

But every generation posed its own queries on activities unfamiliar to previous generations. Again, if the text states: "Ye shall dwell in booths seven days" (Leviticus 23:42), the student must immediately ask himself how to define "booth." . . .

Yet another important task of the oral law that went hand in hand with written law relates to laws based on popular customs or generally known facts that are not detailed in the biblical text and can only be learned through the oral tradition. (pp. 10-12)

B. The Development of the Oral Law

Adin Steinsaltz, in tracing the development of the Oral Law from its very beginnings, writes:

Ezra, who was a priest and scribe, is the first sage, of all those who studied and interpreted Torah and taught the people, to be identified by name. It was said of him that he was "a ready scribe in the law of Moses . . ." and the task he undertook became the mission of all the teachers who came after him. "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the Lord and to do it and to teach in Israel statutes and judgment" (Ezra 7:10). He was, therefore, the precursor of the age of the anonymous scribes, the period known in Jewish history as the era of the Knesset Gedolah (the Great Assembly).

. . . The completion of the Bible, one of the greatest projects of the Great Assembly, also marked the beginning of the reign of the oral law.

Once the work of canonizing the Bible was completed, and it was accepted that the Bible was the central authority on which Jewish life was to be founded, the scribes were faced with the task of establishing order in the oral law. . . . The scribes started out by studying those oral traditions which included interpretations, customs, and legal precedents, and their main achievement was the linking of these traditions to the written law. It was these scribes who evolved the basic methods of midrash halakhah (halakhic exegesis), that is, methods of learning and deriving halakhah from the biblical texts themselves, reconciling apparent textual contradictions, interpreting enigmatic statements, and analyzing and solving problems through perusal of the text. They also tried to find ways of introducing order into the mass of material so as to facilitate systematic transmission.

. . . The Great Covenant (see Nehemiah 9) . . . was not merely a ceremonial proclamation of the people's obligation to observe all the laws of the Torah but also denoted acceptance of many other ordinances and customs. . . . (pp. 14-16)

Writing of the Talmud, Steinsaltz says:

If the Bible is the cornerstone of Judaism, then the Talmud is the central pillar . . . supporting the entire spiritual and intellectual edifice. In many ways the Talmud is the most important book in Jewish culture, the backbone of creativity and of national life. No other work has had a comparable influence on the theory and practice of Jewish life, shaping spiritual content and serving as a guide to conduct. . . .

The formal definition of the Talmud is the summary of oral law