



Olam HaTorah -

Mercy Triumphs Over Judgment

וַאֲתֵם לָכוּ לִנְדוּדוֹ לְרַעַת נִוְהֶזָה חֶסֶד הִפְצֵתִי וְלֹא זָבַח כִּי לֹא-בָאתִי
לְקַרְא לְצַדִּיקִים לָבֹא כִּי אִם-לְחַטָּאִים לְתִשׁוּבָה:

*Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, and not sacrifice.'
For I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. – Jesus*

Introduction

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the law of the Lord (*torat Adonai*) refers to the revelation of God's will for human beings to live rightly before Him in light of His reality and holiness:



תּוֹרַת יְהוָה תְּמִימָה מְשִׁיבַת נֶפֶשׁ

*"The Law of the L-rd is perfect, converting the soul"
(Psalm 19:7)*

אֲשֶׁרֵי תְּמִימֵי-דֶרֶךְ הַהֲלָכִים בְּתוֹרַת יְהוָה

*"Blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the
law of the L-rd" (Psalm 119:1)*

By functioning as a "looking glass" of our inward condition, the law of the Lord reveals both the divine standard of life required of the *tzaddik* (righteous person) and also the truth of our own need for deliverance from ourselves. Nonetheless, in order to be justified before the Lord, the law *qua* law demands that we live as morally perfect agents, regardless of our heredity, infirmities, social status, education, and so on. "Sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy: for I am the LORD your God" (Leviticus 20:7).

As Jesus himself said in Matthew 5:48:

לָכֵן הָיוּ תְּמִימִים כַּאֲשֶׁר אֲבִיכֶם בְּשָׁמַיִם תְּמִים הוּא

"You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."



And as James the Righteous said:

כִּי הַשְׂמֵר אֶת־כָּל־הַתּוֹרָה וְעָבַר אֶת־תּוֹצֵאתֶיהָ
הוּא אָשָׁם כְּעָבַר כָּל־תּוֹצֵאתֶיהָ:

"For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all." (James 2:10)



Indeed, even the inner voice of conscience provides evidence for a “categorical imperative” to always do what we (intuitively) know is right. As Immanuel Kant put it, “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it would become a universal law” (*Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*), or as Rabbi Hillel put it, “What is hateful to yourself, do to no other” (*Mishnah, Avot*), or as Jesus said, “So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets” (*Matthew 7:12*).

The moral aspect of the law finds its most concrete expression in *luchot ha’even*, the tablets of stone inscribed with *Aseret Hadiberot* - the Ten Commandments - and constitutes the fundamental moral requirements given by the Lord God of Israel to His people.

The moral law of God does not change or accommodate itself to the weaknesses and frailties of mankind, however, and stands forever as the abiding truth of God’s requirements for the human soul to be blameless before Him. If we do not realize this, it is because we are asleep or morally deadened; however, the moment we awaken and become alive, life itself becomes tragic. As Rav Sha’ul (the Apostle Paul) said, "I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died" (*Romans 7:9*).



This is the *conviction of our sinful condition*, and it is itself a gift from heaven, for without it we would never attend to the need of our hearts for an abiding hope that can overcome the verdict of alienation and death that hangs over us all... We would never pursue *teshuvah*.

Now in the Jewish tradition, the moral law is often equated with the Torah of Moses, that is, the 613 specific *mitzvot*, *mishpatim*, and *chukkim* that are found in the collective writings of Moses. In the rabbinical tradition, these various commandments, judgments, and decrees are further supplemented and defined by the “Oral Law,” which is likewise considered binding on the observant Jew. In fact, in some Orthodox traditions of Judaism, the claim goes even further, in that God Himself is bound to the Torah of Moses in a way that an engineer is bound to the finished blueprints of an architect.



A potential source of confusion regarding the status of the law of God is that while it is true that the underlying moral aspect of the Torah of Moses is indeed unchanging (as Jesus Himself attested), the various ceremonial and civil laws, which are a function of the covenantal expression of the law, may not be. In other words, were the Lord to make a new covenant with Israel, then, though the moral aspects of the law would still be eternally binding (e.g., “love the Lord your God” and “love your neighbor as yourself”), the ritual expressions of the covenant might undergo change, based on the new terms of the agreement.

