

Torah Min HaShamayim

FAQ

By Shaiya Rothberg

The following “questions and answers” reflect many actual questions posed by students at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem, and they are offered here in the spirit of that ongoing discussion.

Do you really believe that the Torah is the Word of God?

Yes, the Torah is the Word of God in the sense that the Rambam speaks about in his “thirteen principles”: “The eighth principle is Torah Min HaShamayim (Torah from God)...that the whole Torah was given us through Moses our Teacher entirely from God...There is no distinction between verse[s] of scripture like “The sons of Ham were Kush and Mizrayim and Put and Kena’an” or “and his wife’s name was Mehetav’el, daughter of Matred” [and verses like] “I am the Lord your God (Ex. 20:2) or “Hear O Israel” (Deut. 6:4). All are from the mouth of God, and all are the Torah of God, perfect, pure, holy and true”.

But affirmation that Torah is the Word of God can be about definition and assertion rather than belief. I don’t *believe* that Torah is the Word of God, I *know* that it is.

You mean you make some leap of faith and call that “knowledge”?

No, there’s no leap of faith involved. One needs to understand how terms are being defined here. First of all, **everything is God**. All things are revelations of God and all words are divine words. This may not be a necessary assumption for the rest of the ideas presented here, but it seems to make things simpler. Since everything is God, the question is never, “does God exist?” or “could a text really be the Word of God?”, because the existence of all things is God’s existence, and all texts are God’s. But some of these same questions are just cast in a new form: the question is no longer “how do we know that the Torah is really divine”, but rather “why do we single out this as divine and deny the divinity of all other things?”

To understand this it might help to distinguish between two ways of encountering the world. One way is to look *at* things as they appear in ordinary life. The other way is to look *through* things toward God. To look through something toward God is to encounter it as an instance, a particular manifestation, of the All which is God.

A water bottle, for instance, is nothing less than an instance of the universe as a whole. The fact that the bottle rests in one's hand manifests the force of gravity; that one's hand does not pass through it is an instance of the laws governing atoms and molecules; that it appears with color is an instance of the laws governing light waves; and so on.

These examples refer us to aspects of the universe about which people know something. But the water bottle exists in the same interconnected self-consistent web of natural laws, causes and effects as the big bang in the past, black holes in the present, and whatever the future holds. These are examples of things about which people know little or nothing. The water bottle is an instance not only of the known universe, but of the unknown; not only of the finite and fathomable, but the infinite and unfathomable. Addressing an object as an instance of the All is to look *through* it towards God.

When I look *through* the water bottle like this, I sort of look out onto the world, onto the universe and everything I know, through the prism of that water bottle. I might think about how water feels, for example, but I'll think about this because of some connection it has to natural laws governing the nature of my water bottle (gravity, atoms, light waves, as above). In this way the bottle *contains* the All. Every instance of the All contains the All. But each in a different way. Everything I know is interconnected both to the water bottle and to the water in it. But if I had looked out *through* the water, and not the bottle, the constellation of interconnections through which I look out toward the All would be different. Each instance of the All is a unique prism through which certain aspects or faces of the All are revealed.

But we can't always look *through* things to God. Normally we look *at* things as separate entities that we use and appreciate. We look at their particular properties and *not through* them to all that interconnectedness. But there is one "thing" we can only see if we look *through* it to God. That "thing" is the Torah. We can look *at* the bible. We can weigh the biblical text and examine its historical sources. But the Torah, the Word of God, is revealed in the Five Books of Moses (Chumash) only when we look *through* them towards God.

Revealing the Torah, the Word of God, by looking through the Five Books towards God is not the result of a leap of faith but of a choice. The choice is to glimpse the All through the prism of one of its instances: the Five Books.

But If everything is God, then what's the difference between God's "Word" and a telephone pole?

If everything is God, than in fact both the telephone poll and God's Word are divine, even if I don't usually look *through* telephone polls but just *at* them. When I call

something the Word of God, rather than the telephone poll of God, I mean to point at a particular aspect of God. Since I regard words as something uniquely human, I mean to point at an aspect of God which is revealed to me only in human consciousness. That aspect is *meaning* and *purpose*. When I say "the Word of God" I mean the *meaning of human life*.

And you *really* hear God talking about the meaning of life?

I don't think we can hear the Word of God in a universal sense. In this sense the Word would be everything that ever was, is or will be true and good. I imagine that as something too immense and probably paradoxical for the human mind to grasp. But I can hear the Word, to the best of my ability, in a particularistic sense. Every human attempt to live in light of the true and the good is a particular instance of the Word of God. Thus, every text or religion, for example, which I judge to be true and good, I thereby also judge to be an instance of the Word. Examples of the Word might be a religion like Islam or a text like the New Testament. Each of these would reveal the Word through the unique prism of their particularity. In that sense each instance of the Word also contains, in its way, the whole Word. This is like the way the water bottle reveals and contains the All in its unique way when I look *through* it as described above.

