

CHAPTER 5

The Strongest Evidence

The second fundamental belief of Classical Judaism is that the Torah is the inviolate word of God, that it was given to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai after they emerged from centuries of bondage in Egypt. These events are recorded in the Torah, and we accept them as absolutely true.

But how do we know that God really gave us the Torah at Mount Sinai? We cannot offer as proof that it is written in the Torah, because how do we know the Torah is true? We only know the Torah is true because we received it from God at Mount Sinai. This becomes a circle. So, what is the basis for this belief?

There's a long-standing controversy among Jewish thinkers regarding the proper basis for adherence to Judaism. Should our beliefs rest on a rational philosophical foundation or should they be accepted, at least by the common people, on simple faith? Should the approach be *mechkar*, philosophical investigation, or *emunah peshutah*, simple faith?

So, how are we to understand the concept of simple faith? What does it mean, and why should we rely on it? There has to be a rational reason to have simple faith. Even if we rely on tradition, how do we know the tradition is delivering truth?

I want to offer a hybrid approach, rational arguments that embrace and explain the concept of *emunah peshutah*, simple faith.

Let us begin with a question. Two miraculous events combined to form the Jewish people. The Exodus from slavery in Egypt and the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. Which of these two is more crucial to the identity of the Jewish people? God could have liberated us from Egypt without giving us the Torah. He could also have given us the Torah without our first having us enslaved in Egypt. Which of these two seminal events was more essential? It seems obvious that the Giving of the Torah is more important. Without the Torah, we would have no Jewish identity, no covenant with God. We would be just like any other nation.

This brings us to a strange anomaly. There are six hundred and thirteen commandments in the Torah. There are, of course, numerous more commandments, but these are the principal ones. Over one hundred of these commandments relate to the Exodus, either directly or tangentially. We are commanded to eat *matzah* on Pesach. We must love the stranger because we were strangers in Egypt. God forbids us to eat dead insects, because He took us out of Egypt. And so forth. Well over a hundred commandments.

How many commandments relate to the Giving of the Torah? Only one. “Beware and watch yourself well that you should not forget the things your eyes have seen ... the day you stood before God your Lord at Chorev ... and you stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain was engulfed in flames until the heart of heaven.”¹

Considering how central the stand at Mount Sinai is to our identity and our mission in this world, you would think there would be many commandments memorializing it. And yet, there is only one. Only one! How can that be? Furthermore, there is no mention of Sinai in the prayers or in Kiddush on Shabbos and the Festivals. We always say, “*Zecher l’yetzias*

¹ Devarim 4:9-11.

Mitzraim, in memory of the Exodus from Egypt.” No mention of Sinai. In the psalms that review our history, no mention of Sinai. Even the commandment to celebrate the Festival of Shavuot, which falls on the traditional date of the Giving of the Torah, fails to mention the stand at Mount Sinai. “And you shall make a Festival of Weeks ... and you shall celebrate before God your Lord ... and you shall remember that you were slaves in the land of Egypt.”² Why is this so? What is the reason for this strange silence about Sinai?

So, let’s consider a murderer serving a life sentence. After ten years, he tells the warden, “You have to let me go.”

“Why?” asks the warden.

“You see,” says the murderer, “over a period of ten years, all the cells in a person’s body are replaced, even the cells in the decision-making part of the brain. So, I am a new man. I’m not the one that committed the crime.”

Is that a valid argument? Of course not. The totality of the person is the same, but the individual cells are replaced over time.

It is the same with societies. Each individual is like a cell in the collective body of society. Individuals come and individuals go, but the society remains the same as long as its institutions are not demolished.

All Americans are obligated to abide by the Constitution, even though the people who signed it are long since dead, because collective American society obligated itself to the Constitution. That obligation endures as long as American society endures, and the individual Americans, who are its cells, are obligated to honor it. So, we see that the collective can assume obligations on itself and future generations.

² Ibid. 16:10-12.

The collective also bears guilt. The Talmud discusses the Jewish exiles returning from captivity in Babylon seventy years after the destruction of the First Temple in Jerusalem. They brought sacrifices to atone for the sins of idolatry committed before the exile. The Talmud wonders how they could bring sin-offerings for people who have already died. Such sacrifices would be invalidated. And the Talmud replies that these sacrifices were not for the atonement of individuals but rather for the atonement of the congregation, and “the congregation never dies.”³ The collective bears guilt and requires atonement long after the individual sinners have died, because the collective never dies.

We also know that collectives have characteristics and personalities that distinguish them from each other, just as people are distinguished from each other. A Jewish family leaves Poland. One son settles in Germany. The family he raises will be officious, efficient and punctual. Another son settles in Italy. The family he raises will be passionate and outgoing. They will speak loudly and gesticulate with their hands. Another son settles in England. The family he raises will be well-mannered, foppish, reserved and unemotional. They will keep a stiff upper lip and drink lots of tea. There is nothing magical about this. Societies have traits and mannerisms, and people that integrate into that society take on its personality.

The collective also has something else. It has a memory.

In 1999, there was a war in Kosovo. After the Yugoslav Confederation disintegrated, the Serbs attacked the Albanian Kosovars, who are Muslims. At the risk of a little oversimplification, they exacted revenge for the Serb defeat by the Muslim Ottomans at the Battle of Kosovo.