This exploratory article attempts to demonstrate that the Torah of Moses, at least with respect to covenantal expressions determined at Sinai as ceremonial and civil laws, is not immutable and the exclusive possession of national Israel, but is rather subject to the greater purposes and plans of the Lord to redeem *all of humanity* from their lost condition of alienation from Him.

Defining our Terms

The question of whether the “Torah” is immutable and unchanging first requires that we define what is meant by the term Torah. Here are some of the ways to understand this term:

1. **Torah as the writings of Moses.** Often people consider the word *Torah* to refer to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy (sometimes referred to as the “chumash.”). Among more Orthodox Jews, Torah literally refers to the individual letters written on kosher parchment as dictated from heaven and perfectly recorded by Moses on Mount Sinai. These writings of Moses have been meticulously preserved by the Jewish scribes (*soferim*) over the millennia in the form of a *Sefer Torah*, or Torah scroll, which is considered to be the most sacred object of Jewish life.

Note that Torah in this sense not only refers to the physical parchments that comprise a Sefer Torah, but to the various *mitzvot*, *chukkim*, and *mishpatim* established at the covenant of Sinai, with the Ten Commandments as its underlying foundation.

2. **Torah as the Written and Oral Law.** A more traditional Jewish understanding of the word *Torah* refers to the written Torah scroll of Moses *and* the Oral torah, both of which are believed to be revealed to Moses on Sinai. The Written Torah (called *Torah shebikhtav*) is comprised of the Five Books of Moses; the Oral Torah (called *Torah sheba'peh*) was later codified as the Mishna and Talmud, and provides authorized commentary to the Written Torah. Often the words of the prophets (*nevi'im*) and writings (*ketuvim*) are included in this usage of the word Torah (though they are given a subordinate position in terms of revelatory authority). In this usage, then, Torah refers to what would be commonly called the Old Testament Scriptures (i.e., the Tanakh) as well as the Mishna/Talmud.



3. **Torah as Jewish Halakhah and Custom.** The previous definition of Torah does not really do justice to the traditional (and Rabbinical) view, which considers *Torah* to be not only the written and oral Torahs, the *nevi'im* and *ketuvim* (i.e., Nakh), but *also* the entire corpus of Jewish religious literature as expressed as the majority view of the rabbis and their legal decisions since the time of the destruction of the Second Temple (the period of the Sanhedrin and *zugot*) to the present. Collectively this view of Torah may be referred to as *halakhah*, a line of transmission from God to Moses (in the Torah), through the prophets, through the men of the Great Assembly, the Talmudic Rabbis and the Talmudic literature, down to several medieval codes and their responsa. In short, *halakhah* refers to the collective corpus of Jewish rabbinic law, custom and tradition. Halakhah also includes the rabbinical idea of *gezerah* - putting a "fence" around the commandments of the written Torah to ensure compliance with the mitzvot.

Interestingly enough, Jewish tradition seems to go two ways with this idea of Torah as halakhah. On the one hand, it tends to enumerate the various commandments of the Scriptures and engages in various *halakhic* (legal) discussions regarding the meaning and application of case law, and on the other hand it tends to distill the various commandments to more general principles that are fewer and fewer in number. For example, in *Makkot 23b-24a* the discussion goes from an enumeration of the 613 commandments identified in the Torah, to David's reduction of the number to 11 (Psalm 15), to Isaiah's reduction of the number to six (Isaiah 33:15-16); to Micah's reduction to three (Micah 6:8); to Isaiah's further reduction to two (Isaiah 56:1); to the one essential commandment by Habakuk ("But the righteous shall live by his faith" - Habakuk 2:4). It is enlightening to see how Rabbi Sha'ul (Paul) likewise distilled the various *mitzvot* to this same principle of faith (Romans 1:17, Galatians 3:11, Hebrews 10:38).

4. **Torah as Divine Instruction.** The word *Torah* comes from the root word (*yod-resh-hey*) meaning "to shoot an arrow" or "to hit the mark."

In its noun form, the word basically means the "direction" or "instruction" of mankind regarding the revelation of God's will. Understood in this most general way, Torah obviously predates the giving of the Sinatic law to Israel, as the following examples demonstrate:

- Adam and Eve were instructed that there was only one God whom they were to obey in covenant relationship (Gen 2:16-17). This is essentially the first commandment ("I am the LORD your God.")
- After their sin (which was essentially a violation of the second commandment, "you shall have no other gods beside me"), Adam and Eve were graciously given the promise of redemption (Gen 3:15) and the law of blood sacrifice (Gen 3:21).

