

# The Royal Prophet

## Appendix:

### Authority and Argument in the Study of Tanach<sup>1</sup>

What is a source? When I study Tanach, I consider certain sources to be ‘authoritative’. I’ll draw extensively from their words while ignoring others. Why? What makes these different? Isn’t one opinion as valid as any other? And once I’ve found authoritative sources, how am I to understand their internal disputes? Is there more than one version of the truth?

## AUTHORITY

Before we begin, we’ll make a few observations about the Torah world and its authorities:

- Generally, the earlier a commentator lived, the more respect his thoughts and interpretations receive. In fact, a keen student can even sense changes in the standards that *define* authority from one historical period to another (meaning: relatively less is expected of a later scholar than of his predecessors).
- Of all our history’s commentators, sages from the Talmudic period (Chazal) enjoy the greatest influence and inspire the deepest analysis. This is in large part due to the fact that the words of Chazal are profound enough to both invite and support the extra analysis.<sup>2</sup> The opinions of Chazal are (by and large)<sup>3</sup> untouchable and used as the baseline standard for later generations.
- Modern writers (like the author of Da’as Sofrim) will very often comment by suggesting possible scenarios rather than through categorical statements. The implication exists that we no longer have the complete clarity necessary to study Tanach in the same way as it was once done.

So what defines authority in a world that changes? Here are some of the common elements demanded of all “authoritative” discussions of Tanach:

*Who performs brain surgery? Who fixes broken nuclear reactors? There’s a curriculum of study that must be mastered before we as a society will endorse an individual and allow him to practice in a skill-oriented profession. Why not for Torah as well?*

Everyone’s opinion is worth something. I have my own feelings about the relative merits of global free trade and my wife generally listens politely, nodding every now and then. I could call up the local newspapers to try and build my audience, but I don’t think the odds favor success.

Someone who’s read through the Bible a couple of times also has the right to an opinion about its contents. But I’m not as nice as my wife: why should I listen? Before I’ll invest my time in a commentary, I want to be sure that the author has the qualifications that promise to make my read worthwhile.

From experience I know that the sages of the Talmud were intimately familiar with the whole Tanach and with the Oral tradition that accompanied it. Their observations and analyses were invariably profound and their ability to relate the lessons of Tanach to the challenges of real life was unparalleled. So for starters, any author who wants my attention had better be very familiar with Chazal. The fact that large libraries of Torah books exist in abundance and that so many new books are being written and published each year is a huge blessing, but it’s no replacement for old-fashioned wisdom. Nor do searchable computerized databases of Torah literature provide much help:<sup>4</sup> no computer software yet written (or

<sup>1</sup> From the book “The Royal Prophet and other thoughtful essays on the book of Shmuel” by Boruch Clinton - [www.marbitz.com](http://www.marbitz.com).

<sup>2</sup> This is obvious to anyone who’s ever put serious effort into Talmud.

<sup>3</sup> We’ll discuss this point in greater detail below.

<sup>4</sup> To be sure, computerized Torah literature has its uses, it’s just that creating original Torah thought isn’t among them.

likely to be written in the foreseeable future) can make the thematic connections intuitively derived by an expert Torah mind.

But that's not enough. A scholar must know when one seemingly absolute Talmudic statement is qualified by others - though they may be distant or obscure. The Talmud, as we've noted before, is one cohesive whole, and one must have access to the whole thing to be sure he's getting the full picture of any particular subject.

All this requires vast and deep knowledge that can come only through great investments of time and energy.

And one last thing. In order to give me confidence in his ability to properly understand Tanach, a commentator will have to display his loyalty to the Torah's divine origins; as we believe that, in addition to everything else, true Torah scholarship requires help from Above.<sup>5</sup> Surely that can't come without belief in Who's Above.

The ability to think logically is critical for Torah study of any kind, but success also requires an amount of received wisdom. In some ways, the Talmud, despite the fact that it was written down more than 1500 years ago, is still oral. Just as it's true that all the medical books in the world won't completely prepare a doctor for delicate surgery - he must also train side by side with an experienced surgeon - so too, there are nuances, ancient traditions and rules<sup>6</sup> that must be learned from a qualified teacher before one can be sure he's "reading right" - you can't get it all from books.

Tradition may also provide actual historical details to clarify what would otherwise be clouded and inexplicable passages of Tanach.<sup>7</sup> Access to these details is also crucial. In our generation, I doubt there are any direct traditions of ancient events left that are both unwritten *and* unforgotten. This type of legacy was the privilege of earlier generations...mostly those of the Talmudic era.

