

TRUSTING THE TORAH'S SAGES

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What Chazal Knew and What We Know

Teach Contemporary Science

What do we tell our pupils when they discover in the words of Chazal statements that do not agree with contemporary secular knowledge, particularly with the natural sciences which have made tremendous forward strides since ancient times?

Before us lies a paved road that protects our pupils from stumbling-blocks, and I think it is the true road.

First of all, we are not to keep the pupils from studying these subjects. On the contrary, we are to teach them the methodology of these subjects in a satisfactory and enlightening manner. For only the masses who neither know nor understand the methodology of these disciplines believe all the boasts of our contemporaries that this generation is the wisest of all and that all of nature - in the heavens and on earth - has been revealed to the contemporary sages who from the peaks of their wisdom look down upon all preceding generations.

But one who knows and understands how these disciplines function, knows and understands that while it is true that contemporary scholars deserve honor and glory in many matters that they have demonstrated - measured, weighed, or counted - that were unknown in earlier generations; nevertheless the theories built upon these observations are for the most part no more than very shaky guesses. New hypotheses are proposed daily. What is praised today as unalterable truth, is questioned tomorrow and then ignored. Each is different from the others, but they all have no solid foundation.

Similarly, there are statements in the works of the ancient nations that only 50 to 100 years ago were laughed at or denounced as lies by the wise men of the generation, whereas today's scholars recognize that there is some truth in them. There are matters of wisdom that were known to the ancients which have been lost and are unknown to the contemporaries. Consequently if we find statements in the works of the ancients that contradict the estimates of our contemporaries, we cannot decide instantly that the former are lies and that the latter are definitely right.

Sages of Torah, not Masters of Science

In my opinion, the first principle that every student of Chazal's statements must keep before his eyes is the following: Chazal were the sages of G-d's law - the receivers, transmitters, and teachers of His toros, His *mitzvos*, and His interpersonal laws. They did not especially master the natural sciences, geometry, astronomy, or medicine -

except insofar as they needed them for knowing, observing, and fulfilling the Torah. We do not find that this knowledge was transmitted to them from Sinai.

Nowadays too it is enough for the non-specialist to know about any of these areas of knowledge whatever contemporary experts teach that is generally accepted as true. This applies to the lawyer *vis-a-vis* all other areas, to the mathematician and the astronomer regarding the natural sciences, and to the expert on flora regarding all other areas. We expect none of them to seek out the truth and satisfy his inclinations in any field other than his own specialty.

Moreover, even in the area where one is an expert, it is neither possible for him nor expected of him to know everything through personal investigation and experience. Most of his knowledge rests upon the investigations of others. If they have erred it is not his fault. It is sufficient and praiseworthy if his knowledge encompasses all that is accepted as true at his time and place and generation. The greatness of his wisdom is in no way belittled if in a later generation it is discovered that some of the things he maintained or accepted on the authority of others are unreliable. The same is true for Chazal in these areas. The greatest of them knew all the wisdom and science of all the great non-Jewish scholars whose wisdom and teachings became famous in their generations.

They Were Up-to-Date

Imagine if a scholar such as Humboldt had lived in their times and had traveled to the ends of the world for his biological investigations. If upon his return he would report that in some distant land there is a humanoid creature growing from the ground or that he found mice that had been generated from the soil and had in fact seen a mouse that was half earth and half flesh, and his report had been accepted by the world as true, wouldn't we expect Chazal to discuss the Torah aspects that apply to these instances? What laws of defilement and decontamination apply to these creatures? Or would we expect them to go on long journeys to find out whether what the world has accepted is really true? And if, as we see things today, these instances are considered fiction, can Chazal be blamed for ideas that were accepted by the naturalists of their times? And this is what really happened. These statements are to be found in the works of Pliny, who lived in Rome at the time the Second Temple was destroyed, and who collected in his books on nature all that was well-known and accepted in his day.

The Talmud in *Bova Kama* declares "A human spine, after seven years, turns into a snake; this applies only if he did not kneel at *Modim*. " Anyone who reads this finds it laughable, but Pliny says the same statement almost word for word, "After a number of years the human spine turns into a snake." Chazal, however, used this to teach a mussor lesson. To any mind it is clear that every similarly surprising statement of Chazal, if we look into it, was accepted as true by the scholars of the time.

