

# Lost Books

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

In this week's parsha we have the first of several poems the Children of Israel used to sing about their time in the desert. Some of them were clearly written down, along with others in a book called "The Book of the Battles of God." They do not make sense. The names they refer to (Chapter 21. Verse 14 etc.) sound like code. Of course, the Midrash and the commentators try to decipher the codes. But what became of the original book? Why was it lost? Unless it is another way of referring to the Torah.

And then there's a reference here to the Moshlim. Who were they? A Mashal is a parable, metaphor or proverb. As in King Solomon's Mishlei that we call Proverbs. But who were these people? Were they paid poets like there were professional mourners or counselors? Is it a reference to Bilaam the Magician who next week fills the Parsaha with his poems?

The fact is we have lost so much of the background, context and oral traditions that the Israelites had. Yes, we have the Tanach, the Bible, but clearly there was so much more that we have lost. Understanding documents of thousands of years ago is like stumbling in the dark. We may be able to decipher but can we know the intent? To think we can manage only with the written text of the Torah is like relying entirely on what words a person says without reading his expression or hearing his tone! This is why even if Christians and Karaite's have the same text as ours in their version of the Bible, we often understand it completely differently.

This is why we have always relied on the Oral Law, the Torah She Be'al Peh to give us background and context. Even if we have lost a lot, there is still so much that has been preserved.