

THE ACCURACY OF OUR WRITTEN TORAH

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Our Torah scroll is perhaps our most revered physical possession today. The honor and respect with which we handle our Torah in synagogue results from our knowledge that it contains the words of Hashem as dictated to Moshe over 3300 years ago. Meticulous care has been taken to insure the proper transmission of the Torah. There are many factors which collectively contribute to the wholeness of the Torah, but perhaps the single most important factor is the orthography, or proper spelling of each word. In fact, the orthography of the Torah is considered so important that the scribe is instructed to "be careful with your task, for it is sacred work; if you add or subtract even a single letter, [it is as if] you have destroyed the entire world!" (Eruvin 13a). The Rambam writes (Hil. Sefer Torah 7:11) that if one letter is added to or missing from a Torah, it is invalidated and is not conferred the sanctity of a Torah scroll. Special mechanisms were established by the Sages to ensure its accurate transmission through the generations (see, for example, Megilah 18b; YD #274). (From the wording of the Rambam, it appears that this is true even if the wanton letter does not affect the meaning of the word. This is also the ruling of the Tikunei ha'Zohar (#25), Ramban end of Introduction to the Torah, Magen Avraham and Vilna Gaon OC 143:4, Sha'agat Aryeh (#36), Chatam Sofer (OC #52), in contrast to Minchat Chinuch's ruling (#613) that a missing or additional letter does not invalidate a Torah scroll unless it affects either a word's pronunciation or its literal or exegetical meaning.) Originally, the Torah was so well preserved that every letter was counted (Kiddushin 30a), which is why the early scribes were given the title "Soferim" ("Counters/Scribes"). Thousands of traditions were handed down specifying orthographic details. One of the more well-known is that the letter 'Vav' of the word 'Gachon' Parasha Vayikra (11:42) is the middle letter of the Torah (Kiddushin, *ibid.* -- refer to Rabbi Kornfeld's "Torah from the Internet" p. 122 for an in-depth discussion of this and similar traditions.)

Indeed, the text of today's Torah scrolls the world over are uniform, with very few exceptions. As we will demonstrate, the Mesorah (transmitted tradition) of our text was well tended to; its margin of error appears to be less than .00004, and to involve only insignificant letters at that. However, upon investigation it is evident that there existed many variants among older Torah scrolls. This prompts us to ask a number of questions: (a) First, one must ask how it came to be that there existed such diverse texts. Did they derive from individual copyists' errors, or were there differing Mesorot? (b) Second, one must ask how we came to accept at present one text as "correct" from among the many that once existed. (c) Third, can we have any degree of certainty that the present day unified text is the accurate text of the Torah as transmitted to and transcribed by Moshe? In this essay, we will attempt to address these questions.

II

Originally, it was easy to attend to the Mesorah of the Torah text. A Torah scroll written in Moshe's own hand was kept in or near the Holy Ark in the Holy of Holies (Bava Batra 14a). This text, which apparently was accessible to the Kohanim (Rashi Bava Batra 14b s.v. Sefer; see also Tosefot, Bava Batra 14a s.v. Shelo), undoubtedly served as the proof text for all other texts. The scroll which each Jewish king was required to write and bear at all times was likewise copied from this scroll (Rambam, Hil. Sefer Torah 7:2, based on Yerushalmi Sanhedrin 2:6). The kingly scrolls, in turn, served as proof texts after their owner's death.

The destruction of the first Beit ha'Mikdash most likely brought with it the destruction of these proof texts. Ezra the Scribe, who led the people back to Eretz Yisrael and began to rebuild the Beit ha'Mikdash, set to reestablishing a proof text. At this point, a defining event occurred. According to the Talmud Yerushalmi (Ta'anit 4:2), three ancient scrolls were found in the Temple confines which had slightly variant texts. (Although the Yerushalmi does not specify when this occurred, other sources relate that it happened in the days of Ezra and according to some versions, it was Ezra himself who found the scrolls -- see Torah Sheleimah, Shemot 24:25.) The Yerushalmi then relates that the correct version of the Torah was determined by virtue of a majority of 2 against 1.

Throughout the period of the Second Beit ha'Mikdash, a scroll referred to as 'Sefer Ezra' or 'Sefer Ha'azarah' (Moed Katan 18b) served as the standard for all others. Sefer Ha'azarah was either the very scroll that was written by Ezra the Scribe or one that was copied from it (Rashi, *ibid.*). Professional Soferim were employed at the Beit ha'Mikdash to correct private scrolls based on this scroll (Ketuvot 106a; Shekalim 10b). These highly accurate scrolls and their copies remained the standard until well after the destruction of the second Beit ha'Mikdash. The Talmud in Kiddushim (30a) establishes that the accurate counting of the letters of the Torah was preserved at least until Tanaitic times (2nd century CE).

