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Mesorah – Links in the Chain

>Imagine how you would respond to the following situation: It is Shabbos Shuva and you are about to give one of the most significant drashos (sermons) of the year. Resting on your shoulders is the responsibility to inspire people to come closer to HaS and to do better in the upcoming year. The pressure is intense and you are deep into preparing for this all-important delivery.

A man approaches you and says, "Rabbi, you have to meet with a friend of mine — it is very important!"

"Fine," you answer, "have him come and see me right after Shabbos."

"No Rabbi, he has to leave immediately after Shabbos, and it is imperative that you see him right away!"

My Meeting with Moshe

That afternoon there is a knock on the door. There is standing Moshe. After a brief exchange of greetings, we sit down to confront Moshe's dilemma. He begins with his life's story. How he grew up thinking that he was Christian and in fact eventually became a successful minister. At the end of her life, his Mother informed him that she was really Jewish and therefore *he* was really Jewish. We cannot imagine the upheaval in Moshe's life. But Moshe then realized why he had always had an inner affinity for Jews and Torah. He moved away from his previous lifestyle and started on the road to be a totally religious Jew.

"So what is the problem, why was it so urgent that you see me immediately?"

Moshe went on to explain that he was totally committed to ALL of Torah and mitzvos, both from the Torah and from the rabbis. He said that he believed the founding person of Christianity ("J") did not want Jews to go away from Torah and mitzvos. J's system was supposed to be for non-Jews, and that J was a "frum" Jew and a great teacher, however his ideas were twisted by others later on in time. Moshe continued to explain that J was a leader and great teacher and in fact he was Moshe's own role model (i.e., to observe a life to Torah and mitzvos, while at the same time move the non-Jewish world over to belief in the HaS of Klal Yisroel).

"So Rabbi," Moshe asked, "what, if anything, is wrong with what I believe?" He added that he had discussed this with others who saw nothing wrong since his life was one of total commitment.

The Key Significance of Mesorah

I looked at him with shock and dismay. “Moshe, if you believe this you are undermining **the** most basic foundation of Torah Judasim!” He was taken aback at my strong reaction especially since others apparently thought otherwise. I continued to explain that what makes Judaism unique is our knowledge that **millions** of people stood at Mt. Sinai and directly communicated with HaS, actually heard HaS speak to them, call upon Moshe Rabbeinu, and instruct them individually. No other “religion” makes such a claim, nor can they!

“But,” Moshe protested, “that was many years ago how do you really know this happened?”

“We have just celebrated Pesach (Passover), it is interesting that a recent survey showed that an overwhelming majority of Jews do something to commemorate Pesach. Why is this significant? Pesach is the holiday where we mark not only our exodus from Egypt, but also how we got out of Egypt! The overt demonstration of hasgacha pratis (divine providence), which was clear to all, even the Egyptians recognized that the G-d of the Jews was in charge. There was no doubting the power and direct involvement of HaS.

“The challenge with the way most Jews memorialize the Holocaust is that with the passage of time, and as the eye witnesses pass away, there comes an opening for the cynical to deny undisputable history (as we see today with the madman in Iran). Therefore the Torah in numerous ways (e.g., through oral accounting, such as the Seder and via other mitzvos), emphasizes the concept of transmission, for parents and grandparents to instruct and inform the next generation about what they were told of the original eyewitness account of events.

“This is the idea of MESORAH, that we all represent links in the golden chain that leads directly back to Sinai. The chain is from father to son (parent to child) and also from Rebbe (teacher) to talmid (student).

Class Notes vs. Live Lecture

“It clear that HaS meant this system to lie at the bedrock of Torah. Open up to any posuk (verse) of the Torah and try to understand it literally—it is impossible! An example of this is Tefillin, “Bind them as a sign upon your arm and wear them as frontlets between your eyes.” Let me ask you Moshe, what are Tefillin supposed to look like? There is no information given! Who would write such an instruction book?

“The answer is that by design the “Five Books of Moses” are meant to be the “lecture notes” of the “class.” We know with someone who is an excellent “note taker,” if you read their notes of a class that you missed, it is unlikely that you will fully comprehend the actual lecture. Reading the notes can in no way be compared to actually hearing the lecture in person and directly interacting with the teacher. This is exactly what HaS designed — that each student should have direct interaction with a “Rebbe,” not just taught in a sterile classroom setting, but molded by someone from the previous generation. That Rebbe is then someone to be valued and treasured because he is closer to Sinai than I am. This is the exact opposite of the secular world where they believe that the previous generation is closer to monkeys!

“You see Moshe, I was taught and molded by my Rebbe, the Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim shilta, and he by his rebbe and...” (and I proceeded to name and give a brief historical background of each teacher going back 7 generations until tracing back to the Vilna Gaon himself). “This is what we mean by mesorah. And what do you Moshe know about your supposed “rebbe?” Moshe admitted freely that widely published accounts of J’s life are unreliable for many reasons, amongst them that they were written many years after his death.

“So we see that mesorah is the foundation of all Torah and mitzvos.” Moshe was floored and walked away with a new appreciation for the key importance of mesorah and indeed the unique role that it plays in Torah.

In the next issue we will examine the crucial role of mesorah in the area of Mussar.