

"And these are the laws which you shall set before them." (21:1)

What does it mean to place laws "*before them*"? *Rashi* explains that the *Torah* demands that its teachers transmit the law in its completeness, explain it lucidly, and clarify its underlying principles. This is required so that people can easily understand the laws and apply them properly. Literally, one is to place the laws "before them," as a table is set ready for a meal.

In an alternative explanation, *Rashi* comments that the phrase "before them" refers to Jewish judges. We are admonished to take our litigation only to a *bais din*, Jewish court, comprised of G-d fearing, *halachically* erudite *Torah* scholars. The emphasis is on then "*before them*," rather than on the "*place it*."

In a homiletic rendering of the *pasuk*, *Horav Moshe Swift, z.l.*, suggests that the concept of placing laws before them refers to more than mere presentation. It means to place *Torah* law before the Jewish People as an advance guard which defines and determines the "Jewishness" of the people. Contrary to the opinions of those who have strayed, the Jew does not make the law. Rather, the law molds and shapes the Jew. This fundamental Jewish philosophy emphasizes the centrality of the *Torah* in Jewish life. "Before them" means that the *Torah* existed before the Jews came on the scene and is constantly "before them" as they go through their life's endeavors. It paves the way of life for the Jew. The *Torah* is the basis of the Jew's dignity, as it shapes his character and leaves its imprimatur on his conduct. Essentially, the *Torah* fashions his entire life.

Horav Swift notes that the *Luchos* which Moshe received from Hashem were made of stone -- an earthly material. One would think that inasmuch as Moshe was in direct communication with the Divine author, he would have received the Almighty's communique engraved on a spiritual substance. Hashem was thereby teaching us a profound lesson. The law and the commandments were inscribed on an earthly material because they were intended to be a guide for **people**. In the same manner that stones can be consecrated, a table can become an altar, food can be elevated to a meal-offering, and a house can become a sanctuary. So, too, can children become holy by infusing them with *Torah* and *mitzvos*.