But what does this have to do with Israel and the Torah?

The particular manifestation of the universal Word of God in the People Israel is called "Torah". The relationship between the Torah and the universal Word is like the relationship between Israel and humanity. Just as Israel is an instance of humanity, so too, the Torah is an instance of the Word. Torah is the name for the meaning and purpose of human life as revealed to the People Israel.

How does this relate to the actual Five Books?

The Five Books are not an account or an interpretation of God's words to Israel, but rather God's exact words, as in the Rambam's eighth principle mentioned above. *When read properly*, the actual words of the Five Books communicate the meaning and purpose of human life as revealed to Israel.

How does one "read properly"?

Reading properly is a certain way of looking *through* the Five Books toward God. Understanding this involves presenting some ideas about the nature of the human mind and the nature of texts.

While the mind is complex and dynamic, I image that, like the universe, all its parts and processes are connected. For example, consider any experience, such as a thought or emotion. Every such thought or emotion is inherently linked with other thoughts and emotions. Reflecting on these links, step by step, connection by connection, will lead you to the totality of the contents of your mind. This is the way of looking *through*. If we call the contents of the mind "consciousness", you can look *through* any thought or emotion to the totality of your consciousness.

But you can "see" further than that. Everything we think and feel reflects the larger context of human consciousness throughout time. Step by step, connection by connection, reflection would, if our minds were strong enough, lead from every moment of experience to all human consciousness. In this sense each moment of your experience contains, in its particular way, the totality of all human consciousness as the bottle contains, in its particular way, the totality of all things.

Above I defined the Word of God as the meaning and purpose of human life. Where is this Word located? It may be located in places I don't know, but I see it in human consciousness. This is another way of saying that the part of God in which the Word is revealed is the human mind. Since every moment of human experience contains, by extension, the totality of all human consciousness, it follows that every such moment contains, in its particular way, the Word of God.

Now, a text, written language, is an instance of human consciousness. I can look *through* the text toward the totality of human consciousness. In this way, step by step, connection by connection, the text *contains* that consciousness, which contains the Word of God. The Five Books are a text and thus they contain and reveal, through their unique prism, God's Word.

It's still not clear how one actually looks *through* a text to see the Word of God.

Looking *through* the text involves a certain kind of reflective reading in which one considers all things related to the good and the true in relation to the contents of that text. This kind of reflection was involved in seeing how one moment of experience contains, connection by connection, all of one's individual experience. Any consideration of the true and the good involves a process of intuition, analysis, judgment, interpretation and so forth in regard to the contents of human experience.

Accessing the Word of God through a text means going about this process in relation, and through the prism, of that text.

For example, one can reflect on the inter-dynamics of one's own family life, or of all life, through a close reading of the Genesis stories. One can reflect on questions of government and politics through analysis of Moshe's difficulties in establishing the judges or in Korach's challenge to his leadership. Every story and every law demand exposition in every possible context, in relation to every possible question.

But the text is not limited to cognitive content. Equally important is the way it sounds and looks. Each and every detail of the text invites one who reads this way to explore the totality of her mind. All associations and responses are relevant material in such a reading. One reflects on the myriad interconnections within the text and between the text and the world. Each interconnection creates a new context and each new context holds new meanings. Through this method of learning the text contains, by extension, the totality of human consciousness just as each moment of your experience does. There is no boundary between the text and the world, the text reaches out and contains all that the mind can hold.

Hearing God speak from the Five Books involves, then, meditating, or entering an altered state of consciousness, with the text. One explores the text as literature: text and subtext, foreshadowing, hints and interconnections. One contemplates each Hebrew root's myriad associations and the shades of meaning expressed by the different Names of God. One explores the sounds of language and the shapes of letters. The verses of the Five Books are three-dimensional structures revealing open spaces and hidden corners, lit surfaces and darkened depths. Every detail of the Text reveals aspects of God's message to Israel, and these weave themselves into the texts and practices of the tradition, and into our lives, through a web of value and experience, idea and emotion, memory and imagination, whose boundaries fade into the text's ultimate source: God.

The paradigm for this kind of reading is the *midrash* of the Talmud and the Zohar. The midrash reads the Five Books forwards and backwards, inside and out, reflecting a state of mind like the one described above. When read in this way, the actual words of the Five Books reveal God's Word to Israel.

But it would seem that when read in this way, the Five Books contain not only the Word of God, but all the contents, good and bad, of human consciousness.

