

INCREDIBLY CREDIBLE!

by Rabbi Label Lam

And these are the laws that you should set before them. (Shemos 21:1)

The Torah cries out for explanation. There must, by definition, have been a concomitant corpus of information that accompanied the giving of the laws and that is what we call the "Oral Torah". Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch uses the analogy that the Written Torah is like the notes to a scientific lecture. Every jot and squiggle has significance. If properly understood it can awaken the actual lecture. The notes remain practically useless to someone who has not heard the lecture from a Master. The Oral Torah is the sum of the lecture. The Written Torah is a shorthand record. That is the premise with which we approach the study of the Talmud as the repository of the complete record of the full intent of the Torah of HASHEM!

In the spirit of the Mishne in Avos, "Know what to answer a heretical opinion" a question must be asked that is often asked. How can we rely on an oral Torah? The classic analogy that is used to challenge the validity of the Oral Law is the experience we have witnessed in the child's game, "broken telephone" or "Chinese whisper".

We all know how the game is played. One person says a nonsensical phrase into the ear of his neighbor. He repeats it to another and so it goes till the end of the chain. When the last person utters what he had heard from the person before him everyone has a good laugh. What started out as "she sells sea shells at the sea shore" ends up garbled as "Dead men tell no tales".

Does that not demonstrate how unreliable an oral tradition can be?! The message is fumbled before our very eyes in minutes. How can a larger body of knowledge expect to be kept whole over the course of centuries? There are three important distinctions between the child's game of broken telephone and our Oral Torah.

1) When the game of broken telephone is launched it is best begun with an unimportant phrase or word! The sillier the better! We want to see the message distorted! The Oral Torah is not only not nonsensical it breathes meaning into every molecule of our existence. When a mother remembers her children's medicine schedules or a doctor memorizes all of pharmacology or you and I recall our social security numbers it is only because it is of utmost importance to us that we get it right. This is no silly game! This is life!

2) When we play the game of broken telephone, the rule is you get maybe one chance to say the

word or phrase. If the person fails to hear it the first time he can declare "operator" and get one more whack at it! After that, you're on your own! Now when my Bar Mitzvah boy was approaching 13 years old I did not take him to the side and whisper into his ear Tefillin and the 30,000 details therein and after he declared "operator" I said it again. No! For years he watched me longingly until it was his turn. It is observable to the eye and acted out in a myriad of ways daily by millions of people. You see in action!

3) The game of broken telephone is a single snaking line of information. If something is distorted or lost it is gone forever. The Talmud describes how Moshe taught and reviewed with the sons of Aaron and then the 70 elders who taught the people and so forth until the hearts and minds of the entire Nation of Israel was irrigated with this information. It is like a rock landing in pond. The waves go out in neat concentric circles. As the rings of a tree each generation around that circle bears the torch of what came before. If you want to check, you can look backwards at the historic record or you can look around the circle. We have reliable transmitters, giants in every generation who knew all, and names going all the way back. Those that share the precise fingerprint of agreement around the circle have a live line from Mt. Sinai, not a broken telephone. **It's incredibly credible!** DvarTorah, Copyright © 2007 by Rabbi Label Lam and Torah.org.