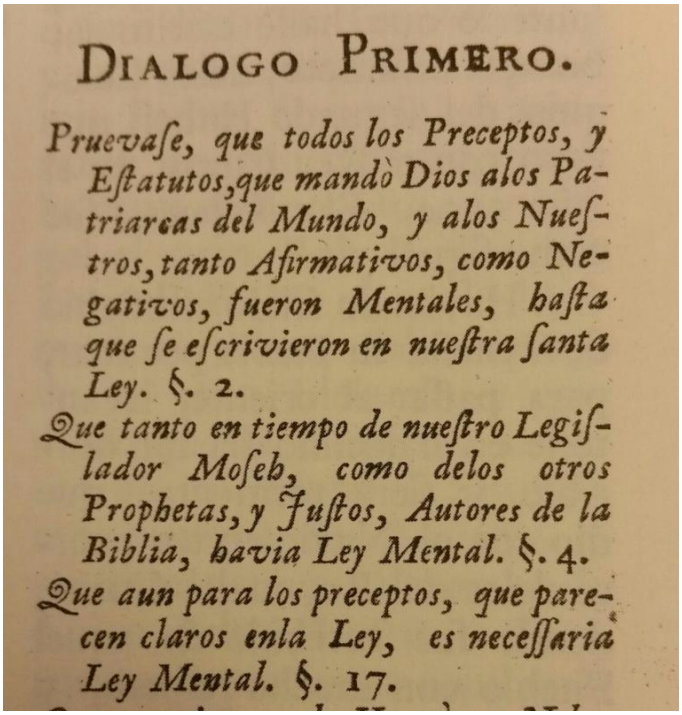
8th PRINCIPLE: Presentation of the book Mate Dan, by rabbi David Nieto

The subject of the Oral Tora was explained by many of our sages. One of them was Maimonides, who expanded on this theme in his Mishne Tora and in his commentary on the Mishna. It is this last text which we are using to analyze the different categories of laws including in the Oral Tora.
However, even if we would write for two or three weeks on this issue, I believe that it will not be enough for the reader who really wants to learn about the Oral Tora. That's why today I'm presenting a book, which unfortunately is little known, called MATE DAN, written by Rabbi David Nieto (Venice, 1654 – London, 1728). MATE DAN was written in a bilingual edition Hebrew and Spanish. What is the book MATE DAN about? This is a book about the nature of the Oral Tora, which Rabbi Nieto, following the Sephardic custom, called in Spanish "Mental Law". The book MATE DAN was virtually impossible to get, even in special libraries, up to 3 or 4 years ago. Nowadays, we have the great merit of having access to this book online public. And this is the link to find and download Mate Dan in the original bilingual edition, London, 1714.
Mate Dan was recently reprinted by "The Spanish and Portuguese Congregation of London" and "Mechon Haktav". I have the book, which has an impecable English translation done by Louis and Raphael Loewe, Jerusalem, 5768. (I have the English edition "The Rod of Judgement" which was given to me as a gift by my friend Rabbi Abraham Levy, when visiting London. I don't really know if and where this English edition can be purchased…)
Rabbi Nieto wrote this book for the BENE ANUSIM of his time, that is, for those Jews that after the Inquisition and the Expulsion from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1496), lived as Christians for generations, and now they were looking into their roots to start again living as Jews in Amsterdam, London and the Americas. These descendants of ANUSIM knew the Bible because of their Christian past, but almost completely ignored the Oral Tora and its principles.
Mate Dan is divided into five chapters, which the author calls "dialogues", because Mate Dan was deliberately written as imaginary dialogues between a rabbi, the Hakham, and a Gentile king whom the author calls "the Cuzari" the king of the Khazars, who converted to Judaism in the 8th century. Rabbi Nieto took the model of the famous book "The Cuzari" by Rabbi Yehuda Halevi (1075-1141). Because, as he himself explained, *"In the Cuzari the author demonstrated the truth of the Written Tora, and in this book, which will be also called 'the second Cuzari' I will prove the truth of the Oral Tora."*
Let us review this book, chapter by chapter.
1. In the first dialogue Rabbi Nieto shows that the Oral Tora existed even before the written Tora. And that an oral tradition is always necessary to understand a written law.
2. In the second dialogue, in my opinion the most original of all, Rabbi Nieto demonstrates with logical arguments and using principles of psychology, that the Oral Tora could not be "fabricated" by the Rabbis, it was transmitted to them by previous generations.
3. The third chapter talks about the different categories of laws including in the Oral Tora, which is the subject we started to analyze last week. It also explains on what kind of laws exists consensus between the rabbis and in what not.
4. The fourth chapter demonstrates that our Sages of the Mishna and the Gemara (□"□□) had very deep knowledge of sciences, like medicine, physics, biology, etc.
5. The fifth chapter deals almost exclusively with the Hebrew calendar. Knowledge of the Jewish calendar involves a very profound knowledge of sciences related to astronomy, physics, mathematics, etc. This issue is very complex because in the Hebrew calendar combines the lunar calendar with the solar, and for this combination to be possible, one must know very very precisely (a number followed by 4 or 5 decimals) the exact duration of the moon and sun cycles. To demonstrate that this data is not easy to get, Rabbi Nieto brings the example of Pope Gregory XIII, who in 1582 had to adjust the Christian calendar: that year the calendar jumped from October 4th to October 15th in 24 hours, because they did not have an accurate information about the solar cycle. This is perhaps the most technical chapter of the book, and I think that is a must reading for those who want to know about the details of our lunar-solar calendar, and to understand the role that the Oral Tora plays in this and in many other cases.
Maté Dan should be a required reading for any student who wants to study Mishna and Gemara, or for any Yehudi who wants to know the basic principles of orthodox rabbinical Judaism.

FOR THOSE of YOU WHO WOULD DARE TO READ MATE DAN IN SPANISH
I think the modern Spanish reader will not have major problems in understanding the content of this book, as the vocabulary, although with a style that today is outdated, it is very similar to ours.
From my own experience I think the only difficulty a beginner reader will have is to identify the letter “S” when it is written at the beginning or in the middle of the word. In old Spanish (or English) the “S” in this position was “taller” than today, and the modern reader often confuses between the “S” and the “F”.
Beyond that, I think, it is very easy to read this book, and the advantages of studying a book of this category and this authority in the original are, I think, priceless.
To further facilitate the reading in Spanish, I will copy a short paragraph of the book and re-write it in a more modern version.



DIALOGO PRIMERO.

Pruevaſe, que todos los Preceptos, y Eſtatutos, que mandò Dios alos Patriarcas del Mundo, y alos Nueſtros, tanto Afirmativos, como Negativos, fueron Mentales, haſta que ſe eſcrivieron en nueſtra ſanta Ley. §. 2.

Que tanto en tiempo de nueſtro Legiſlador Moſeh, como delos otros Prophetas, y Juſtos, Autores de la Biblia, havia Ley Mental. §. 4.

Que aun para los preceptos, que parecen claros enla Ley, es neceſſaria Ley Mental. §. 17.

Pruebase que todos los preceptos y estatutos que mando Dios a los patriarcas del Mundo y a los Nuestros, tanto afirmativos como negativos fueron mentales, hasta que se escribieron en nuestra santa ley. Página 2
Que tanto en tiempo de nuestro legislador Moshe, como de los otros Profetas y Justos, autores de la Biblia, había Ley mental. Página 4
Que aun para los preceptos que parecen claros en la ley, es necesaria Ley mental. Página 17

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