Who grants authority? This question has a rather subtle, yet beautifully simple answer:

What are all those rabbinic books really about? The job of the rabbis of the Talmud (the Amoraim) involved nothing more (and nothing less!) than explaining the words of their predecessors, the Tanaim (authors of the Mishna) and placing those words in their proper context. The medieval scholars (Gaonim and Rishonim) worked to understand the meaning and significance of the words of the Talmud - and to share that understanding with their students. Following the trend, the scholars of the past five hundred years have devoted all of their enormous talents to comparable tasks.

And the job's not done. As long as there's another generation of Jews willing and eager to learn the holy Torah, there will be teachers and scholarly works to help them make sense of the complex and quickly growing body of Torah literature.

What does all this tell us about one generation's relationship with another?

By devoting the greater part of his life's work to understanding and explaining the words of those who came before him, a Jew is acknowledging their authenticity. He is, first of all, admitting that it's no easy thing for him (and for his contemporaries) to fully understand and appreciate these words; that they were written by men of greater intellect. He further shows how the effort is *justified* when weighed against the value of the wisdom found within the words of the Torah leaders of past generations. Isn't this process an expression of respect - and authentication - for the ideas and credentials of the earlier sages?<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> "This (diligent Torah study) without that (sincere supplication from G-d) is not enough." TB Nidah 70b

<sup>6</sup> Reference is made to many of the rules that relate to the study of homiletic passages in the Talmud (aggados) in a collection of essays found at the beginning of *ספר עין יעקב*. It should be noted that there isn't complete unanimity among the contributing scholars as to the exact substance of these rules.

<sup>7</sup> *רב צבי הירש חיות במבוא האגדות שלו* writes that whenever the Talmud uses the words "גמרנו" or "מסורה" *בידינו* an actual direct historical tradition is indicated.

<sup>8</sup> This argument can perhaps be seen as an amplification of a thought expressed by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (the author of *Mesilas Yesharim*) in his "מאמר על אגדות חז"ל" where he writes that we rely on the judgement of the arrangers of the Talmud "for they included nothing in their books except that which they had investigated and discovered to be proper in every way..."

How reluctant are our rabbis to use their great abilities to create something new! This reluctance is really very old and, at times, has been so deeply ingrained in the national psyche that even Jews on the fringe of religious society have expressed it as a matter of course. One striking example is the following rather lengthy passage from Flavius Josephus, the Jew of complex loyalties who wrote histories for his Roman masters during and after the period of the destruction of the Second Temple:

*“And, indeed, hence hath arisen that accusation which some make against us, that we have not produced men that have been the inventors of new operations, or of new ways of speaking; for others think it a fine thing to persevere in nothing that has been delivered down from their forefathers, and these testify it to be an instance of the sharpest wisdom when these men venture to transgress those traditions; whereas we, on the contrary, suppose it to be our only wisdom and virtue to admit no actions nor supposals that are contrary to our original laws; which procedure of ours is a just and sure sign that our law is admirably constituted; for such laws as are not thus well made are convicted upon trial to want amendment.”*<sup>9</sup>

Authority, then, may be seen as a product of scholastic and spiritual excellence. Identifying authority is essentially the art of recognizing that excellence.

One final point: we must be careful not to confuse “authority” with “style.” Just because I don’t give much of a hearing in this book to certain types of commentary, doesn’t necessarily mean that I consider them un-authoritative. These might just be systems that I didn’t feel would lend themselves well to my particular approach.

## ARGUMENT

Given that there’s such a thing as an authentic source, how then, can two equally authentic sources argue about an historical event or philosophical truth? In a way, the Talmud itself asks this question:

The Tanach (Judges Ch. 19) relates the events leading up to the terrible carnage of the Jewish civil war. There was a man who became angry with his concubine and separated from her, sending her back to her father’s home. Later, reconciled and in the process of returning to their home in Benjamin, the couple spent the night in the town of Giva’ah, only to be horribly mistreated by some local criminals. The concubine died as an indirect result of the abuse and, upon hearing of the atrocity, the other tribes attacked Benjamin to protest what they felt was a weak response to the crime.