³ Temurah 15b.

When did the battle of Kosovo take place? In 1389! Six centuries later, the hatred and the desire for revenge still smoldered in Serbian hearts. How could a battle so many centuries earlier spark such savage hatred? Because it was never forgotten.

The defeat in the Battle of Kosovo became so integrated into the culture and identity of Serbian society that it could not be forgotten. The fighters in that battle were national heroes from the day they fell on the battlefield. Serbian children did not learn about the battle in a history class. They sang songs about it and dreamed about the day when they could even the score. The reality of that battle cannot be denied to a Serbian. It is part of his collective memory.

Evidence can always be disputed. Documents can be forged. Witnesses may lie. Photographs and films can be falsified. The only evidence that cannot be denied is the memory of what we have seen with our own eyes, or at least the collective memory of what we have seen. Collective memory is not transmitted through testimony and proof. It is transmitted by shared experience, and therefore, it is a stronger proof than any evidence.

If an audacious professor would write a book claiming that the American blacks were never abducted and enslaved, that they are just making up the story in order to gain an advantage over the white population, would such a book have any credibility? Not a shred. Race is the most dominant factor in American social consciousness today. Bigotry. Resentment. Reparations. Persecution. Police brutality. Confederate flags. White-hooded riders. America has a vivid collective memory of slavery. We do not need any evidence.

Do we remember the Civil War? Certainly. Do we remember the Revolutionary War? Probably. Do we remember Columbus? Not at all. We only know about him from the history books. Is he a myth? Who knows.

Holocaust deniers dispute all the evidence of the German atrocities and bring evidence to the contrary. Perhaps they can make the argument to a farmer from the Midwest who has never met a Jewish person. But they cannot make an argument to me. Even though I was born after the war, it is an important part of my memory, since I grew up among survivors and shared their experiences.

I would venture to say that there are virtually no Jews in the world that do not know about the Holocaust, but there are millions of American and European gentiles who have never heard about it. Why is this so? Because the Jewish people have a collected memory of the harrowing attempt to exterminate us, a memory kept alive by the specter of genocide still hanging over us. Will our grandchildren remember it? Perhaps not. The memory may fade if circumstances change, and if nothing is done to preserve it.

As we have seen, what drives memory over the span of many generations is intense passion. Hatred. Revenge. Anger. Resentment. But Jewish children are not indoctrinated with the desire to exact revenge on the Germans. Jews have been conditioned over the centuries and the millennia to move on, to look forward and not backward. We are happy just to be alive, to lead successful lives and provide for our families.

The Holocaust may indeed be forgotten someday, but the Exodus from Egypt and the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai will never be forgotten. The genius of the Torah and the Sages who composed the liturgy and the prayers was to weave the memories of the Exodus into every aspect of observant Jewish life. Our prayers are constructed around the Exodus. The observances that form the fabric of our daily lives commemorate the experience of our Egyptian bondage and liberation. Our lives, the lives of our parents, the lives of our grandparents and so on going back millennia

are completely enmeshed with the memory of the Exodus. And in this way, the memory can go on forever.

Why didn't the Torah and the Sages construct the memory around the Giving of the Torah being that it is more important than the Exodus? It is because at Mount Sinai the entire nation experienced God in a state of national prophecy. It is impossible to build a memory on a prophetic experience which we cannot imagine in our minds. We can conjure images of slavery, backbreaking labor, harsh slave masters, frogs, locusts, we can relate to all these, and therefore, they can become part of our collective memory. But we cannot relate to a prophetic vision of God. Therefore, the Torah and the Sages constructed the memory around the experiences of the Exodus, which culminated with the Sefirah countdown to the arrival at Mount Sinai. In that context, we can remember the Giving of the Torah.

According to the Chinuch, the purpose of the commandment to count the Sefirah is to commemorate the spontaneous countdown of the people in Egypt before and after the Exodus. They knew they were heading toward a national encounter with God at the mountain in the desert, and this thought was so exciting to them that they counted the days, even though they had not been instructed to do so. The count of the Sefirah, therefore, provides a direct connection between the Exodus and the Giving of the Torah. We remember the Exodus and, by extension, the Giving of the Torah.

This is, I believe, the meaning of *emunah peshutah*, simple faith. We do not need documents, artifacts and philosophical arguments to prove to us that we were liberated from Egypt and that we received the Torah from God at Mount Sinai. We need just take a look at the lives we live, the lives our ancestors lived for thousands of years, and we know it is true. The Jewish collective remembers.

Do we know for a fact that there was a Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem that was destroyed two millennia ago? Of course, we do. We break a glass under the wedding canopy so that the loss of Jerusalem is never forgotten. We leave unpainted patches on our walls to remind us. We fast several times a year, and we go into mourning on the Ninth of Av. We pray three times a day that Jerusalem should be rebuilt. We have never forgotten Jerusalem.

The footprint of Jerusalem on our lives is much smaller than the footprint of the Exodus, which is only one thousand years earlier. If we remember Jerusalem, we certainly remember the Exodus and by extension the Giving of the Torah and the formation of an everlasting covenant between God and the Jewish people.