We find that Chazal themselves considered the wisdom of the gentile scholars equal to their own in the natural sciences. To determine who was right in areas where the gentile sages disagreed with their own knowledge, they did not rely on their tradition but on reason. Moreover they even respected the opinion of the gentile scholars, admitting when the opinion of the latter seemed more correct than their own. In the Talmud we learn:

The Jewish sages said, "By day the sun passes beneath the firmament and at night above it." The sages of the nations maintained, "By day beneath the firmament

and at night beneath the ground.” And Rabi said, “Their opinion seems more correct than ours. “

To my thinking, this clearly proves what I have been saying. This is my approach to the study of these areas with my limited faculties. If I have erred, may HaShem forgive my errors.

Learn to Say, "I do not know"

I wish to add one more point - in my opinion an essential rule for every person who teaches our holy Torah, whether Tanach or Halachah or Agadah. That is: Get into the habit of saying, "I don't know." It is not within a teacher's power nor is it his obligation - to know everything and to resolve every difficulty. Even Chazal left a number of matters unresolved, all the more so lesser people like ourselves. Let us admit unashamedly before our pupils, "This is something we do not know."

We must be extremely cautious not to create a forced explanation for a verse or a statement in Agadah or a statement in the Talmud simply in order to cover our ignorance. When we admit that we do not know, our pupils learn to humble themselves before the wisdom of Chazal and all the more so before the statements of G-d and the expressions of His holy spirit.

Is Agadah from Sinai?

A Dangerous Approach

You are of the opinion that the *agados* were received [by Moshe from G-d] at Sinai, and that there is no distinction in this respect between them and the halachic statements that were transmitted. As far as my limited mind can grasp, this is a dangerous approach that poses a grave danger for the pupils who grow up believing this concept. For it very nearly opens the gates of heresy before them.

What should these wretches do if they hear from their teachers today, “Agadic statements were transmitted at Sinai just like the main body of Torah,” and then they discover the declarations of the greatest of our early talmudic commentators (*rishonim*) upon whom all of Jewry relies - in which one of them says, “Agadic statements are not articles of faith but reasonable assumptions,” and another says, “They were stated as exaggerations,” or “as one man speaks to another, making statements that are not intended to be true but to entertain their listener for a while,” or “They narrated what they had dreamed,” or “Learn from [Agadah] only things that make sense,” and so on? What are these wretches to do when they read these and similar declarations about statements they were taught by their teachers to believe came from Sinai with no difference between them and the main body of Torah?

The Road to Life

They will find themselves in great spiritual danger, ready to reject both equally and to accept only what their little brains comprehend. It would be better for them not to study Torah and *mitzvos* in depth and simply to keep *mitzvos* by rote rather than tread this dangerous path! Which is why it is my humble opinion that we are not to budge from the road to life shown us by our *rishonim* when they made a major and intrinsic distinction between statements made as transmissions from G-d to Moshe and statements made as Agadah. Their very names speak for themselves. The former were

transmitted from master to disciple, and their original source is a human ear hearing from the mouth of Moshe who heard at Sinai. The latter, though transmitted from master to disciple (for many agadic statements are introduced by a disciple in the name of his master and sometimes even in the name of the master's master), have their origin in what the originating scholar stated as his own opinion in accord with his broad understanding of Tanach and the ways of the world, or as statements of mussor and fear of G-d to attract his audience to Torah and *mitzvos*.

You cite statements in *Yalkut Shim'oni*, *Talmud Yerushalmi*, and *Maseches Soferim*, all of which imply that agadic statements were told to Moshe at Sinai. You also point out that the Talmud forbids men in a certain state of defilement to study Agadah as well as Halachah.

What Is Agadah?

Allow me to posit a general principle: agadic statements are surely not ordinary or irrelevant statements. They are extremely precious statements which are surely pertinent to the intention of the Torah's Giver, blessed is He. For, beyond the study and transmission of the details of Jewish practice so that Jewry should know how to act, every scholar to whom G-d grants the ability to do so, draws wisdom and mussor from the well of Torah and *mitzvos* according to his time and place, and according to his understanding and talents, in order to draw Jewish hearts to love of G-d and of His Torah. These are the *darshonim* of every generation.³⁸ In his lectures, each of them develops his unique style in accord with his nature and spirit. There is no doubt that this form of expression is acceptable to G-d so long as it does not stray from the way of truth and uprightness. It is acceptable and part of His intention from the very giving of His Torah, when He informed Moshe of these aspects of Torah, too - but in a general way, without going into all the details that some scholar might at some time express publicly in a lecture. He transmitted it generally so that each scholar could develop his own ideas and produce fresh flowers in the garden of Torah and *mitzvos* to please G-d and man. It is no wonder that defiled men may not learn Agadah any more than Halachah, for agadic statements are as a whole considered part of Torah and most of them are based on verses in Tanach.