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- Both Cain and Abel brought offerings to the LORD, but Abel's was regarded as a right (i.e., blood) sacrifice whereas Cain's was rejected (Gen 4:3-7).
- After murdering his brother, Cain was given the sixth commandment: "Thou shalt not kill" (Gen 4:10-16).
- Enoch was such a godly man that he "was not" in his end. How is it that one man is godly and another is not if there is no instruction from the LORD?
- Seth and his son Enosh began to call upon the Name of the Lord (Gen 4:26), and their descendant Noah "walked with God" (Gen 6:9).
- The Great Flood was a judgment from the LORD against worldwide apostasy and chronic idolatry (Gen 7).
- Noah offered sacrifices to the LORD and distinguished between the "clean" and the "unclean" animals (Gen 7, 8:20). God furthermore gave him laws regarding not eating blood (Gen 9:4) and instituted human governmental authority for capital offenses (Gen 9:6-7).
- The idolatrous humanism of ancient Babel was judged by the LORD (Gen 11)
- The covenant God made with Abraham was unilateral in the sense that only God participated in the covenant ritual (Gen 15:9-21); Abraham's response of faith was counted to him as *tzedakah* (righteousness).
- Of Abraham it is written that "he obeyed (*shema*) my voice and kept (*shamar*) my charge, my commandments (*mitzvot*), my statutes (*chukkim*), and my laws (*torah*) [Genesis 26:5].
- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all offered acceptable sacrifices to the LORD, thus implying an understanding of the laws of sacrifice.
- Moses obeyed the commandments of the LORD and went into Egypt to deliver the Israelites from bondage *before* he was given the lawcode on Mount Sinai.

In this most general sense of the term, then, Torah can be understood as simply as *instruction* about how to live rightly before God and with men. Presupposed in this definition is the establishment of a *covenant* between God and mankind wherein the scope of what constitutes Torah (i.e., the terms of the agreement) may be understood.

In this regard, the eight covenants revealed in Scripture (the Edenic, the Adamic, the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Palestinian, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New Covenant) each present a different (though not mutually exclusive) set of laws regarding how to be rightly related to God. Moreover each of the covenants is ultimately predicated upon the promise of the coming Seed who would remove the *kelalah* (curse) upon mankind and restore the children of man back to God.



Questioning the Dogma of Maimonides

The immutability of the Torah of Moses (or the covenant given on Sinai) is one of the most basic principles of the Jewish faith. Indeed, the Rambam's ninth principle (*Mishneh Torah*) is the belief that the lawcode given to Moses on Mount Sinai is entirely unchangeable and never to be superceded by another form of Torah: *Ani ma'amim be'emunah sh'leimah, shezot ha-Torah lo t'hei muchlefet velo t'hei Torah acheret me'eit ha-borei yitbarakh sh'mo* ("I believe with complete faith that the Torah will not be changed nor will there be another Torah from the Creator, blessed be His Name"). Even today this faith in the eternity of the Torah is expressed each time the Keriat Torah ceremony is completed at the synagogue, when the Torah scroll is held up and the people recite:

וְזֹאת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר-שָׂם מֹשֶׁה לְפָנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

"And this is the Torah which Moses set before the children of Israel" (Deut 4:44)

When this statement is made, the claim is being made that the scroll being held up before the congregation is entirely identical with the Torah that Moses himself received while upon Mount Sinai thousands of years ago. As such, this response is a sort of "vote of confidence" in the work of the *soferim* (scribes) and their work in preserving the Torah scrolls throughout the centuries.

Textual Changes by the Soferim

However, as a matter of historical fact the original script of the Torah was not the square script (called *ketav ashurit*) that has been preserved over the centuries by the *soferim* (scribes), but rather *ketav Ivri* - an earlier script that resembles ancient Phoenician. This statement is born out not only by qualified paleo-linguists, but by Jewish authority itself, since the Talmud (*Sanhedrin 21b*) itself says:

Mar Zutra or, as some say, Mar 'Ukba said: Originally the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew characters and in the sacred [Hebrew] language; later, in the times of Ezra, the Torah was given in Ashshurith script and Aramaic language. [Finally], they selected for Israel the Ashshurith script and Hebrew language, leaving the Hebrew characters and Aramaic language for the hedyototh. Who are meant by the 'hedyototh'? — R. Hisda answers: The Cutheans (i.e., Samaritans). And what is meant by Hebrew characters? — R. Hisda said: The libuna'ah script.

