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Open Letter:

The Pursuit of Truth

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The Internet is a mixed blessing. You write something, and “click”: millions of others can be affected...or infected. My impetus for writing this letter on truth was born out of two recent email conversations I had with individuals who mean well. I respect their intent, but I am fearful their ideas will spread and go unquestioned. Others will thereby be misled in Torah’s fundamentals. Therefore, one may not remain silent.

Many Jews still determine truth based on false criteria such as masses who support a notion, the reputation of a teacher, the fact an idea is in print, and many feel ancient documents and books must bear truths, simply because they are old. Of course, none of these factors contribute in any way to truth. For many masses follow idolatrous rites, many reputable people are wrong many times, many books proliferate lies and unchecked notions, and the age of artifacts and ancient documents are unrelated to truth.

What determines what is truth? This will never change: it is the idea alone. An unknown individual can be right while dozens of famous teachers are wrong. A teenager can catch a genius in an error. A friend next door can find an error in a popular book. And ancient manuscripts can be based on a flawed science of its times.

As educators, individuals with influence, and everyday Jews, we must be able to accept and verbally admit error. Maimonides invited any of his readers to correct his thoughts. He is correct. Torah is not about untouchable reputations. Torah is about God. *“Fear of God is the beginning of knowledge”*. (Proverbs 1:7) This means that if our focus is anything but fear of God and the desire to know and spread His teachings, then we fail. We cannot possess knowledge. We fail at being teachers. If we sense an iota of defense for our reputations or egos, we fail. We harm others by spreading wrong ideas, when we should detract.

While alone, can you back down from a position you have held precious all your life? In class, can you say in front of dozens of your students the words “I am wrong”? At a lecture in front of hundreds, can you be humble enough to admit that Maimonides knew more than you? And if Saadia Gaon and Judah HaLevi also defended Maimonides’

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position, would that make you think twice about your opposing view? Great minds that all agree on a given topic must cause our trepidation if we oppose their views. Yes, aside from Torah texts inspired by God, men can be wrong, even Maimonides and Moses. But do we make honest, objective inquiry into why these giants held the views they did before we argue on them? It is a balance: we know all men can err, but we also must double check our views if we oppose such giants.

At times, Rabbis and teachers make dangerous errors. Unsuspecting students who have such high regard for their teachers may blindly accept all he or she says. While I am worried that dangerous notions spread, there is no doubt that God will sustain His promise, *“As for me, this is My covenant with them, said God. My spirit which is up you and My words that I have placed in your mouth will not be lost from your mouths, the mouths of your offspring, and the mouths of your grandchildren said God, from now and eternally”* (Isaiah 59:21) God will ensure Torah is never lost or distorted. But that does not mean individuals won't accept fallacy, and despite God's promise we are not excused from acting, as Rabbi Bachya teaches in his Duties of the Heart regarding a livelihood. Although God decides our yearly income, we cannot sit back and avoid working. So too regarding Torah: we must make certain that only those ideas we are convinced are true will be taught. We must be equally valiant in our education helping others see the flaws in false ideas and reject them.

I preface my remarks by stating that proof cannot be from a source, about that very source. That would be circular reasoning. Therefore, when I cite sources, I refer to the verbal transmission of the account and not the written words. Thus, when proving the Torah's account of Revelation at Sinai as true, I do not present the text as proof. The proof is the phenomenon of mass, verbal transmission and acceptance of that event. The text is merely a reference. It is impossible that the world today accepts the history of Revelation, and that history is false. Had that account been distorted or fabricated we would have heard of stiff opposition, and we would also be in receipt of the true account. Had Moses been a liar, approached a people and told them what the Torah says, *“Don't forget what your eyes saw at Sinai”*, and the 10 Plagues, etc....those people would laugh at his attempt to rewrite their past, and his story would not spread. Certainly, it would not totally supplant that peoples' real history. Today, we could in no way possess the lie with no evidence of the accurate history.

In his article *Torah from Sinai*, Rabbi Israel Chait wrote the following:

“Someone may ask how we know that these events were as described in the Torah, clearly visible, and that they transpired before the entire nation. Perhaps this itself is a fabrication? The answer to this question is obvious. We accept a simple fact attested to by numerous observers because we consider mass conspiracy absurd. For the very same reason no public event can be fabricated, for we would have to assume a mass conspiracy of silence with regard to the occurrence of that event. If someone were to tell us that an atomic bomb was detonated over New York City fifty years ago, we would not accept it as true because we would assume that we would have certainly heard about it, had it actually occurred. The very factors, which compel us to accept as true, an account of an event of public proportion safeguards us against fabrication of such an event. (8) Were this not so all of history could have been fabricated. Had the event at Sinai not actually occurred anyone fabricating it at any point in time would have met with the stiff refutation of the people, “had a mass event of that proportion ever occurred we surely would have heard of it.” Fabrication of an event of public proportion is not within the realm of credibility.”

