

## RESPONSA LITERATURE

Like Midrash, Responsa literature does not refer to one specific book but rather to a certain process. We have seen how at various times the need arose to codify Jewish law, to summarize and consolidate. At the same time an opposing - yet complementary - phenomenon occurred: the process of Responsa.

Responsa, or in Hebrew, שאלות ותשובות (shaylot ve'teshuvot - questions and answers), refers to the letters sent back and forth between people regarding questions of halacha. This letter writing existed during the Talmudic period, but really took off in the Geonic age (between 750 - 1050). At this time, the Jewish people were widely dispersed in the Diaspora and sought the guidance of the Babylonian scholars who were perceived as the most knowledgeable and authoritative. The questions included matters of practical observance, theological and ideological questions, and requests for explanations of Talmudic passages. Some of the responsa have been gathered into collections. Responsa continued to be written throughout the generations as new problems, issues and questions arose in new historical circumstances. The responsa of each period are actually an excellent source from which one can learn about the history of each period, as they were written spontaneously, not written as 'history', and reflect the issues of everyday life. Each generation's responsa reflect its character. We see in eighteenth and nineteenth century responsa many questions regarding the new realities ushered in with emancipation, questions regarding scientific discoveries and modern technology, as well as questions regarding the newly formed Reform and Zionist movements. Among other issues, twentieth century responsa have dealt with several totally new realities: questions which arose out of life in the Holocaust, and in a different sphere altogether, questions which arose out of trying to apply Jewish law to the newly formed Jewish state. The establishment of the State of Israel brought with it questions of Sabbath and holiday observance, agricultural issues, questions of immigration of intermarried Jews or Jews from different countries with different religious customs, and many more.



The Reform movement has put out quite a lot of Responsa literature which presents its perspective. We include here some examples of questions people in the Reform movement have dealt with in this way.

Three questions follow accompanied by their answer/ ruling. Try to think about how you might respond, before you read the response. How would any of the following respond to this question: the movement, your synagogue community, your friends?

**Question:** A member of my congregation has suggested that we conduct services on Friday night, even if attendance - counting men and women - is less than the customary Minyan of ten. Is it permissible to conduct a regular service in a Temple with fewer than ten persons present? (1936)

**Answer:** Whereas the general rule is to require a Minyan, it was the practice in Palestine in olden times to be satisfied with six or seven people. While every attempt should be made to have a full Minyan, the importance of regular services in the Temple is such as to conduct them even when there are fewer than ten people present in accordance with the above mentioned old Palestinian custom.

