



Ask The Rabbi

Researched at Ohr Somayach, Jerusalem

This Issue Contains:

1. Historical Verification of The Torah
2. Yiddle Riddle



C E. K. from Los Angeles, California <kill@worldnet.att.net> wrote:

Dear Rabbi,

In Ask the Rabbi #154 (Parashat Beha'alotcha) Ohr Somayach wrote the following:

"Our tradition is a faithful, unbroken chain dating back to Sinai. (The evidence for this is a topic for another discussion.)"

I have often debated this with my learned, pious Talmudic scholar of a cousin. The discussion usually starts with me saying: "How can you rely on information 'passed down' orally, when it's impossible to even get a phone message communicated correctly?" My cousin usually replies that the information is 'correctly passed down' because the entire known world witnessed the event, or made the law, what have you, and thus everything witnessed is supported. Myself, I still am not convinced. So here's one vote for opening of the discussion of unbroken chains of oral tradition. As usual, thanks so much for your service, and keep up the good work. Shalom

Dear C. E. K.,

Because this is such a broad subject, I can only offer a partial answer in this short column. There won't even be room for a joke (but keep your eyes open for a pun or two).

First let's start with a fact everybody agrees upon: There exists today a group of people, the Jews, who claim the following: "3,300 years ago, millions of our ancestors experienced what they felt was G-d talking to them. We, their descendants, have an unbroken chain passed on through the millennia that tells us two things: (1) That the event took place, and (2) The contents of the message." The Jews are the only people to ever make such a claim.

Let's first look at point number one.

How can you explain a group of people who claim to be descendants of millions of people experiencing the splitting of the sea, the manna and the Revelation at Sinai? How did the first generation start believing it? A charismatic leader? A slowly evolving story? Mass hypnosis?

Could a leader rewrite the oral history of a people and get them to believe it happened to their own ancestors? Imagine Napoleon telling the French "In the year 750, G-d split the Rhine river for your ancestors, commanded them a set of all-encompassing laws, and they passed that experience down from generation to generation." The people would say "What? Dad never told us that! Hey, Grandma, did your grandparents ever tell you about this?" Remember: We not only believe in the Exodus and Sinai, we also believe that we have an unbroken chain back to those events.

Or the slowly evolving story: The people ate sap from bushes that grew in the desert, but used to say "G-d sent us food from heaven" because they wanted to express the idea that all nature comes from 'Above.' One day, Johnny comes home from kindergarten and says "Dad, the teacher told us that food fell from the sky." The father, reading a newspaper, grunts "Uh huh," and Johnny grows up with a misconception. Eventually, Johnny's misconception becomes the predominant belief. Slightly absurd. And What about Sinai? Was it really a volcano that 'grew' to become a mass prophecy of 613 commandments that we all agree upon?

Mass hypnosis? Martians? Now we come to a second problem. No matter what theory you concoct to imagine how such a belief got started, you must answer the following question: Why are we the only ones in history ever to make such a claim. Why, indeed, didn't Napoleon create such a belief? Why didn't Pharaoh or Hammurabi, Paul or Mohammed, Alexander or Julius, Lenin or Mao? They all could have 'propheted' greatly. No people, clan or country across the globe at any time in recorded history ever claimed that G-d convened their nation and spoke to them. Except us. Why?

Is it that the Jews were simply the most ignorant, superstitious, stupid and gullible people ever to walk the face of the earth? But then, having accepted this belief, they became the most scholarly, unyielding, skeptical people in the world, earning the title 'People of the Book,' surviving the ideological onslaughts of Christianity and Islam, giving their lives to pass on this belief, becoming a 'light to the nations' and spreading morality and monotheism to all humanity?

The Torah itself predicts that no one else in history will ever make a similar claim: "Inquire into the earliest days, the past, from the day G-d created people on the earth, and from one end of the universe to the other: Was there ever such a great thing as this, or was there ever even heard a claim like it? Did a nation ever hear the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of the fire as you heard, and live (to tell about it)? Or did G-d ever attempt to come and take a nation out from the midst of another nation with miracles, signs, wonders, and with open expressions of Divine might, and with great awe, like all that Hashem your G-d did for you in Egypt in front of your eyes? (Deuteronomy 4:32-34)

Now, how do we know the events and laws were transmitted faithfully? Well, we see Jewish communities dispersed across the globe for millennia: Europe, North Africa, Asia, Yemen, the Middle East. And although they had no central authority and limited means of communication, they all have the exact same Torah and the exact same oral explanations of it. (Obviously, there are some minor differences, but only the type you would expect. What's astounding is how few there are.) Even our Torah scrolls agree to the very last word.

Obviously, therefore, we have a remarkably faithful method of transmission. And the reason is also obvious: We never treated the Torah like a party-game or a 'telephone message.' Rather: "He heard it from his teacher 40 times." "One who studies a chapter 101 times is incomparable to one who studies it only 100 times" "His father left him hundreds of ships, hundreds of fields. but he never saw any of them — rather, he traveled from teacher to teacher and studied Torah." "Rabbi Akiva studied 40 years, Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakai studied 40 years..."

The Talmud is replete with examples of the Jewish People's total dedication to Torah study, sometimes suffering even torture and death for it. It's easy to see how such a nation kept the message intact.

Yiddle Riddle

Lev Seltzer <levs@virtual.co.il> asks:

What holiday addition to the 'grace after meals' is it that most people don't say and hope they never have to?

Answer next week...

If you have E-Mail and a question, you can submit it to Ask The Rabbi for possible inclusion in a future edition. Just write your question using your E-Mail program, set the subject to "Ask The Rabbi" and send it to ohr@virtual.co.il. Or use our form at <http://www.ohr.org.il/ask/page/ask.htm>. We can't include all questions submitted, but we do try to respond to everyone.

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