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Finally, I write not to deride the authors of the ideas I reject. I write so that you might hear my arguments and know that such notions are false, and dangerous. What follows are excerpts of emails from individuals with whom I had dialogues with this week, and my thoughts on their notions. The first writer attempts to dismiss any historical proof of Revelation at Sinai. He makes fundamental errors:

Writer: “This whole need for proof is pitifully something the Greeks had to settle for. My view is that ‘proof’ as you mean it doesn’t exist at all. Not even about the question of the sun coming up every day. Certainly there is no definitive proof in the discipline of history.”

Astonishingly, this person who is a prolific writer and noted Rabbi, doesn’t see his contradiction as he attempts to “prove” that proof is impossible by using reasoning, as he says “certainly”. The word certainly is used in rational argumentation to “prove” a point.

Writer: “Who are people more sure of existing – God or their best friend?”

The writer expresses his acceptance of personal experiences over intellectual comprehension. Maimonides and Saadia Gaon headline the list of Torah giants who demanded proof...not personal experience. We must appreciate that they – not us – wrote brilliant works like Maimonides’ *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide*, and Saadia Gaon’s *Book of Beliefs and Opinions*. Let us humble ourselves and attempt to grasp why they valued proof over all else. Rabbi Israel Chait included the following footnote in his aforementioned article:

“When visiting the Rockefeller Medical Institute, Albert Einstein met with Dr. Alexis Carrel, whose extracurricular interests were spiritualism and extrasensory perception. Observing that, Einstein was unimpressed. Carrel said, “But Doctor what would you say if you observed this phenomenon yourself?” To which Einstein replied, “I still would not believe it.” (Clark, Ronald W. Einstein: The Life and Times. (New York: 1971, Avon Books) p. 642). Why would the great scientist not capitulate even to evidence? It is a matter of one’s total framework. The true man of science who sees knowledge permeating the entire universe from the smallest particle to the largest galaxies will not be shaken from his view by a few paltry facts even though he may not be able to explain them. Only the ignorant are moved by such “evidence.” In a similar manner miracles do not affect a man of Torah who is rooted in Sinai and God’s infinite wisdom. His credo is his cogito.”

Maimonides equates Revelation to firsthand experience (Foundations of Torah 8:1):

“In what do we believe Moses? Through Revelation at Sinai. Our eyes saw it and not a stranger; our ears heard it and not another person, the fire, thunders and earthquakes and Moses drew close to the darkness and a voice spoke to him and we heard “Moses, Moses go tell the Jews...”

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Maimonides wishes to impress upon us the human need for, and God's furnishing of proof. This is why he says Revelation at Sinai is unique, for it alone offers literally "us today" the same proof as eyewitnesses, "*Our eyes saw it and not a stranger; our ears heard it and not another person*". Maimonides describes the account "as if" we all witnessed it in detail. Maimonides is teaching that there is no doubt about this event. In fact, prior to that extraordinary event God told Moses why He was orchestrating Revelation: "*Behold I will come to you in thick cloud so that the people shall hear when I speak with you, and also in you they will believe forever*". (Exod. 19:9)

We have before us a number of fundamentals. First, Maimonides holds proof to be both paramount and available through Revelation at Sinai. However, the writer criticizes Maimonides' acceptance of Sinai as an historical truth, when he later wrote to me saying:

Writer: "...proving revelation alone does not prove that we didn't play "Broken Telephone" with it along they way."

It must strike us that this writer – and orthodox Rabbi – says this while he read Maimonides' major works... most certainly the opening pages. For in the opening pages in his Mishneh Torah, Maimonides listed the 40 generations of Torah transmitters from Moses to Rav Ashi. Not one ever suggested what this writer suggests, that there was a break in Torah transmission. Nor have I ever heard of any Rabbi in the Talmud, before its era, or afterwards suggesting that the transmission of Torah had a break. Nor has any latter Rabbi argued on Maimonides' list, until this writer first suggested his new view.

