

CHAPTER 6, MISHNA 6: THE 48 WAYS: 22(C) ARE THE SAGES INFALLIBLE? PART III

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

Torah is greater than priesthood and kingship, for kingship is acquired with 30 qualities, priesthood is acquired with 24, whereas the Torah is acquired with 48 ways. These are: ... (22) trust in the Sages...

We're now up to Part III of a topic which many find one of the most difficult to accept about traditional Judaism -- trust in the Sages. The Torah seems to insist that we accept the words and decisions of the Sages to be on par with Scripture itself. We are told to "trust" them -- even beyond what we understand or agree with, even if "they tell you your right is your left and your left is your right" (see again Deuteronomy 17:8-13). The question we have been dealing is: Were the scholars of the Mishna and Talmud perfect? As great as they were, were they infallible? And theoretically if they did err, why should I (who somehow knows better) be bound by their decisions? Is what they wrote "Torah" per se -- or is it merely their own imperfect attempt to make sense of the same Scripture and tradition we can understand ourselves?

Let us briefly review the discussion up until now before we arrive at the final hurdle. As we explained, most of our tradition was given to us orally rather than in written form. Originally, only Scripture itself was recorded in writing. Most of the explanation -- the Oral Law -- was memorized and passed from teacher to student until the period of the Mishna and Talmud many centuries later. We explained that the Torah had to be in an oral state. The world is an ever-changing and developing place. New societies and situations arise; new technologies develop. There is no way a written work could tell man how every person should act in every possible situation from the Revelation till the End of Days. Rather, G-d gave us a **dynamic** Torah -- in a state we would have to explain and interpret ourselves. Man would have the task of understanding the Torah's eternal truths and applying them to myriads of people and situations. The Oral Law, as a living document, would bridge this gap. It would be the tool through which man would take G-d's infinite and absolute knowledge and apply it to the relativity of the physical world.

The key to this arrangement is that G-d placed the Torah in man's hands. Since we were entrusted with the mission of understanding the Torah and applying it to mankind, G-d would have to **give** us the Torah as well. Could G-d have us interpret and live by the Torah, yet fault us if we make mistakes? G-d gave us the tools for understanding the Torah, the various methods of interpretation, but at that point the Torah was no longer in the hands of Heaven. It was ours to understand and

apply. And if we would err -- after -- and only after -- our greatest efforts -- that is the only Torah G-d gave us, and it is the one we would have to live with. (In addition, the Torah provides guidelines for settling debates among the Sages -- primarily by following the majority opinion. It also provides criteria for defining who is a true and authentic scholar -- although that has not gone uncontested over the ages.)

We then introduced the final issue. We quoted the passage in the Talmud (Bava Metziah 59) in which during a debate a Heavenly voice spoke up in favor of R. Eliezer's opinion, yet the remaining scholars (who were in the majority) rejected it, stating that the Torah was no longer in Heaven's hands to decide. To this we asked that we might accept the Sages could make an occasional mistake and it would be binding upon us. But here the scholars *knew* they were wrong -- their understanding of the Torah was not in accordance with G-d's original intent. If so, how in the world could they have persisted?

We now arrive at an even deeper issue. The task of the sages of each generation is not merely to "figure out" what G-d meant in the Torah. And if they err, it is not just simply a matter that their mistakes can be forgiven. Rather, the task of the sages is infinitely more profound: to bring down the Torah from the heavens to the world of man and to fathom how their particular generation relates to the Torah. What does the Torah -- in its many possible interpretations -- mean to **us**, not what did it mean to G-d in heaven?

As we explained above, it is the task of man to bring G-d's Torah down to this world, applying its timeless principles to the relativity of man and the physical world. This is the charge of the greatest scholars of each generation. They must take the Torah from the level of the abstract to the down-to-earth. They must ascertain what the Torah means to **them**, and what particular messages and applications are most relevant to their times. This is because the Torah does not and cannot on its own reside in the world of man. The Torah is eternal and infinite; the world physical, finite and relativistic. It is the task of the sages to bridge this gap, to understand the Torah as they are best able, and to fathom what particular messages are most relevant to their day and age.

Thus, amazingly, when the sages rejected R. Eliezer's opinion, they were not interested in how G-d understood the Torah. The Torah was truly no longer in heaven. It was theirs. They realized they were the leading scholars of the age. They were entrusted with the task of bringing the Torah down to their generation. They were not studying the abstract law of heaven, but the practical law of man. And so, as great as R. Eliezer no doubt was, the sages decided to -- in fact they had to -- reject his opinion. If anything, he was **too** right. His arguments were perhaps too sharp and profound for them to grasp, and he touched upon a level of truth they simply could not comprehend. And they recognized that his opinion was just not one their generation was worthy of. (Based in part in thoughts heard from my teacher R. Moshe Eisemann.)

It should also be borne in mind that the Sages tell us there are many valid interpretations to the

Torah. The Midrash writes that there are 70 "faces" (facets) to the Torah (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:15). There are many valid ways of understanding each part of the Torah -- some more literal and some more profound -- but all valid according to the legitimate methods of Torah study handed to us. Thus, the Sages who contested R. Eliezer did not consider themselves "wrong". Perhaps their opinion was not the most profound in an absolute sense. But they correctly recognized that it was the only explanation their generation could fathom.

I'd like to illustrate this principle with yet another fascinating episode from the Talmud (Shabbos 12b). I recognize this topic is one of our most profound and to be honest, most difficult to explain. Hopefully another illustration will shed a little more light -- and then we'll call it a day.

The Sages of the Mishna forbade reading from the light of an oil lamp on the Sabbath for fear the reader will tilt the lamp to adjust the light (causing the fire to burn better on the Sabbath). R. Yishmael son of Elisha responded: "I will read and I will not tilt." He felt, no doubt rightly, that he was so cognizant of the Sabbath that it could never possibly slip his mind. He went ahead and ignored the decree and the inevitable occurred: he found himself tilting the lamp.

The simplest explanation of this incident is that one never really knows for sure and we can never be too sure of ourselves.

My teacher, R. Yochanan Zweig, however, saw a much deeper lesson. One person cannot disassociate himself from his generation. Just as the sages of a generation bring down the Torah according to their ability, they also recognize precisely how it applies to their generation. This is a part of their mission of applying the Torah. They define the reality of Torah for their day -- what precisely is the Torah their generation is privy to. If the Sages correctly see that their generation requires an extra safeguard for Torah observance, they are defining how their generation (and future generations) relate to Judaism -- in this case, to the Sabbath. The Sages of the Mishna saw that as a whole, their generation did not have the same awe of Sabbath that previous generations did. There was the need for an additional fence or decree. They had therefore defined their generation's relationship to the Sabbath. And that was now the Sabbath that existed for them. And so, no individual, no matter how great, could relate any differently.

We now have an inkling of the magnitude of the Sages' mission -- then and today. They see Torah, they define it, and they bring it to man and the world. Over the generations, our greatest leaders have seen the need for new concepts and new stresses within Judaism -- for Chassidus, the mussar (ethics) movement, better education for boys and girls, more emphasis on family harmony, etc. (Not, of course, that they introduced something foreign to Judaism, but the Sages saw need for new stresses or safeguards.) Each generation would then have its own unique approach to the Torah, and each would make its own contribution. And so, the Torah in all its wonder and eternity, would assume greater freshness, relevance and vitality in each and every generation.

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