

By the Grace of G-d
27th of Shevat, 5723
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Greeting and Blessing:

Your letter of January 14th reached me with considerable delay. You posed a number of questions regarding our Torah and Mitzvot, faith and traditions, etc.

Needless to say, it is difficult to discuss adequately in a letter such questions as you raise. Since you write that you had occasion to spend time with Lubavitcher students, I trust you discussed with them some of these questions, and perhaps may have another opportunity to discuss them further. However, inasmuch as you have raised these questions, I will attempt to answer them briefly,

1) How can one be certain of the authority of the T'nach in all its particulars? The answer to this is based on common sense, and if one approaches the question open-mindedly and without prejudice, one must come to this conclusion. To put it very briefly, and going back from our present generation to preceding generations, we have before us the text of the T'nach as it was transmitted from one generation to the other by hundreds and thousands of parents of different backgrounds to their children. Even during the times of the greatest persecutions, and even after the destruction of the Beth Hamikdash, there always survived hundreds and thousands of Jews who preserved the text of the T'nach and the traditions, so that the chain has never been broken.

Now, assume that someone would come today and wish to add a new chapter or a new section to the T'nach, declaring this new addition to be of the same antiquity and validity as the other parts of the T'nach, it is clear that no one will accept it on the ground of the simple question; If this is truly a part of the T'nach, how is it that we have not had it before? The same would apply to any question as to the dating of any particular section of the T'nach, which itself contains a record of the prophecies beginning from Moshe Rabbeinu to the latest prophets Zecharia, Haggi and Malachi.

You mention, in passing, certain theories by certain Bible critics. But, as you know, it is not a case where these people have a different tradition from ours, going back to all those ancient generations, but it is rather a case where this one or that one has come out with theories or hypotheses which are not only speculative, but have been shown to be unscientific as well as illogical. For, according to them, it would be a case where thousands upon thousands of Jews have at one point or another suddenly changed their views and attitudes toward the T'nach in radical ways. With all the arguments about super-

stitutions or mass hypotheses, etc., such radical changes by hundreds of thousands of people of different backgrounds in different parts of the world, etc. are simply very farfetched and most illogical.

Furthermore, there is a basic difference between our Jewish tradition and those of other faiths, such as Christianity or Islam. For, whereas in the latter cases the traditions go back to one individual or a limited number of individuals, our traditions go back to a revelation which was experienced by a whole people at once, so that at no time did we have to place our trust in the veracity of one, or a few, individuals.

2) You mention the existence of other ancient codes among other ancient peoples, which are in many respects similar to the laws of our Torah.

I do not see what difference or contradiction this can have to the authenticity of the Torah. The point is that when a similarity of ideas is found between two peoples, it is necessary to ascertain which one derives from the other. More important still is not so much the similarity as the difference. Thus, you mention Mesopotamia, and presumably you have in mind the code of Hamurabi. A careful comparison will show at once that the similarities are only superficial, but the differences are basic. For the Code of Hamurabi is permeated with a spirit of extraordinary cruelty, as for example in regard to the penalties for theft, etc., and the same is true of other similar codes, whereas the underlying principles of the laws of the Torah are uniquely merciful. However, the essential thing is, as mentioned earlier, that there is no proof whatever that the laws of the Torah have been derived from other ancient codes.

In this connection, you also mention the similarity of the custom found in the Torah as well as in ancient Mesopotamia that when a wife could bear no children to her husband she could take her maid-servant and give her to her husband for a wife, with a view of adopting the children, etc. Here again, I do not see what difficulty this similarity of custom presents. For, even today, you may find similarity of customs between the most observant Jew and his non-Jewish neighbors as long as it is not in conflict with the Torah. For, to be authentically Jewish, it is not absolutely necessary to reject every possible similarity of custom or habit which might prevail in the society, but rather to bring in a spirit of holiness into a custom or practice which is otherwise not in conflict with the Torah.

3) You ask, granted that the Torah is accepted as being of Divine origin, how is it possible to be certain of the validity of the Oral Law, and of the traditional interpretation of the Torah?

This question is also not difficult to answer. Inasmuch as you are a University student, I will give you an example from science. As you know, modern science has made all sorts of discoveries and opened new fields, such as electronics, etc., which are based on the science of mathematics; the basic principles of which have been known thousands of years ago, as is well known and admitted. Needless to say, the mathematicians of old had no idea or conception of electronics, but there is no contradiction here, but only the application of old principles and methods of deduction to new fields or branches of science.

Similarly in regard to the Torah. For the Torah, too, already contains the methods and principles whereby it is to be interpreted.

Therefore, the traditional interpretation of the Torah is already contained in the Torah itself, and it is nothing but a continuation of the written Torah itself, so that only both together ~~do they~~ constitute one living organism.

In this case, too, we can apply the argument from common sense, as mentioned above. For it is unthinkable to assume that at any particular time there arose a new school of thought which claimed to give a new interpretation to the Torah which was in conflict with the accepted traditions of the past. No one would accept such a radical change, and certainly it could not be accepted by the whole Jewish people. For, it is not a case where a particular professor is studying with a group of students, but the study and interpretation of the Torah has been going on in numerous Yeshivoth and Academies, all of which presented a remarkable degree of unanimity.

To be sure, we find differences of opinion in the Mishnah and Gemorra, but the important thing is the resulting decisions, which became unanimous in the Halachah. Thus, we also find in the Torah itself a difference of opinion, on occasion, between Moshe Rabbeinu and other Jews, but it is the final outcome of such differences that is important. So, we also find, a difference of opinion between the first Jew, Abraham, and his wife Sarah, in which case there was a Divine directive that Abraham was to follow Sarah's opinion. Therefore, the integrity of the whole tradition and Oral Law is in no way challenged by the differences of opinion which are mentioned in the Talmud, which are in themselves methods of deduction to arrive at the final decision, or P'sak Din.

I trust you know the dictum that the important thing is not the discussion but the deed. Therefore, my intention in writing you by the above is not for the purpose of discussion, but in an effort to remove the confusion which seems to bother you, and seems to interfere with your duties as a Jew, ~~and~~ to live up ~~to~~ in your daily life, to the Jewish way of life, the way of the Torah, which is called Torah Chaim, the Law of Life, and all the Mitzvath whereby Jews live a full life worthy of its name. It is only a matter of will and determination, and we have been assured that he who is determined to purify himself a little by his personal effort, received a great deal of aid from On High.

With blessing