The "they" in this statement refers to the men of the Great Assembly, and in particular, Ezra the Scribe who *transliterated* the ancient Hebrew script into the Aramaic script of his day. Ezra did this to distance the Jewish people from the Samaritan transplants living in Israel after the return of the Jewish captives in Babylon (the Samaritan Torah still uses the older *ketav Ivri* and is extant today).



Now the question that is begging to be asked is simply this: By what authority did Ezra translate the Torah into *ketav Ashurit*, especially since Moses himself in the Torah stated: “You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you” (Deut 4:2)? There is no one-to-one correspondence between the two scripts, either in morphology or in phonetics, so is it not obvious that the transliteration of Ezra represents a real change in the Torah itself?

Moreover, the calligraphic embellishments of the *soferim*, most notably the *tagin* (or “crowns”) attached to seven of the 22 letters of the Ashurit script, are hereby made suspect, as are the mystical speculations entertained by various Kabbalists regarding them.

Note: Jesus endorsed both the threefold division of the Tanakh (Luke 24:44) and the authority of the Torah (Matt 5:17-18) and thereby sanctioned the Ezratic transliteration, and therefore Christians do not need to be disturbed about the authority of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament....

Changes to the Torah in Olam Haba

The sages believe in two *olams* (worlds): A this-world (*olam hazeh*) and a next-world (*olam haba*), with a Messianic 'transitional' world somewhere at the intersection (each *olam* reflects an 'indefinite' duration of time, but not an 'infinite duration'). The question that needs to be considered is whether the Torah, understood here to refer to the various *mitzvot* found in the writings of Moses, will abide as “everlasting” commandments, or whether the conditions of the world will be so transformed that they will no longer apply.

Some Jewish sages (such as Rebbe Schneerson) have said that in *yemot HaMashiach* (the days of the Messiah) the Torah will be more strictly obeyed, but in the *olam haba* - the world to come - “the mitzvot will be nullified,” which means that they will no longer be needed, since they will be “as the light of a candle is nullified in the blaze of the noonday sun.” In other words, in heaven itself there will be no litany of mitzvot that will be scrupulously adhered to, since the Substance of that which the commandments aimed will be fully manifest. As Schneerson said, “In the world to come, the mitzvot will be annulled. No longer will the laws of the Torah be the stuff of a divine relationship with an extrinsic reality. Rather, they will be fully and unequivocally realized in a world that is no longer separate from its source, unhindered by “laws” that define a finite and mortal world.”



Contrary to the dogma of Rambam, not all of the Jewish sages agree in the dictation theory of the Torah as an immutable document:

“We absolutely do not admit that which Maimonides laid down, that the entire Torah will not change, for there is no decisive proof for this -- neither from reason and logic nor from the Bible. Verily, the Sages tell us that the Holy One will give a new Torah in the future. If our King should wish to change the Torah, or exchange it for another, whatever the King wishes, whether it be to descend on Mount Sinai or another of the mighty mountains, or even a valley, there to appear a second time before the eyes of all the living, we would be the first to do His will, whatever be His bidding.

R' Abraham Hayim Viterbo (quoted from Marc Shapiro. Littman:2004, in The Littman Library of Jewish Civilization)

Changes to the Torah in the Messianic Age

In *yemot hamashiach* - the days of the Messiah - many Jewish sages have argued that the Torah will undergo change. For example, a passage in *Vayikra rabah* 9:7 states: 'In the Time to Come all sacrifices will be annulled, but that of thanksgiving will not be annulled.' This passage is cited by numerous authorities, including Nahmanides in his commentary on Leviticus 23:17. It appears to be a reference to the messianic era and not the time of resurrection, since the proof text cited from Jeremiah 33.11 is a messianic prophecy.

In Leviticus Rabba, it is stated that all sacrifices and prayers will be abolished in the Messianic days, except for the thanks offerings and thanksgiving prayers, because, as Isaac ben Judah Abrabanel (1437- 1508) explains, in those happy days there will be no Evil Inclination and thus no sin, so that no offerings or prayers to atone for transgressions will be needed. Of course, Leviticus Rabba was written in the fifth century, that is, about four hundred years after the destruction of the Temple and the cessation of the sacrificial ritual, which made it relatively easy for the authors to contemplate such a contingency."