But what was it about the woman’s behavior, asked the Talmud,<sup>10</sup> that made her husband separate from her in the first place? R’ Eviyasar and R’ Yonason each presented an answer...one seemingly exclusive of the other. Subsequently, the Talmud relates,

*“...R’ Eviyasar came across Eliyahu (Hanavi) and said to him ‘what is G-d doing?’ (Eliyahu) answered ‘He’s involved with the (matter) of the Concubine of Giva’ah.’ ‘And what is He saying?’ (Eliyahu) answered ‘Evyasar My son says this and Yonason My son says that.’ (R’ Eviyasar) said to (Eliyahu) ‘Heaven forbid! Is there any doubt before G-d [i.e., does even G-d not know the truth of what actually occurred]?’ (Eliyahu) answered ‘These and those are the words of the living G-d.’“*

But the Talmud still seems unsatisfied: how could two mutually exclusive events have both taken place; how could both R’ Eviyasar and R’ Yonason be right? The Talmud answers that the events described by both R’ Eviyasar and R’ Yonason were equally important in the general chain of events. In other words, both actually happened; each playing its own role.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Flavius Josephus: Contra Apion, Book 1, Paragraph 21:

<sup>10</sup> TB Gitten 6b

<sup>11</sup> To be fair, it must be pointed out that, based on the language of the Talmud, R’ Eviyasar himself seemed to accept his uncertainty about the historical event and understood that either he or R’ Yonason was correct - but not both. What seems to have bothered him was

The Talmud here “rewrites” what appears to be an historical debate by showing that there really is no argument but, instead, each side is describing the same thing from a different perspective. According to Rabbi E.E. Dessler<sup>12</sup> this is actually the proper way to understand all debates found among the Talmud’s aggadic passages.

Here’s an example about which written earlier in this book:

*“R’ Yonason said: ‘anyone who says that the sons of Eli sinned is mistaken...’ Rav said: ‘Pinchas [one of Eli’s sons, the other was Chofni] didn’t sin [but Chofni did sin].’ (R’ Yonason) compared Chofni to Pinchas [and therefore concluded that neither sinned]. How, then, do you understand ‘that they had consorted...(I Shmuel, 2; 22)?’ Because they weren’t quick enough with the sacrificial service, women bringing their post-partum offerings were forced to spend an extra night away from their homes and husbands so it is considered as though they had consorted with them.*

*“But Rav himself [as opposed to R’ Yonason who maintains neither son sinned] ...how does he understand “בני בליעל” [which describes Eli’s sons as sinners, but in the plural tense]? Since Pinchas could have restrained Chofni, but didn’t, it is considered as though he sinned as well.”<sup>13</sup>*

Now, a quick glance at this passage leaves the impression that Rav and R’ Yonason argue over whether or not Chofni actually sinned. In fact, even Tosafos (“מתוך”) describe it that way. But if Rabbi Dessler’s observation is correct, then there must be some other way to understand these words.

I would suggest that R’ Yonason fully agrees that Chofni did sin and that Pinchas was rebuked by the Tanach only for his failure to restrain his brother. But what exactly, wondered R’ Yonason, was the sin? We are therefore told to think of it as nothing more than the product of a lack of zeal and that neither brother “consorted.” Rav, on the other hand, doesn’t address the definition of “consort,” and could happily agree that even Chofni was innocent of such coarse and vile behavior. Rather, Rav’s focus was on which of the sons actually lacked zeal and which was “only” guilty of lacking concern for his brother’s behavior.

So Rav and R’ Yonason are only describing two aspects of the same event and might not be arguing at all. Just as R’ Dessler expected.

It would be no simple task to demonstrate R’ Dessler’s principle for every aggadic argument, but let’s examine one more example through which some kind of system might begin to be apparent.

Regarding the identity of those men whose previous contact with dead bodies prevented them from eating the Passover offering (Num. 9; 6), The Talmud (Succah 25a-b) records three opinions. Rabbi Yosi HaGalili says that the men were those assigned to carry Joseph’s bier. Rabbi Akiva says it was Mish’al and Eltzaphon (who had worked to recover the bodies of Nadav and Avihu). Rabbi Yitzchak, however, rejects both those opinions, as, in both cases, there would have been plenty of time before Passover to undergo purification (so there would have been no reason for them to remain impure). Rather, says Rabbi Yitzchak, seven days previous to Passover, these men had been involved in the burial of some anonymous individual and hadn’t the time to complete their “clean up” until the night of the fifteenth of Nissan. The Talmud seems to accept this approach and deduces from it that involvement in one mitzvah absolves you of another, subsequent mitzvah (even one of greater significance).

Now here, it would seem, we have a full-fledged, open and shut case of debate in aggadah. Is there any way to read this passage that doesn’t involve dispute over identity?

Before we address that, there’s a second loose end we should tie up. The Ben Yehoyada asks about Rabbi Yosi HaGalili and Rabbi Akiva: what were they thinking? Don’t they, too, have to deal with Rabbi Yitzchak’s question (that there would have been plenty of time to purify without skimping on their funereal duties)?

The Ben Yehoyada answers that at the time of this event (which occurred a full year after the

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only the idea that G-d Himself could entertain some doubt. This would seem to suggest an alternative explanation to that of R’ Dessler: that in general it is possible for Chazal to argue but that only in this specific case is there a unifying resolution.

