

HORRIBLE HERESY

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

The heretics^[2] were claiming that Shavuot always falls on Sunday. R. Yochanan ben Zakkai said to them, "Fools! What is your source?" No one could answer him, except for one old man who taunted him and said, "Moshe Rabbenu loved the Jews. Knowing that Shavuot was but a single day, he arose and fixed it to always fall right after Shabbos, to give them two days of enjoyment." R. Yochanan ben Zakkai responded, "If so, why did he delay them in the wilderness for forty years?" The heretic answered, "With that you dismiss my argument?" R. Yochanan comes back, "Fool! Our perfect Torah should not be compared to your idle chatter!"^[3]

Our sympathies lie entirely with R. Yochanan ben Zakkai, but we should be somewhat puzzled by his choice of words, and by the heaping portion of vitriol that he dished out to his interlocutor. The heretic was as wrong as could be, but did he really deserve to be called a fool? If anything, the simple reading of the key words of the text that determines when the count of 50 days towards Shavuot should begin— *macharas ha-Shabbos* / on the morrow of the Sabbath^[4] - support the heretical view more easily than the traditional, halachic one!

Properly understood, the exchange between R. Yochanan and the heretic is not limited to calendaring Shavuot. It is really about the tension between full, traditional acceptance of the Torah and warped, "enlightened" ways of understanding it.

Torah satisfies the soul like nothing else – when it is accepted as a complete package. When it is sliced and diced, however – when people arrogate to themselves the right to determine which mitzvah they find attractive, and which they do not; when they accept the Written Torah as authoritative, but not the Oral Torah – then even the fraction that they embrace becomes to them an unbearable burden.

If the Written-Torah-only people could really offer an alternative that worked, we would view them on the basis of our faith alone as unfortunates, as lost souls. The facts are otherwise. They have no way of acting as literal devotees to a Divine text without some sort of interpretive tradition. The literalists do not relish in the least the prospect of turning a literal take of "an eye for an eye" as instruction to the court. While the Torah clearly states that the owner of an ox that has gored several times should be put to death, the heretics suddenly become uncomfortable with applying their literalist standard. Rejecting the Oral Law leaves them hopelessly exposed even in regard to the Written Law.

Determining the proper day to celebrate Shavuot illustrates the inadequacy of literalism in explaining Torah. As the gemara mentions further on, just which Shabbos did they suppose that the count towards Shavuot followed? There are fifty-two candidates in the course of the year!

The heretics would respond that this is patently not true. The Torah relates the count begins on the same day as the bringing of the Omer offering, marking the beginning of the barley harvest, and ends with Shavuot, at which time we offer two loaves of bread – presumably marking the beginning of the harvest of wheat. The Shabbos pointed to by the Torah must occur between those two events on the calendar, and begin a seven week period bridging those events. The number of possibilities is certainly not 52!

Thus, even without the *derashah* through which our *chachmei ha-Mesorah* determine that the count begins on the day after the first day of Pesach, the heretics would be able to agree upon a single Sunday on which to begin the count towards Shavuot! This thinking, however, bases itself on the assumption the Omer offering is brought from barley. Unfortunately for the heretics, no text proclaims this explicitly. We know it only through a *derashah* – a tool that the Oral Law deniers could not use. R. Yochanan ben Zakkai had this in mind when he said, "Fools! What is your source?" I.e., since you reject the *Torah she-b'al-peh*, you are back to square one! There are 52 candidates for the Shabbos of the *pasuk*!

No one could dislodge the argument – except for the old man, who dropped the old proof, and presented an argument of his own: Moshe was solicitous of the interests of the people, and made the holiday of Shavuot follow after a Shabbos, creating a two-day festival.

The response betrayed a tendency of those who challenge the Oral Law. Inevitably, they challenge the Divine authorship of the Written Law as well. The heretic could have stated that G-d wished to offer His people a two-day holiday. Instead, he attributed the decision to Moshe, in the manner of others who often speak as if Moshe was responsible for shaping the contours of the Torah.

By invoking Moshe, the heretic left himself open to R. Yochanan's next challenge: "If so, why did he delay them in the wilderness for forty years?" Had the heretic attributed the decision to G-d Himself, the question could not have been raised. Does anyone – traditionalist or heteric – claim to understand the Divine Mind? Do we not face endless questions in trying to comprehend His ways, and fall back upon the impossibility of mortal Man to understand that which is so far beyond him? When the heretic pointed to Moshe, however, as the responsible party, R. Yochanan could challenge his thesis. If Moshe cared so much about the comfort level of his people, why did he have them tarry forty years in the wilderness?

The old man was upset. "With that you dismiss my argument?" I presented a perfectly valid argument, preserving the integrity of our ruling that Shavuot always falls on a Sunday. You are quibbling about a minor detail – my subconsciously having mentioned Moshe as the author of this law, rather than Hashem. Shouldn't you deal with the real substance of my argument, rather than my

poor choice of words?

Not really, responds R. Yochanan. You might have a point, if I were dealing with other people. But you heretics have a habit of insisting on the beauty of your words, rather than finding the beauty of our Torah. You pride yourselves on the elegance of your words. "Fool! Our perfect Torah should not be compared to your idle chatter!" You embellish your idle chatter with airs of sophistication. Is it right that you drop your practice of being precise and exact in your choice of words when it comes to discussing Torah?

R. Yochanan did not ignore the heretic's challenge to him to address the substance of his argument. He had claimed that the Torah wished to give us a two-day holiday, so it piggybacked Shavuos on to Shabbos. Why, then, did the Torah not do the same elsewhere? Shemini Atzeres is also celebrated for only a single day. Why did the Torah not join it to a Shabbos as well?

One could argue that the two days are very different. *Oneg*, physical enjoyment of the day, belongs much more to Shavuos than any other day, because it marks the giving of the Torah. The Torah teaches us how to safely navigate the pleasures of this world without losing our spirit and integrity in the process. The heretic's argument, then, does make sense! It is Shavuos in particular, with its mandatory inclusion of enjoyment of food and drink, that should be part of a two-day celebration.

It would make sense – but not according to the heretics who reject *Torah she-ba'l- peh*. According to halachic Judaism, Shavuos falls on the sixth of Sivan, marking the day that the Torah was given. Our *mesorah* sees it as the anniversary of our receipt of the Torah; festive meals are appropriate. The rejectionists, however, always count seven weeks from a Sunday. Shavuos can fall on a variety of calendar days. There is nothing explicitly in the Torah text to join the events of our parshah with the holiday of Shavuos. The heretic's argument thus fails. There is no reason to join Shavuos to Shabbos any more than to do the same for Shemini Atzeres.

R. Yochanan ben Zakkai's repartee, when read more closely, is a stinging rebuke to those who chip away at the sanctity of our *mesorah* – then and now.

1. Based on HaMedrash V'HaMaaseh by R. Yechezkel Libshitz zt"l.
2. Literally, the *Boetusin* – a group that rejected the Oral Law.
3. Menachos 65A.
4. Because Shavuos is the 50th day from the beginning of the count, it will fall on the same day of the week on which the count begins.