Changes to the Torah in Olam HazeH

But even in this age, called *olam hazeH*, we find evidence that Torah is not as immutable and unchanging as Rambam and the Rabbinic tradition would maintain. For it is instructive to consider how Moses himself changed Torah during his own lifetime when he first instructed *b'nei Israel* to eat the Passover in their individual homes (Exodus 12) but later commemorated its observance "at the place that the LORD will choose, to make his name dwell there" (Deut 16:2). Later still the Torah was modified to allow meat to be eaten that was not slaughtered at the sanctuary as a sacrificial act (compare Leviticus 17 and Deut 12:15-16). This is also seen in the various laws concerning the gathering of the manna were annulled after the Israelites took possession of the land. In short, because historical circumstances had changed, some of the older laws given to the wilderness generation were annulled and newer ones created.

Jesus also indicated that Moses had changed the meaning of God's Torah in *olam hazeH*. For instance, consider this verse from Matthew's gospel:

They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?" He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, *but from the beginning it was not so.*" (emphasis mine) (Matt 19:7-8)

These words of the Mashiah clearly imply that Moses was permitted to command things that were not originally from the LORD "on account of the hardness of men's hearts." That is, God permitted Moses to institute "laws" regarding divorce (the *get*) because He knew that the people would act contrary to His perfect will.

Consider also how King David appears to have transcended (i.e., changed) the literal words of Torah in light of Hashem's covenant with him - and the subsequent revelation that came to him as Hashem's prophet. For indeed David did add to the words of Moses by devising and planning the Bet Hamidash - the holy Temple - that would be constructed by his son Solomon in Jerusalem:

Then David gave Solomon his son the plan of the vestibule of the temple, and of its houses, its treasuries, its upper rooms, and its inner chambers, and of the room for the mercy seat; and the plan of all that he had in mind for the courts of the house of the LORD...for the divisions of the priests and of the Levites, and all the work of the service in the house of the LORD; for all the vessels for the service in the house of the LORD...also his plan for the golden chariot of the cherubim that spread their wings and covered the ark of the covenant of the LORD. *All this he made clear to me in writing from the hand of the LORD, all the work to be done according to the plan.*



Then David said to Solomon his son, "Be strong and courageous and do it. Do not be afraid and do not be dismayed, for the LORD God, even my God, is with you. He will not leave you or forsake you, until all the work for the service of the house of the LORD is finished.

1 Chronicles 28:11-20

What's going on here? It is clear that King David was changing the Torah of Moses from the mishkan-centered sanctuary, to a temple-centered sanctuary. Moreover, he was also changing the duties of the *kohanim* (priests) and their age requirements (plus adding a new schedule of service for them). Note especially that the text from 1 Chronicles states that these changes to the pattern explicitly commanded to Moses were sanctioned as being the result of a revelation from the LORD Himself.

הַכֹּל בְּכַתָּב מִיַּד יְהוָה עָלַי הַשְּׂכִיל כָּל מְלָאכֹת הַתְּבִנָּה

All this that the LORD made me understand by His hand on me, I give you in writing -- the plan of all the works (1 Chronicles 28:19)

Someone might argue that this was not really a change of Torah, but then we will need to rather loosely construe the meaning of the term "change" here, since David's modifications of the sacred pattern that Moses was instructed to follow touched on every aspect of the *mishkan* and its parts, including the role of the very priesthood and its activities. In fact, the translation of the Mosaic formulation of the mishkan to the Bet Hamikdash amounted to an enormous change in the life of the Jewish people, and was only justified if Melech David was truly and divinely authorized to transcend the clear instructions given by the Lord in the Torah of Moses.