<sup>12</sup> Michtav M’Eliyahu (vol 3, page 353). In that letter, Rabbi Dessler mentions a number of sources for this idea.

<sup>13</sup> TB Shabbos 55b

exodus), the Jews were enjoying their last days at Mt. Sinai. Why bother, Rabbi Yosi HaGalili's pall bearers might have thought, going through the purification process (and using up precious mai chatos)? Won't they soon have to take up their ancestor Joseph once again on the next leg of the journey to his burial? This is especially relevant since it wasn't yet known whether there would be a Pesach offering that year (as the fourteenth fell on Shabbos, the halachic status of such a combination being still unclear). And what of the bodies of Nadav and Avihu (invoked by Rabbi Akiva)? There is a tradition, says Ben Yehoyada, that they weren't buried at Sinai, but with their father Aharon on Hor Hahar. Won't they, too, soon need carrying? This, then, is the background to the debate.

But the Talmud is not a history book and it's quite likely that none of the three sages mentioned above had an opinion (or even an interest) in naming the participants – if the Torah itself didn't name them, why should we care? Isn't it possible, then, that identity wasn't the point of the whole exercise? Perhaps, instead, there are lessons to be learned from each of the *possible* identities: if it was either those who buried Nadav and Avihu or Joseph's carriers, we learn both about the importance of not wasting the red heifer ashes and of the value of proper care for the bodies of the righteous (and consideration for Aharon, who, no doubt, found comfort in being buried next to his fallen sons). If it was some anonymous individual, we learn how to weigh the demands of conflicting Torah commandments.

But the actual names of the participants are really only means to a greater end. The key lessons, are, therefore, mutually compatible and there is, again, no debate.

Here's another problem: Doesn't the existence of two (or more) Talmudic statements offering conflicting interpretations of a single verse imply an argument about the meaning of that particular verse? If each statement's source is an authentic masoretic transmission, then how could they both be right?

This question is dealt with by Rabbi Avraham the son of the Rambam in his essay on aggados: *“But you should know that (Chazal's) explanations of verses - those which aren't relevant to essentials of faith or laws of the Torah - are not a received tradition in their hands but some of them represent (a rabbi's) logical conclusions and others are attractive thoughts.... For I have no doubt that when Rabbi Yehoshua said concerning “and Yisro heard,” (Exodus. 18; 1) ‘What did he hear that made him come (to join the Jewish camp in the wilderness)? The events of the battle with Amalek’<sup>14</sup> - this must be a logical assumption and not a tradition. The proof of this is in the fact that R' Yehoshua resorts to substantiating his statement with evidence from textual context. Had these words been a direct transmission, why add textual proof? Furthermore, we see other sages besides R' Yehoshua who explicitly offer other thoughts. Now, if the matter was a received tradition, they would not have argued with R' Yehoshua. For instance, Rabbi Elazar said ‘The giving of the Torah was what Yisro heard’ and he brings proof....”<sup>15</sup>*

Now, if one sage can use his (formidable) logic to offer an assumption on a non-halachic issue, could not another sage offer his own opinion without necessarily negating the first?<sup>16</sup>

This approach can also be used to explain the many cases where scholars of the past one thousand years have appeared to take issue with, or even ignore, statements from the Talmud. Take this, rather typical, example where Rabbi David Kimchi (the Radak) raises the issue of Michal's continued suitability

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<sup>14</sup> This quotation (that of R' Yehoshua) and the subsequent one (R' Elazar) are from TB Zevachim 116a

<sup>15</sup> Essay of Rabbi Avraham ben HaRambam “החלק הרביעי.” It must be noted out that Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato in his essay on aggados disagrees and maintains that each and every textual interpretation of the sages was based on a firm tradition. For a full and informative discussion of this issue, see Rabbi Joseph Elias' note (#3) to the Eighteenth Letter of the Feldheim translation of “The Nineteen Letters” of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch (2nd edition, pp 281-3).

<sup>16</sup> Is R' Dessler (mentioned above) on the same page with R' Avraham ben HaRambam? I would suspect he is not. R' Dessler might hold that, even though there is no *debate* in aggada, *all* of the various lessons (or perspectives) represent full traditions from Sinai (each one transmitted to us by a different sage).

On the other hand, R' Avraham, who holds that Talmudic interpretations of Tanach are not necessarily based on tradition, might easily allow for actual conflicting interpretations (as the various sages aren't working from a single source).

as a wife to David - having, under her father's instructions, lived with a man named Paltiel. The Radak (I Shmuel, 25; 43) quotes two explanations from the Talmud and then writes: "All these words are distant from the way of simple understanding (pshat). But what is proper in my eyes is...."

