand them; [the Torah's] wisdom is unfathomable. [The Torah is] "longer than the earth and wider than the sea." One can only follow in the footsteps of David, God's Messiah, who prayed, "Open my eyes that I may behold the wonders of Your Torah" (Psalms 119:18).

The authoritative explanation of the Torah was communicated by God, and the way we observe the commandments of sukkah, lulav, shofar, tzitzis, tefillin etc., is exactly as God instructed Moshe. He [Moshe] was the faithful conduit [of the Oral Law].

This is the eighth Principle, as affirmed by the verse:

"With this you will know that the Almighty sent me to do all these things, for I have not done them of my own mind." (Numbers 16:28)

-- Maimonides' 13 Principles of Faith

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THE INSCRIBER OF GOD'S WORDS

The *Ani Ma'amin* version of this Principle reads:

"I believe with complete faith that the entire Torah which is now in our possession is the same as that which was given to Moshe Rabbeinu, may he rest in peace."

This rendition of the eighth Principle expresses the belief that the Torah we have now is the same Torah that was given to Moshe Rabbeinu at Sinai. Although the phrasing chosen by the author of *Ani Ma'amin* is reminiscent of the actual text of the Rambam, it does not reflect his main concern in this Principle.

The text of this Principle reads:

"We believe that the entire Torah in our possession today was given [to us] by the Almighty through Moshe Rabbeinu, by means of the medium we metaphorically call "speech." No one knows the real nature of this communication except Moshe, to whom it was transmitted. He was like a scribe receiving dictation. He wrote the history, the stories, and the commandments. Therefore he is called [the] inscriber."

Clearly, the thrust of this Principle is the conviction that every letter of the Written and Oral Torah transmitted through Moshe Rabbeinu was of Divine origin. Moshe Rabbeinu merely served as a conduit for communicating it, or as a "scribe," as the Rambam himself describes him.

In contrast, it is difficult to understand *Ani Ma'amin* literally, i.e. that the Torah we now possess is the same Torah given to Moshe Rabbeinu. It is true that as long as the Temple stood and the Torah scroll which Moshe Rabbeinu wrote was kept there, the Jewish People had a standard to which to compare all new Torah scrolls that were written. But we are told (*Sofrim* 6:4) that after the destruction of the Temple, when Ezra returned to Israel, he found three Torah scrolls which were all considered valid.

Even so, there were minor discrepancies among them, which were maintained or discarded, depending on whether they appeared in two of the three scrolls. Although the Torah itself instructs Jews to follow the majority in making a decision (see Exodus 23:2), one suspects that after many such occurrences, his decisions are not going to produce absolutely accurate reproductions of the original Sinai version. The Talmud, too, says we are no longer experts in the exact spelling of many words. Consequently, the Rabbis could not count the exact number of letters in the Torah (*Kiddushin* 30a). Certainly, these were very minor variances -- such a spelling a word with a *hei* or an *alef*, or with or without a *vav* -- changes which did not seem to affect the meaning significantly.

The Rambam knew very well that these variations existed when he defined his Principles. The words of *Ani Ma'amin* and the words of the Rambam, "the entire Torah in our possession today," must not be taken literally, implying that all the letters of the present Torah are the exact letters given to Moshe Rabbeinu. Rather, it should be understood in general sense that the Torah we learn and live by is for all intents and purposes the same Torah that was given to Moshe Rabbeinu. The real emphasis of this Principle is that this Torah, which includes both the Written and Oral Law, is word for word, *letter for letter from the Almighty*, and absolutely none of it was edited by Moshe in any way whatsoever. There is not one phrase, not one letter that Moshe added to clarify or explain what was transmitted to him. He had no input of any kind but functioned only as the mouthpiece of the Almighty.

MOSHE'S FREE WILL

In order for God to guarantee that Moshe Rabbeinu was a true prophet, as He did at Sinai, and that every word of the Torah is the word of the Almighty, it was necessary to deny Moshe free will in regard to his communicating the Torah.

It is self-evident that a promise from the Almighty which defines an individual's actions is

incompatible with that individual's free will regarding those actions. Once the Almighty promises that an individual will do something according to His Will, the person has no more choice in the matter. Once God testified to the validity and accuracy of the prophecy of Moshe Rabbeinu, Moshe could no longer edit, add or subtract anything from the words of the Torah, even if he would have wanted to do so.

Perhaps this restriction of free will was the natural consequence of relating to the Almighty "face to face," or perhaps it was a specific intervention, a miracle, in order to assure the giving of the Torah. It is clear, however, that once God promised that Moshe Rabbeinu was a true prophet, he automatically lost his free will in the entire process of communicating the Torah.

THE ORAL LAW

The requisite for this Principle is clear. As mentioned, since only a Torah that is absolute and not open to change can bind man, providing the opportunity for worshipping the Almighty, any ambiguity in the laws of the Torah would render it non-absolute and therefore non-binding. Consequently, the Oral Law was given simultaneously to Moshe Rabbeinu at Sinai, complementing the Written Law. Both together constitute Torah.

Without the Oral Law, the Written Law remains ambiguous and cannot bind man to the service of God. That's why the various splinter groups throughout history that have attempted to keep the Written Law without the Oral Law have all but disappeared. Thus, regarding the Oral Law as well, if Moshe Rabbeinu could have edited or changed a word, there would no longer be a Torah. For anything an individual would not like, anything of inconvenience, *that* would be the very word or idea he would claim that Moshe had changed. As long as the possibility existed of one sentence, one letter being not from God but from man, one could pick and choose whatever he liked.

As discussed, if the Torah is subject to choice, it has no meaning. This is the basic flaw of any segment of Jewry that feels it can choose which laws are relevant and which are not. In essence, these Jews are transforming a body of absolute law and ethics into one of relative law and ethics. As they shift and twist to conform to the passing fantasies and outlooks of society, their tailor-made "Torah" becomes more and more attenuated.

It is in exactly this way that the Catholic Church has lost its strength. There was a time when Catholics thought the Church professed absolute truth and was not subject to change. Now that Vatican II has allowed shifts and innovations, however, relatively few people still take the Church seriously. Why should they if tomorrow a new pope will change today's "absolute" law? Why go through the inconvenience of obeying a law only to discover it was all for nothing? As a result, the Church has very little authority left; it has become a culture which will naturally become weaker and weaker with every generation.

The identical phenomena would have occurred with Torah if there ever existed the possibility that one law or another was not from God. In contrast, this Principle states clearly that every word is the Almighty's. The Torah is absolute. There can be no choosing of what to follow and what to reject. There can be no changes without destroying the very fiber of Torah, and without creating a situation where man will no longer be serving God.

This article is an excerpt from "Fundamentals and Faith: Insights into the Rambam's 13 Principles" by Rabbi Mordechai Blumenfeld.

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