Second, God teaches this proof is something "they will believe forever". God says that history will serve as a proof for later generations, "forever". The writer opposes, suggesting that any transmission is suspect to foul play. In doing so, he commits heresy as he denies God's word that Revelation will be accepted generations later as true, and as a proof.

Writer: "The Kuzari's approach is flawed in theory: one can make up a bedtime story and have it slowly evolve over generations into an accepted history."

This denies God's words again:

"As for me, this is My covenant with them, said God. My spirit which is up you and My words that I have placed in your mouth will not be lost from your mouths, the mouths of your offspring, and he mouths of your grandchildren said God, from now and eternally" (Isaiah 59:21)

Radak, quoting his father, says "My words" in this verse refers to the Torah. Meaning, Torah will never be lost from Israel. The writer suggests it can be lost through "Broken Telephone".

This concludes my remarks on the first writer. ■

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Segulas

A new email now being sent regularly, quotes accurate Halachas (Jewish laws) and does a fine job to remain true to the texts. However, a recent email included a non-authoritative source, although written by a Rabbi. The email quoting the Rabbi urged people to rely on segulas, or acts that assure certain outcomes. A second unrelated email I received today says as follows:

“The giving of chai rotel mashka – literally, eighteen measurements of fluid – on Lag Baomer, the anniversary of Rabbi Shimon bar Yichai’s death, has been proven a powerful segulah (talisman) against barrenness, illness, shidduchim difficulties and countless other crises in people’s lives. Stories abound, and they seem almost too miraculous to be true. But they are. Hundreds of people attest to their power, hundreds of people have been helped. Read some of their accounts on our success stories.”

I did go to that “success stories” page, and throughout every “account” not one name was given. Either “a man” or “a woman” had such and such happen.

How are we to treat segulas? We have an authoritative source for Halacha: Torah and the Shulchan Aruch. This latter work by Yosef Caro rejects segulas. Torah openly prohibits horoscopists, superstitions, omens, witchcraft, magic and other fortuitous acts. Even the very common practice of wearing Red Bendels is described in an authoritative source, Tosefta Shabbos chap. 7 and is referred to as idolatrous. Rabbi Saul Zucker wrote as follows:

“But more...the Tosefta in Shabbos 7:1 explicitly states that wearing a red thread is a clear violation of a Torah principle, darkei ha-emori. With that in mind, please see the commentary of the Radak on Yeshayahu 40:21, where he states, “...people thought that many things and certain actions would help or damage, sicken or heal. These things are not based upon wisdom or medicine or natural forces, but rather they are based upon the repeated customs of people throughout the generations...and these are the darkei ha-emori.” Does not the “ancient custom” of the red thread fit exactly into what the Radak derides?

And worse...please see the Rambam’s Moreh HaNevuchim 3:37, wherein he states unequivocally that the engagement by people of practices that constitute darkei ha-emori in order to protect themselves from danger will not only be ineffective, but on the contrary, will result in new dangers brought to them as a result of their sin.”

Torah demands we follow the patriarchs, matriarchs and prophets. These perfected individuals are never found resorting to segulas: not when they were single, barren, starving, near death, or otherwise in need. Never did Moses or any other prophet tell the nation to follow segulas. If we do not deserve a much-needed good, the true Torah response is this: *“Let us search and examine our ways and return to Hashem”*. (Megillas Eicha, 3:40) Eicha teaches what we must do, and it does not say segulas are the Torah’s approach. This is so clear, and must be our response to those who err.

I urge those of you, who can, to teach. Create learning groups. Give a weekly class...even by phone. Speak to teachers and Rebbes in Yeshivas and ask them to discuss these issues. If you receive such emails, respond to the sender. Inform them how they sin by misleading Jews. Maimonides says that misleading others to sin is one of the worst sins and God does not allow such a person to repent due to its gravity. (Laws of Repentance, 4:1)

Continue to seek truth. *“Minimize your working hours and engage in Torah.”* (Ethics) Through your earnest desire for truth, God will grant it to you in His Torah. ■

The JewishTimes is glad to announce a new Students' Column. We invite all students to submit articles on your choice of Torah topics for publication in the JewishTimes. Articles should be no longer than two typed pages, but may be as brief as desired. Articles must cite authoritative Torah sources. Please submit your articles no later than 12:00 noon Tuesdays.

Parents, teachers and Rabbis are asked to inform students.

Students may collaborate. We also invite student photographers and artists to email your jpeg images to accompany your friend's articles. Jpegs must be 175 DPI, RGB.

Please email articles as attachments in MS Word format to: office@Mesora.org

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