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## FEATURES

### DEVAR TORAH

# Re'eh parsha: Why the Oral Law was not originally written



Rabbi Avi Weiss

God's spoken word goes beyond the Torah. Rashi, quoting the *Sifrei*, makes this point when analyzing the sentence "and you shall slaughter as I've commanded you" (Deuteronomy 12:21).

One would expect clear, specific details of how to slaughter — after all, God says, "as I've commanded you." Yet the technicalities exist nowhere in the Torah. It follows, then, that the details were spoken by God although they are not written in the Torah text (*Chullin* 28a).

This is not the only place where this phenomenon occurs. The Torah, for example, states, "Observe the Sabbath day" (5:12). Yet the specifics of how to observe the Shabbat are not found in the Torah (*Shabbat* 97b). These absences point to a divine aspect of

the Torah that was given alongside the written text.

Additionally, not only were many of God's words transmitted orally, but also the words of our sages were designated to be passed through the oral tradition. One wonders why it was transmitted orally: why wasn't it all written down from the very beginning? Several answers have been suggested.

Ironically, transmission of law through the generations is more precise, more reliable through the oral legacy. Once written — especially in ancient times when very few copies of books existed — it was easy for one scribe to tinker with texts and change them, whether purposefully or not.

Another possibility: had everything been written down, it would have sent the message that the law was closed and that the process of interpretation halted. The oral transmission sent the message that rabbis in each generation, basing themselves on the Torah and prior rabbinic

rulings, could continue to evaluate and contribute new teachings.

One last thought. Had everything been written down, a *rebbe* (a teacher of Torah) would have been unnecessary — after all, it's all in the book. The oral transmission made the *rebbe*, a living person who could teach the law, necessary. Ultimately, such personalities enable Torah to be passed down through the generations.

In time, however, the Jewish community was no longer capable of remembering the oral dictates, and so we were left with no choice but to commit the Oral Law to writing.

The challenge, even as we study the Oral Law from a written text, is to recall the law with precision, to remember that it is ongoing, and to recognize that its study requires a knowledgeable, soulful *rebbe*, a living role model, to teach it.

**Candle lighting:**  
**Parsha: Re'eh**  
**August 26 at 7:29 p.m.**

## ELEM/Youth in Distress comes to Florida

ELEM/Youth in Distress in Israel has opened a branch office in Aventura that covers Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties as well as the entire Southeastern United States. The local office is headed by Aventura resident Alan Frent.

ELEM/Youth in Distress in Israel, which will celebrate its 40th anniversary next year, is the U.S. branch of ELEM, Israel's leading nonprofit for at-risk youth.

The 21,000 young people ELEM serves annually and the additional 100,000 youth who reach out to ELEM online each year

face tremendous challenges, such as domestic violence, substance abuse, neglect, bullying, homelessness and prostitution in addition to distress caused by national security concerns.

Over 90 programs in more than 40 cities provide counseling, mentoring, vocational training and safe spaces for Israeli youth to envision a positive future and become productive members of Israeli society.

ELEM's unique, informal settings, as well as continuous growth and innovation, led the United Nations to grant ELEM special consultative status in the field of

at-risk youth.

"We're looking forward to strengthening our relationship with the Jewish communities in Florida and by creating meaningful relationships to help support and save many lives among the next generation of young Israelis," said Frent. "We will offer programs to the community to educate them about Israel's significant population of at-risk and troubled youth."

To learn more, visit: [www.elem.org](http://www.elem.org)

For local inquiries, contact Alan Frent at [afrent@elem.org](mailto:afrent@elem.org) or (305) 469 2505.