Furthermore, according to the rabbis themselves the Torah was (somehow) changed the Second Temple was destroyed in the year 70 AD and the sacrificial system was abandoned. But does this not affect the meaning of Torah, especially when you consider that *nearly half* of the 613 commandments of the written Torah are found in the book of Leviticus, the *Torat Kohanim* (laws of the priests), and much of the writing found in the Talmud is based upon it? It is only by means of rabbinical reinterpretation (i.e., change) of the Torah that Judaism - as a non-Temple-based system - could continue to exist in the world, despite the teaching of Yohanan ben Zakkai, the Jewish sage of the first century, who is credited with the dogma that animal sacrifices could be replaced with prayer and acts of lovingkindness:

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai once was walking with his disciple Rabbi Joshua near Jerusalem after the destruction of the Temple. Rabbi Joshua looked at the Temple ruins and said: "Alas for us! The place which atoned for the sins of the people Israel through the ritual of animal sacrifice lies in ruins!" Then Rabban



Yohanan ben Zakkai spoke to him these words of comfort: "Be not grieved, my son. There is another way of gaining atonement even though the Temple is destroyed. We must now gain atonement through deeds of lovingkindness." For it is written, "Lovingkindness I desire, not sacrifice" (Hosea 6:6). *Siddur Sim Shalom*, (Avot DeRabbi Natan) Jules Harlow, ed. (New York: United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism)

Indeed, this "Judaism without the Temple" *bypassed nearly half of the explicit commandments given by God to Moses in the Torah* while simultaneously establishing rabbinic Judaism as the interpretive authority of the Torah for Jews throughout the Diaspora. Surely this change in authority indicates a change in the Torah!

Brit Chadashah and Torah

After Jesus came to ransom Israel from her sins (as *Mashiach ben Yosef* - the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53), the Second Temple was destroyed and the Jewish people began to suffer their nearly 2,000 year long Galut (exile). Various exegetical techniques were subsequently employed by the rabbinical tradition to establish a form of Jewish worship that did not require the presence of an earthly Temple, and Torah became a matter of inward observance, with prayer substituted for animal sacrifices, etc.

Messianic Jewish believers instead understood that the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-33) was beginning to be fulfilled, an "already-not-yet" state of affairs that awaits complete eschatological fulfillment when Jesus returns as *Mashiach ben David* to establish His kingdom in Jerusalem. Meanwhile the inner meaning of the Torah, distilled as the commandment to love God and one another by the indwelling power of the *Ruach Hakodesh* (the Holy Spirit), becomes the guiding principle of the life of faith.

The book of Hebrews provides the main New Testament commentary on this "new" covenant, quoting directly from the Jeremiah reference to establish its application through the work of the *Mashiach* on our behalf (Hebrews 8:8-12). Interestingly the word "new" used is *kainos* in Greek, a word that does not mean "renewed" but rather "unheard of," "entirely new," or "unique." Now the words of the covenant are one thing, and the covenant itself is another. The new covenant changes the way of obtaining justification and righteousness before the LORD (through faith in the grace of God as demonstrated in the offering of His Son as our *kapparah* (atonement) for sin), but it does not change the inner meaning of the Torah to love the Lord and to love one another (as these examples from the new covenant writings will attest):

Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, "You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet," and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law. (Romans 13:8-10)



For the whole law is fulfilled in one word: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Galatians 5:14)

For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. (1 John 3:11)

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Matt 7:12)

And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?" And he said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets." (Matt 22:40)

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" And he answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." (Luke 10: 26-29)

Conclusion

To ask the question whether "Torah" can be changed is obviously a bit more complex than we first might suppose. First we need to define what is meant by the word "Torah," and then we need to consider if *that* meaning of Torah is subject to change.

If Torah is understood to generally refer to the "moral law" as an imperative of human reason to live according to duty, it is obvious that such a universal principle is not subject to change, but it also immediately produces a sense of alienation within our hearts, since our moral condition is thereby revealed. The voice of conscience is a witness that we all violate the standards of decency and justice on a regular basis. We all have an intuitive sense of moral "cause and effect" and yet we either live in conscious despair of our lives, or we (irrationally) hope to be exceptions to the verdict of the law. However, just as it is impossible for the sum of 2+2 to not equal 4, so there are no valid exceptions to the duty to obey the perfect and moral law of God (note, however, that so understood the law is a "mirror" only if we choose to look "into it" (as opposed to looking "at it"). In other words, it takes personal integrity and courage to look at yourself and to confess your alienation and guilt before the moral law. By so doing, however, a hope is introduced for divine grace and deliverance, an "alien" righteousness that can be obtained by faith).