You cite from the Talmud that agadic works are categorized as Oral Torah which it was forbidden to put in writing. But this does not mean that they originated at Sinai. Many statements were not made at Sinai, yet were forbidden to be put into writing. These include every new insight (*chidush*) the Sages discovered based on their own reasoning; laws they established for situations that arose in their times; commentaries, distinctions, and derivations that they arrived at in order to clarify *halachos*; as well as all their amendments and decrees. It is clear that the lesson of "*kesov lecho ess hadevorim hoeileh* write these things for yourself," means that "these" you put in writing but you do not put into writing anything else related to Torah, including *agados*.

Traditions That Are Not from Sinai

You write that there are [agadic] statements about which it is impossible to say that Chazal invented them, such as the statement by Rabbi Yochanon bar Chanina⁴¹ that the earth for Adam HoRishon was piled up during the first hour of the morning, etc., particularly since [you say,] a major area of Halachah is based on this statement: the computation of the new moons. Similarly, many other *midroshim* have no basis or

root in Tanach, nor are they logically inferable; they must surely be traditions transmitted from master to disciple.

You are surely right in saying that there are many statements which those who related them did not arrive at by their own reasoning, but had received from their masters. This is particularly true for historical incidents such as the stories of Avrohom in Ur Kasdim or the life of Moshe before he was chosen to be G-d's emissary, and similar stories. A clear proof of this is that we find agadic stories recounted by later talmudic sages (*amoro'im*) which are found almost word for word in the writings of Philo of Alexandria who lived several hundred years before them at the time of the Second Temple. Yet even these stories need not have been transmitted from Sinai, but could have been part of the national heritage from earlier generations. It seems reasonable to assume that historical details were transmitted from the earliest generations - those of Adam, Enosh, Noach, and Eiver to Avrohom and from him to his descendants.

Nevertheless, to my limited intelligence, it seems impossible to swear that all those stories are true and to compare them to those told by Moshe and the other prophets. Some of them may have been stated as parables for some *mussor* or intellectual purpose. And even if someone were to say that the tales of Avrohom's early life with Terach and Nimrod in Ur Kasdim were parables inferred from Avrohom's having recognized his Creator at the age of three and from HaShem's statement "I am HaShem who took you out of Ur Kasdim," one could not invalidate his position. I can demonstrate that. According to the opinion in Chazal that Avrohom did not convert until he was 48 or older there is no room for any of these stories; if they had been accepted by Jewry as Torah truth, there would be no way to set his conversion at so late a date. Do not be surprised at this [contradiction], for even about the story of Iyov some of Chazal maintain that it was only a parable to teach wisdom, *mussor*, and fear of G-d in the form of a lofty story that tugs at people's hearts.

Impossible?

It seems to me that this applies as well to the statement you cited about the day of Adam's creation. You write that it is impossible for Chazal to have made this statement without a genuine tradition, particularly since a major area of Halachah - calculating lunar and solar cycles - is based on this statement.

It seems possible that this statement was made, not as the report of an incident that really took place, but was derived agadically from the verse, "*V'odom biykor bal yolin.*" I can demonstrate that this is reasonable. The preceding statement of Rav Osha'ya quoting Rav is no more than a reasonable guess; see Rashi there. I recall having seen some sage wonder about Rabbi Yochanon ben Chanina's statement: "How can you say that the creation of Adam was begun immediately at the beginning of the sixth day? Didn't the creation of animals, beasts, and crawling creatures precede Adam on that very day?" He thus demonstrates that Rabbi Yochanon bar Chanina's statement was not made to teach history but is an Agadah that teaches a moral or intellectual lesson.

According to Rabbi Shelomo Ibn Aderes in his commentary to the Agados, the *agadah* of the moon's protesting and being punished is only a parable to teach us wisdom and *mussor*. Is this reason to, G-d forbid, undermine the basis for determining our months and our yomim *tovim*? This seems to be conclusive evidence of the truth of my position.

Further Proofs Are Not Convincing

You point to the 32 principles by which Agadah is derived, one of which is “parallel texts” (*gezeirah shovah*) which no person may originate, but for which he must have a transmitted tradition. You wish to demonstrate from this that agadic statements were transmitted from Sinai. Forgive me, but we have no evidence that the principle that no one may originate his own *gezeirah shovah* applies to agadic statements. If you will take the trouble to study the borysa-text listing the 32 principles, you will find that most of its statements speak of *midroshim* of *Nevi'im* and *Kesuvim*, and that the *midroshim* cited for the principle of *gezeirah shovah* are all either on *Nevi'im* or *Kesuvim* or to derive Torah laws from statements in Nach (which cannot be done with the 13 [halachic] principles of Rabbi Yishmoel). It is absolutely impossible to say that these *midroshim* were transmitted at Sinai.