

DIVINE AUTHENTICITY OF TORAH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

On the third day in the morning, there was thunder and lightning, and heavy cloud upon the mountain, and the voice of the shofar was very strong. The people in the camp trembled. Moshe directed the people out of the camp towards God, and they placed themselves at the foot of the mountain. (Shemos 19:16-17)

Once I gave a class to a group of secular Jews, most of whom were just traveling through Israel and happened to be invited to a class while visiting the Kosel. I'm surprised they said yes, but there they were sitting patiently in front of me, attentive (or so they appeared), waiting to hear what I might say.

What a coincidence. I was also waiting to hear what I might say. Looking at them, all of a sudden, the material I had prepared didn't seem to be right for the setting, and fighting back panic (it was my first time doing this), I scrambled to think of something appealing, something that might not turn them off from Judaism for the rest of their lives, if they weren't already. The idea of saying, "Let's all go for a coffee!" popped into my mind, but that probably wouldn't have gone over too well with the administration.

That's when the following words just seemed to flow from my mouth, and I wasn't exactly sure, at the time, where they came from.

"What is more logical," I asked them, "that a person check out the validity of the Bible, or ignore its claims?"

A hand immediately went up, and after acknowledging it, the person answered, "It's more logical not to check it out."

"Really?" I asked, baiting the person a little.

"Really," he answered. "Otherwise more people would be doing it."

Looking around the class, I asked the others, "Does everyone agree, or does someone disagree?" and was pleasantly surprised by the reaction and the amount of participation. All of a sudden, the class seemed to have a life of its own, and I knew that I was going to enjoy myself, and that they might too.

Most people agreed with the first opinion, as was to be expected. So I asked them, "Are you sure? The Torah makes some pretty powerful claims ..."

Of course, no one changed his mind, though I did read some growing doubt in the eyes of some of the people who had volunteered an answer, a look that I thought said, "What claims?" So, we spent the rest of the class speaking out some of those claims, and an hour later, many in the group somewhat uncomfortably, agreed that, based upon the claims, it was more logical to check out the Bible than not check it out.

I don't know if anyone actually ever did, but that's cognitive dissonance for you. However, who knows? Maybe one of them, down the road, did go to a Torah class somewhere else because of the revelation. It wouldn't be the first time a person has had a delayed reaction to what he or she has learned.

The point is that there are billions of people walking around out there who couldn't care less about Torah and the people who observe it, assuming that is an irrelevant relic from the past. Logic dictates, at least to them, that they have no need to waste their time checking it out, even if they were born Jewish.

Even more amazing is how many people refute those claims without ever having really investigated them, and proven them false. People will claim that they are false, but no one has ever proven them to be false. Granted, there are some important questions to be answered regarding the giving of Torah at Mt. Sinai, but they are answerable, if a person is prepared to give Torah the time of day, and check out what it says and why.

For example, there is the claim that God dictated every word of the Torah to Moshe Rabbeinu, letter-by-letter. Other religions have claimed that their codes of ethics were Divinely-inspired, but no book or document, except for the Torah, has ever claimed that it was given entirely directly by God to man, certainly not word-by-word.

There is a reason for that, and it is not honesty for honesty's sake. It is about salability. For example, if you came to a large group of people and told them that God told you, word-by-word, that it was okay to be promiscuous and take advantage of the meek, there might not be a lot of people who would take you at your word, but there would certainly be a lot of people who would want to.

But try and make the same claim while selling commandments that go against a person's yetzer hara, and see who's even willing to listen to such a claim—unless they know it is true. How much more so when there are 613 such commandments, and a myriad of instructions about how to fulfill them. You might find a few unstable people to follow you, but not too many logical and clear-thinking people who also have yetzer haras.

However, things become more probable when the people making the claim of Divine origin for Torah happen to also be logical and clear-thinking with yetzer haras. The implication is that somebody knows something that others may not know, something that validates the Torah, and if he is wise, then not only does God exist, but the Torah is true, and we are expected to live by it, or answer for why we didn't. At the very least, that is worth checking out. At the very least.

There are other less global claims that make Torah worth looking into for our own, everyday good. For example, if you live by Torah, you will be a better person, a better son or daughter, a better spouse, and a better parent, whatever the case may be. Who doesn't want to be better at all of that? You will be a happier person. Who doesn't want to be that?

But, one can argue, that the bookstores are filled with human beings making similar promises, some making millions of dollars off people who buy their books, tapes, and cds, just to hear their take on life. Hence, the Torah is competing in a very competitive market today. In fact, when was the last time an Orthodox rabbi was invited to speak on a popular talk show to share the Torah's viewpoint on all of these everyday current and burning issues? Exactly.

Here's the difference. In life, there are only absolutes, and opinions. If something is not an absolute, then it can only be, at most, an opinion. We humans are not able to make absolutes, only to perceive them, because our big picture is still quite small when it comes to knowing everything about the universe there is to know, and are unable to control reality absolutely. Only God knows all of that, and can do that.

The problem with opinions is that they vary. They can work for one person, but not necessarily another, or at some times, but not at all times.

Sometimes, when it comes to opinions, it is hit-or-miss, and even the hitting often requires what others call "good luck," but what we Jews call Hashgochah Pratis—Divine Providence.