When we access all of human consciousness through a text we're involved in a kind of expansion. We disregard the limitations we normally place on the meaning of a

text, like the author's intent or its simple meaning, and allow the text to extend out to all consciousness through the interconnectedness of all things.

Understanding a text as the Word of God **and nothing else** requires the opposite motion, a kind of limitation. Here we determine the nature of the text and then regard as relevant interpretations only those in keeping with that character. A text reveals *only* the Word of God when the only relevant interpretations of its contents regard the meaning and purpose of human life.

For example, if when asked as to the contents of a recipe in a cook book, one responds "a great flurry of activity expressed through a series of highly physical verbs forming a semi-circle around a sensuous illustration", one can expect a surprised look in response. This is so because while this may be a true "interpretation" of the text, it is not an interpretation relevant to *a cook book*. Similarly, a response concerning the possibility that a given part of a recipe was actually added by the publisher and was not present in the author's original manuscript is also not relevant to the book *as a cook book*. Approaching the text *as a cook book* means interpreting it in a way that involves *cooking something*.

In the same way, understanding a text as the Word of God means that only interpretations involving the meaning and purpose of life are relevant to its meaning. It is possible to discuss, for instance, the history of the Five Books, who its authors might be and so forth. However, if one seeks to address the Chumash as a cook book, one needs to talk about cooking. And if one seeks to address the Chumash as the Word of God, one needs to talk about the meaning and purpose of our lives.

The other descriptions of the Books can be significant in other contexts. But only descriptions involving the meaning and purpose of life are relevant to the Chumash as a revelation of God's Word. If one systematically learns the text in this way, then the text doesn't contain the Word of God along with everything else in human consciousness, the text contains the Word of God and nothing else.

Now, it should be pointed out here that since our judgment of the good and the true is limited, so too, we can never understand the Five Books completely. We know, given the hermeneutical assumptions outlined above, that the words of the text are God's Words. Whether we understand those words is a matter of our best considered judgment.

But how is the Chumash different from any other text?

The Chumash may be a miraculous and brilliant work superior to any other, but this is not necessary for the approach outlined here. Everything said above is, in principle, true about any text.

The reason that we approach the Chumash, and only the Chumash, in this way is that we are the People Israel. While its true that any text could in principle reveal the Word of God, no two texts reveal that Word in the same way. One could build a civilization around hearing the Word of God in the Koran, but that would not be the Word of God to Israel. The People Israel reflect the Five Books as Word of God, and the Five Books as Word of God reflect the People Israel. Facing the Chumash as divine revelation is inherent to what the People Israel is, has been, and may become. That is why some Kabbalists say “Israel, Torah and God are One”. Israel - people, religion, language, land and history - is the pattern of colored light and darkness created by God's Word shining through the prism of the Chumash onto humanity.

Reflection on the Oral Torah enables a deeper understanding of the unique face of God revealed through the Five Books (which are also called Written Torah). What I mean here by Oral Torah is Israel's response to the Word in the Books. One could imagine hearing God's Word in the Chumash as an individual and even momentary affair. One might hear God command wearing Tefillin, and then moments later hear God forbidding them. Such interpretations would not in principle contradict the idea of Chumash as the Word of God, but it would compromise establishing a coherent life of meaning in response to that Word.

The Oral Torah provides coherency to the way we learn and respond to the Word. Its two central avenues are halacha and aggada. Halacha is our response to the Word in regard to what we do. Aggadah is our response to the Word in regard to what things mean. These two avenues, with their interpretative principles and textual traditions, provide coherency in our response to the infinity of God's Word in the Chumash so that we can build our lives around it.

The Oral Torah is an ongoing tradition of Torah interpretation. This tradition constitutes Israel as a people collectively living out the meaning of the Chumash as God's Word throughout time. The tools of halacha and aggadah, shared by learners of the Five Books as God's Word, forge a community of Jewish religious self understanding which reaches not only across individual lives but also across continents and generations.

But Oral Torah, the response to the Word, isn't limited to reading or learning. The full meaning of looking *through* the Five Books to God's Word is manifest only by

living the response. Torah is not a theory or a philosophy that can be expressed in words but what might be called a *life form*. The Word touches and informs not only religion, morality and politics, but the way colors reach the eye (as in the tabernacle), the aromas of spices, the feel of leather on one's arm, the light of fire, the passion of sex, the passage of time, the meaning of sounds...the Word is as rich and multi-faceted as human experience itself.

Through the totality of Israel's Torah life, a unique glimpse of God can be seen. The particular face of God revealed in Torah is called the Shechinah. One can see Her only when one looks *through* the Five Books of Moses to reveal God's Word to Israel. The choice to be Israel, to look *through* the Five Books rather than through some other text, ultimately reflects love for Her. A life of Torah is a life in Her presence.

Doesn't Biblical Criticism undermine the idea that the Torah is God's Word?