Or consider this Talmudic passage:

*"Rabbi Yossi ben Rabbi Chanina said: (the Sinai Desert) has five names [i.e., throughout the Torah the place is referred to by five different names]. (It was, for instance, called)...the 'Sinai Desert' because onto it fell the hatred (שנאה) of the idolaters (for Israel) and what was its (real) name? Horeb was its name. And (Rabbi Yossi) argues with Rabbi Avohu for Rabbi Avohu said: Mount Sinai was its name and why, then, was it called 'Mount Horeb?' Because onto it fell destruction (חורבן) to the idolaters."*<sup>17</sup>

...Two possible ways to explain the various names attributed to the site of G-d's revelation. However, when Nachmanides (Ramban) discusses the same question,<sup>18</sup> he offers his own, entirely different, scenario (to the general effect that both Sinai and Horeb were place names, but of slightly different location or geographic importance).

I feel safe in saying that neither the Radak nor the Ramban are ignoring or negating Talmudic statements with which, of course, they were well familiar. But it's most likely that, while conscious of the huge gap separating them from their distant teachers, they expressed their own humble assessments of a passage's simplest understanding.<sup>19</sup>

So the problem of "two or three versions of the truth" simply doesn't exist. Rather, through the ages, our sages used the vehicle of "argument" to better communicate some of their deeper and more complex ideas (either through expressions of personal educated opinions or through the presentation of multiple perspectives).

Since we're here anyway, we should note that there are some<sup>20</sup> who like to attribute opposing Talmudic opinions to their authors' personalities or backgrounds. This, for a number of reasons, would seem to be an error.

First of all, there's precious little material available with which to work. By way of example, Rabbi S.R. Hirsch,<sup>21</sup> in criticizing an essay of H. Graetz, writes about attributing a "peaceable disposition" to Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai:

"What does our author (i.e., Graetz) know about the 'disposition' of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai? What *can* he know about it? Where do our literary sources offer so much as one single fact from which one could draw conclusions regarding the peaceable disposition, or the contentious nature, of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai..."

Graetz is then quoted by R' Hirsch as having referred to *one* statement of R. Yochanan ben Zakkai where, rather tangentially, he mentioned the concept of peace in explaining one facet of the Temple law. R' Hirsch continues (with more than a hint of irony)...

"So it would seem that, of the more than four decades of a man's scholarly activity, one aphorism, gleaned from his interpretation of one single Scriptural text, would be sufficient to form a historically accurate picture of his peaceable character!"

<sup>17</sup> TB Shabbos 89a; 89b

<sup>18</sup> Deut. 1; 6

<sup>19</sup> Rabbi E.E. Dessler, in *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Vol IV page 354, suggests the possibility that, since an aggadic statement is essentially useless to us if we can't apply it to our spiritual lives, then only those we actually understand are personally relevant. The others, while certainly true, must be "ignored" until we grow sharp enough to make sense of them. This, then, might be what the Radak and others had in mind with such statements (i.e., "It's distant..." really means "I don't yet understand this so let's suggest a different approach...").

<sup>20</sup> The man often considered the originator of this idea is the 19th Century author of "History of the Jews" and professor at the Judisch-Theologische Seminar in Breslau, Dr. H. Graetz. Graetz is also known for having developed many of the academic underpinnings of the Conservative movement.

<sup>21</sup> Collected Writings, Volume V, pp 7 - 8

In other words, trying to understand (from a distance of two thousand years) a complex man and his lifetime of scholarly work using only one or two statements taken blindly out of context is not likely to yield anything useful.

Secondly, Rabbi Hirsch himself shows us that a broad knowledge of the Talmudic literature can reveal how such speculations are simply wrong.<sup>22</sup>

And finally, claiming that the roots of a particular halacha or aggadic idea are to be found in a sage's deep inner nature, in some superficial habit, or in the peculiar influence of his community and age, eliminates their importance. If, for example, Hillel or Rabbi Akiva only chose one particular halachic stance over another because of their childhood experiences, then their opinions are no more authentic than mine (after all, I, too, had childhood experiences). Offering such interpretations is really nothing less than an attack against the Talmud's very authenticity!

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<sup>22</sup> The trick, I suppose, is to acquire R' Hirsch's incredible mastery of the literature! In case you haven't yet done that, I would recommend reading the first chapters of *Collected Writings, Volume V*. And remember: R' Hirsch was able to write these essays in weeks and sometimes days without the aid of computers, searchable databases or even the enormous, cross-referenced libraries that we're all used to today.