If Torah is restricted to mean the literal, written words of Moses (as preserved in the *Sefrei Torah* of the Jewish scribal arts), then it is evident that it has indeed physically changed, since (textual criticism of the Masora aside), we know that the original script of the Torah (*ketav ivri*) was later changed to ketav Ashurit by Ezra and the men of the Great Assembly sometime after the Babylonian exile. This statement is born out not only by qualified paleo-linguists, but also by the Talmud itself (*Sanhedrin 21b*).

On the other hand, if Torah is meant to mean not just the written words of Moses, but also the entire tradition of the rabbis over the centuries (i.e., *halakhah*), then likewise we understand that it has been subject to various changes in its historical interpretation and praxis over the centuries. This can be seen most dramatically in the radical departure from the writings of Moses regarding the role of a Temple-based Judaism as advocated by Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai and the Rabbinic traditions, since nearly half of the explicit commandments of the Torah are now considered “changed” in their status for the Jews of the Diaspora. These changes in the Torah are today seen in the various interpretations of Jewish hashkafah (theology) and in the various liturgical practices of the Reconstructionist, Reform, Conservative, and Orthodox schools of Jewish thought.

Indeed, even the Jewish sages themselves admit that the Torah and its observance are subject to the various *olamim* (ages) that are in effect. In *Olam Haba* (the world to come), the mitzvot “will be nullified” (Schneerson), since they will be about as useful as lighting a candle to see inside a room suffused with direct sunlight. In *yemot hamashiach* (the days of the Messiah), the sacrifices to be offered in the (fourth) Temple will be thanksgiving offerings (rather than *chatat* (sin) or *asham* (guilt) offerings). And perhaps more controversially, even in *Olam Haze* (this world) we see how Moses changed some of the laws he wrote previously to accommodate newer conditions for the people, and King David later transcended the explicit laws concerning the *mishkan* by additional revelation from the Lord regarding the *Bet Hamikdash* (Temple).

Since the word Torah itself means “instruction” or “direction” about how to live rightly before God and man, it should not be surprising to see how it can change in relation to the covenants the God has established with mankind and with Israel. If one divine agreement is made but later is transcended, for example, then the terms of the later agreement (i.e., the instructions about how to be rightly related to God in light of that agreement) will likewise change. This is admitted, for example, in the case of the additional laws given to Israel in the covenant that Moses mediated with God at Mount Sinai, which was later ratified by the “sprinkling of blood” and the eating of the covenant meal by the 70 elders. Surely these added laws given to the nation went beyond those given to Noah, and yet they are both considered divine instructions about how to be rightly related to God.

In the case of *brit chadashah*, the New Covenant, the various civil, ceremonial, and dietary laws of the writings of Moses are made obsolete, but the inner meaning of the moral law’s commandments are clearly retained. This is also in accord with various



traditions of the Jewish sages, who distilled the 613 laws of the Torah down to the rule of faith (“the just shall live by faith”).

The New Covenant is based on the “new altar” of God’s sacrificial love for us that transcends both the “karma” of the moral law (and the *midah k'neged midah* (measure for measure) of moral reasoning) by removing the *kelalah* (curse) of the sinner by the *chen* (grace) and *chesed* (love) of God. However, those who choose to serve under the (Levitical) tabernacle have no access to this altar (Hebrews 13:10), since it is paradoxically restricted to those who willingly confess their inability to keep the moral law of the Lord (with its ritual practices expressed in the Levitical system), and who therefore appeal to the God of Israel for everlasting *kapparah* (atonement) through the sacrificial death of Jesus as the “Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Indeed, Jesus alone satisfies the moral requirements of the Torah, and as the “Second Adam” represents us before God as an unfailed son and Inheritor of paradise. All who trust in Him as both their sacrifice for sin and their *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) of the better covenant are graciously declared *tzaddik* by God. Indeed, *The just shall live by faith*.

The word “Torah” should not, therefore, be exclusively linked to the (conditional) covenant made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai, since the deeper covenantal purpose of God has always been to remove the *kelalah* (curse) from humanity through the sacrifice of His Son as the “Lamb of God slain before the foundation of the world” (Rev. 13:8):

וְהוּא הוּכָן מִקֶּדֶם טָרָם הַיּוֹסֵד אֶרֶץ וְנִגְלָה בְאַחֲרֵי־יָמֵינוּ לְמַעַנְכֶם

He (Jesus) was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the end of days for your sake (1 Peter 1:20)