

What Is Torah? (Edited Transcript)

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On the upcoming festival of Shavuot we celebrate the anniversary of G-d giving us the Torah. Shavuot is dedicated to thanking Hashem for the Torah, as well as to the great mitzvah of learning Torah. As we know, we put much more time into learning on Shavuot, and some even have the custom of learning all through the night. Shavuot is a time of great excitement about receiving the Torah and the privilege of learning it. But what exactly is the Torah?

It seems as though the question is simple and has an obvious answer - Torah means the laws, principles and mitzvahs that G-d has given us. That is true, but Torah is so much more than that.

Torah is the foundation of the world

The Maharal of Prague offers us a deeper understanding of what Torah is. In his book *Netiv HaTorah*, the Path of Torah, the Maharal explains the importance of Torah - and specifically the importance of learning Torah - from a completely different perspective. He quotes the Midrash which says that 'G-d looked into the Torah and created the world,' meaning that G-d did not create the world and say, now we need to create the Torah so that people will know how to live. Rather, it was the other way around: the Torah was created first, as the blueprint for the world, and then the world was created. What our Sages are telling us in this Midrash, says the Maharal, is that the Torah is the foundation of the entire universe. G-d looked into the Torah to create the world because the Torah is the blueprint. The world is an expression of everything contained in the Torah, and therefore there is nothing within human experience that is outside the framework of Torah. This relates to the Mishnah in the fifth chapter of *Pirkei Avot* which says *Hafoch ba vahafoch ba dechulei ba*, 'Turn it over and over for everything is in it.' For this reason, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, one of our great rabbinic thinkers from 19th-century Germany, was opposed to referring to Judaism as a 'religion.' He said the word religion implies that Torah is just another aspect of life, along with business, family, society, government and any other human endeavour. If one defines Torah as a religion, one is really confining Torah to one limited aspect of the world, when in fact it contains all of reality. Torah speaks to everyone, about everything - marriage, parenting, politics, economics, compassion, society; all different aspects of human existence - in fact, **every** aspect of human existence - are contained in the Torah and therefore it is so much broader than the term 'religion' implies. It is the blueprint of life itself.

This is why, says the Maharal, if we are going to try and understand what Torah is and why it's important to learn it, we need to understand that we are not just talking about a particular discipline or area of study, but about **the** framework which underpins everything else.

The breadth of Torah teaches us that we mustn't view it as a 'religion,' nor as merely a 'way of life.' While it's true that it is a way of life, it's far broader than that. It's an all-encompassing worldview, a whole way of experiencing the world and conducting ourselves in the full spectrum of what it means to be a human being.

Torah gives the world its structure

There is another thing we learn from the aforementioned Midrash, and that is that the world has an order and a structure to it, which are based on the Torah. What is the definition of order?

The Maharal says order means there are connections between things. As a simple example, if you are tidying up your desk, you will designate a drawer for papers and a drawer for pens and pencils, and different shelves for different kinds of books. We link things conceptually, in order to create structure in our lives. So too when we look at the world, we must make sense of it. We might view it as disconnected; there are so many different parts to it - the animal kingdom, the plant kingdom, deserts, seas, fire and water and all

different elements that make up the universe in which we live. But although these might appear to be disparate, what the Midrash teaches us in saying that G-d looked into the Torah and created the world is that there is an organising design holding the entire universe together, and its disparate parts are actually interconnected. There is one Creator and one master plan which permeates the cosmos and all of human existence, uniting everything.

This unity is based on the Torah, as the Torah is the blueprint. We learn two things from this: one is that the world is unified and interconnected and the other is that the Torah is multidimensional, encompassing everything. When we approach Torah learning, we must realise that it is comprised of many different aspects - the Five Books of the Chumash, the Prophets, the Mishnah and Gemara, as well as all different dimensions of philosophy and halacha; but at the same time, all of these elements connect, as the entire Torah is one integrated system - G-d's master plan for all of Creation.

The Maharal says further that when we learn Torah such that it becomes part of our worldview and governs how we act, we are actually upholding the spiritual scaffolding upon which the world stands. G-d created the world by looking into the Torah, and the Torah is the organising blueprint holding the entire world together. Thus, if we want our lives to have a sense of structure and order, we must connect to our Jewish values as found in the Torah. The Torah is the organising force; it gives us a framework of values by which to live, without which things fall apart.

Torah sustains the world

This is how the Maharal explains another fascinating insight from our Sages. In the book of Bereishit, at the conclusion of each day of Creation, it says yom sheni 'a second day,' yom shlishi, 'a third day,' etcetera. When it comes to the sixth day of Creation, however, it doesn't say yom shishi, 'a sixth day,' but yom hashishi, 'the sixth day,' as we know from the Friday night kiddush. None of the other days have the definite article, and the Talmud says the reason why the sixth day of Creation has the definite article, yom **h**ashishi, is because it alludes to 'the sixth day' - the sixth day of Sivan when the Torah would be given.

The Talmud tells us that the world's existence was held in suspension, waiting for the sixth of Sivan. G-d had made a condition with the world, saying that if the Jewish people accept the Torah then the world will stand; if not, the world will return to chaos and void, *tohu vavohu*, the state of the cosmos before the world was created. The world was maintained through G-d's grace, solely on the condition that the Torah would come into the world. Thus it was on the sixth of Sivan, on Shavuot, that the world's existence was reconfirmed. The whole world is based upon the Torah and is an expression thereof and so had the Jewish people not accepted the Torah, the world's existence would be meaningless and unstable. Without the necessary spiritual foundation and structure, the world would inevitably go back to chaos and void. If the world doesn't have its spiritual scaffolding - whether it's in our private lives or communal lives or in society at large - then there isn't anything to hold it together, and so the natural consequence is that it ceases to exist.

To sum up, on Shavuot we celebrate the Torah, not just as an instruction manual with mitzvahs and guidelines. Of course it includes all of that, but it is much more. It is the very foundation of our lives and indeed of the whole cosmos. The Torah opens up our minds to G-d's worldview as the master Creator. When we learn Torah, we align ourselves with G-d's blueprint of how we, our families and communities can and should function.

The Torah is the gateway to understanding G-d's worldview, as well as all the structures that lie beneath the surface. This is what we celebrate on Shavuot, not just the fact that G-d gave us the Torah which we can 'fit' into our lives or even live by, but the fact that all of Creation is dependent on the Torah. It's not just another aspect of life, without which we could still function; it is not a 'religion,' applicable in a limited context. It encompasses everything and holds everything together, whether it's how we do business, how we raise our families or how we interact with our fellow human beings. The entire functioning of the world and everything in it is contained in the Torah because it is the spiritual foundation holding up the physical world.