The fact that the Written Torah was most likely written by many people over a number of generations in no way undermines its status as the Word of God to Israel. Recall for a moment the example of the water bottle given above. When one looks *through* the water bottle toward God, it makes no difference whether the bottle was made in Taiwan or in the People's Republic. So too, the claim that Torah is the Word of God has nothing to do with its origin when one looks *at* it as a thing in the World. Incontrovertible evidence that the Chumash miraculously materialized from thin air in Moshe's hands would make it a remarkable *thing*, but not God's Word. The Chumash is the Word of God to Israel when we look *through* it toward God to reveal that Word.

It's true that some people who study the Bible critically look *at* it as a thing. And for them the Torah's divine nature is concealed. But there is no contradiction between studying the Bible critically and recognizing its divine nature. Looking *through* something toward God means recognizing it as an instance of the All, and thus as fundamentally infinite. In the infinity of meaning of God's Word there is plenty of room for the significant, meaningful and valuable interpretations of Biblical Criticism, just as there is room for another midrash, the fruit of today's learning in the beit midrash (study hall).

Is this authentic Jewish thought?

First, the Jewish thought of the past might be considered pretty radical when examined from the viewpoint of, for example, contemporary Orthodoxy. Just open Rambam's Guide or the Zohar.

Second, Jewish thought should not restate the understanding of past generations but rather provide a compelling self-understanding for Torah Jews now. It seems to me that in order to provide that self-understanding, a viable theology of Judaism must make compelling sense of the following three foundations of Jewish Tradition:

One: God is real and the source of all meaning.

Two: The Torah is God's Word.

Three: The Tradition (Oral Torah) is the medium through which the meaning of God's Word is revealed.

If you make sense of and share these assumptions, then the practices and texts of Jewish life speak *directly* to you about the most important things in your life. The power and beauty of the Jewish way to God are revealed – and you live it, and help define it, as an equal among equals.

Many committed Jews don't share these assumptions. But in important ways it seems to me that they engage Torah *from the outside*: God is “a profound idea”; Torah “contains something divine”; Tradition is “an important part of our identity and past”. Statements like these divide one from the world of ideas and values that *bring Torah alive*.

But isn't somebody who *really* believes that stuff a fundamentalist?

Fundamentalism should not be confused with taking the fundamental concepts of Torah seriously. Valuing Torah above all else, seeing the world through the categories of God's Word, and fulfilling mitsvot, are not fundamentalism but simply Torah life.

I understand fundamentalism as a denial of one's moral responsibility for the content of the Word of God *as it is interpreted*. The fundamentalist regards criticism such as “that's not true” or “that's not good” as *outside* of Torah and therefore irrelevant. In his or her eyes, the true and the good have no meaning except how previous generations have understood them.

But this is a grave mistake. Torah makes a tremendous demand on its living bearers in each generation. We must not only understand and apply the teachings of the past, we must *identify* with them. When we say, in learning or in prayer, that Torah is true and good, we must *mean* it. The literary legacy of Torah demonstrates that different sages interpreted the tradition in light of their different understandings of what is true and good. This is only to say that these sages fulfilled their obligations as bearers of God's Word. No healthy soul calls “true” or “good” what in his or her considered judgment is really false or evil. A Torah Jew does not lie when she says “Righteous and

Just is the Lord”. Words like *emet* (truth) and *tov* (good) do not rest on the page of the Chumash or Siddur, they rise up through one’s eyes and demand consent from a living human mind. The yoke of heaven involves a hermeneutical project in which our evolving sense of the true and the good reveals new meanings in God’s Word.

Fundamentalists deny independent meaning to the true and good beyond what they imagine they deduce from authoritative text. They deny their *da’at*, their rational faculties and moral sense. When the words of the Chumash or Siddur invoke the living concepts of truth and goodness, when these terms reach up from the page to engage a living bearer of tradition, they are met with empty silence. Fundamentalists quote understandings of the true and the good from the past. But they have no means to navigate the myriad and often contradictory ideas and world views recorded in the tradition, for they lack what previous generations cherished: recourse to the rational and moral sense with which God blessed them: “For the Lord gives wisdom, from His mouth judgment (*da’at*) and understanding” (Prov. 2:6). In this way fundamentalism robs the true and the good of any real meaning, and in a place where these terms are meaningless there can be no Torah. Thus it’s taught in Lev. Rabbah (1 15): “A scholar without independent judgment (*da’at*) - an impure carcass (*nevela*) is better than he!”

Reason and moral sense are no less critical to Torah life than knowledge and commitment. The authentic religious response to claims made in the name of truth and goodness against one’s understanding of Torah is honest reflection, Talmud Torah and finally, considered judgment.

Revised תשס"ה