So, yes, there are a lot of competing authors out there pushing their wares and fairs to help others to be more successful in life, usually based upon their own personal experiences and insights, and most of all, their own personal opinions. No doubt there is wisdom in their words, some more than others, but no doubt, there is also a lot of mistaken notions, or at least mistaken generalizations.

However, God is the watchmaker, so-to-speak. He made man, and knows what makes him tick, why it makes him tick, and how it makes him tick. He knows man better than man will ever know himself, and best of all, He is totally unbiased, absolutely objective, and, well, absolute. If he says something will make you a better person, or a not-so-good person, He is right, 100 percent of the time. You can bank on it, if you're willing to work at it. Which is why His book, with all of its absolutes, is less popular amongst the non-religious crowds, than secular books dealing with similar issues.

It is because human authors know that humans want success, but with minimal effort. Marketing and advertising knows that most people will not bite the bullet if they don't have to, or at least perceive they won't have to. We're all looking for success, but we're also looking for shortcuts to success, and the absolute truth is that they're none. None.

I remember the first time I "went" through the Talmud, inspired by the upcoming birth of my first child. One night, as I sat on our living room sofa and pondered the change of life our new child would bring, it also occurred to me, for the first time, that if the child happened to be a boy, he could

end up knowing more Torah than me by the age of nine. For, I had been religious and learning Torah for only about five years at that time, but my child would start early.

There was something very unsettling about that thought, and as difficult as learning Talmud was for me at that time, I decided that I had one choice: either to put on the burners and put some learning distance between my child and myself, or eat his learning dust, so-to-speak.

Don't get me wrong. There is nothing a father wants more than seeing his children succeed in life, especially in ways that he could not. What parent does not want the very best for his or her child, even if it means that they will end up being much greater than he or she ever became. That is success as a parent, and I can't wait for that day to happen, for each of my children, b"H.

However, for it to happen by the time my child was only nine years old would be a little early, kind of embarrassing, and probably quite frustrating. A child, especially in the Torah world, wants to know that his father has been around in the world of learning, at least until he is old enough to know what that actually means.

So off I went on my journey of the Talmud (before ArtScroll produced their translated and annotated Shas), like a hiker beginning a long ascent up a huge mountain. At first it was very difficult, but intriguing, until I realized how big a project it was that I was undertaking. But, like a mountain climber, you try not to look up and see how far you have to go, lest you despair (which I did on more than one occasion), looking instead just at where you have to place your next foot.

As it turned out, and I guess somewhat to my relief, my first child ended up being a girl. However, that did not change too much, since a boy could easily come within two years, and did, and besides, I had already been bitten by the Shas bug. I had to continue, so I did.

Over the years, as I became more proficient at Aramaic and the methods of the Talmud, I began to look for all kinds of shortcuts to allow me to speed the process up, while at the same time remembering most of what I was seeing. So I developed all kinds of systems and methods for learning, adjusting them as I went along and as I became more experienced.

When I finally finished and made my first siyum on the Shas, I reflected on what I had done, and how I had done it, only to realize that, 10 years later, my shortcuts had not been shortcuts. Indeed, I realized that there weren't really any, and what I had thought were shortcuts, had been, in fact, distractions, like the mountain climber who talks to himself as he climbs to take his mind off his task.

The only shortcut, so-to-speak, when it comes to the word of God is to put in the necessary time and energy to learn it well, and remember it even better. As the rabbis taught, "According to the effort is the reward" (Pirkei Avos 5:26), and remembering Torah requires Heavenly help (Megillah 6b), a reward for the effort that one makes to learn and remember Torah. Then you won't have to learn the same thing from the start all over again, but build, instead, on what you know.

Because there is so much to know, so much, and on so many different levels. But, unfortunately, you

can't tell a person what that means; he has to see it for himself. Indeed, one of the most frustrating things in life, when it comes to Torah, is having seen things that you know if you could show it to others, they'd have no trouble believing that Torah is from God. But, of course, to do that, the person has to be willing to listen, and have the time to learn, because it would take a lot of it to bring the person up to speed just so he can relate to the concepts.

Personally, I have spent the last few years trying to write up for others, with less background, Kabbalistic concepts I have learned recently, in a way that they can appreciate the ideas themselves. In the beginning, it was just about sharing the beauty and depth of Torah, the prime reason I began to write in the first place.

However, more recently, it has been about trying to show people how God runs His world, how we know exiles are coming to an end, and why anti-Semitism always resurfaces with a vengeance at the end of them, and what to do about it. Ironically, such life-saving information exists on deeper levels than most people learn, perhaps part of the reward for having taken Torah seriously, and spending the time to delve into it.

It is not easy, but it is extremely rewarding. First of all, the process has forced me to learn the ideas better than I thought I already knew them. Secondly, after spending time writing the ideas, and then editing them, until they make sense even for someone with little or no background, it feels as if a work of art has been created. There is something profoundly beautiful about bridging the intellectual gap between the abstract and the practical, without sacrificing the sanctity of the concepts.

That, too, is part of the Torah experience. That, too, is a reason why a Jew, who has doubts about the Divine authenticity of Torah, should check it out. These are serious and profound claims, and there are only two types of people who can make them: mad men, or people who know the truth. Given the level of intelligence of the people who have made those claims over the millennia, a person really ought to prove the Divinity of Torah for himself.

Text

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