III

A century or so later, in the times of the Amora'im, Rav Yosef commented that this accuracy was already somewhat diluted. Such a lack of accuracy can only have been made apparent by the existence of divergent texts. The Gemara makes it clear that even this dilution of accuracy was only with regard to Malei and Chaser. (Malei and Chaser refer to unpronounced letters, such as 'Vav' and 'Yud,' which lend added accent to vowels. Their presence or absence does not affect the meaning of a word). Nor does the Gemara state in how many instances doubts arose regarding orthography. It is possible that these uncertainties were limited to a very few instances. In fact, nowhere in the Talmud or Midrashic sources is there recorded a dispute over the orthography of a specific Malei or Chaser, either before or after the time of Rav Yosef. (It should be pointed out that according to some, Rav Yosef was merely stating that *he* could not determine the exact number of letters in the Torah, since he himself was blind and could not count them by heart and he was not willing to rely on another person's count -- see Rav Reuvain Margulies in "HaMikra V'HaMesorah," #4).

Due to the dispersal of the Jewish people and the lack of a central supervising authority, variations in scrolls continued. Authorities in Israel and Bavel, independently, undertook to produce one highly accurate text. These authorities, called the Masorites, thrived and produced such works between the 8th and 10th centuries. Their methodology, which was based on the system described by the Yerushalmi Ta'anit (above, section II), may be called the "eclectic process," or majority rule. Simply stated, this process involves surveying a great variety of Torah scrolls whereby each letter of the text is compared and contrasted. The correct orthography is determined based on the majority of texts, and hence errors are weeded out. For example, if in a survey of 200 Sifrei Torah, 198 were found to have in one particular place a spelling of "honour" and 2 were found to have the spelling as 'honor', it may be assumed that the former is the correct orthography, while the latter were introduced by careless scribes. (Of course, the eclectic process can only be employed using older texts of good standing to some degree. This is evident from the fact that only the three scrolls found in the Temple confines were considered for the process, in the time of Ezra. After all, certainly hundreds of scrolls were in existence at the time.)

The crowning jewel of the master texts produced in this manner was the one produced in Teveryah by Aharon ben Moshe ben Asher (known simply as "Ben Asher") of the late 10th century. The Rambam extols his text as being extremely accurate and it was adopted by the Rambam and many others as the standard (Rambam, Hil. Sefer Torah, beginning of 8:4). In the Rambam's time, this Torah was known to be in Alexandria, Egypt. (Traditionally, the "Keter Aram Tzova," or Aleppo Codex, presently in Yerushalayim, is purported to be the Ben Asher manuscript. Unfortunately, only the Nevi'im and Ketuvim sections of this manuscript remain intact, as virtually the entire Torah section of the manuscript was lost to fire a few decades ago.)

Today, the Teimani (Yemenite) Torah scrolls are very likely exact copies of this text. It is well known that the Yemenite Jews adhered firmly to the Rambam's rulings in every matter of Halachah. The limited size and dispersion of their community throughout the generations made it much easier for them to preserve their Mesorah. Indeed, there is no variance among Teimani scrolls today.

Despite the Rambam's efforts to ensure the perpetuation of one standardized text, divergent scrolls began to propagate once again. A contemporary of the Rambam, the RaMaH (Rav Meir Halevi Abulafia -- early 13th century), undertook to reestablish a text of exceptional accuracy. The RaMaH again used the eclectic process, surveying hundreds of old and reputable scrolls. (RaMaH did not have the Ben Asher manuscript at his disposal.) The resultant text was published in his work "Mesores Seyag la'Torah." Given the great effort that RaMaH invested in this project and his standing as a leading Halachic authority, his work became the definitive standard until today, certainly with regard to orthography (see Ohr Torah, Minchat Shai and Keset ha'Sofer).

We have thus answered the first two of our questions: (a) Since a standard, approved Mesorah for the Torah text existed throughout much of our history, in all probability the variant texts of early Torahs may be attributed to sloppy copyists, who did not carefully compare their work with the Masoretic proof-text of the times, or were not able to do so.

(b) The manner in which the mistaken texts were weeded out from the correct ones was the eclectic process of the Yerushalmi in Ta'anit, which has been employed regularly since the time of Chazal in order to ensure proper transmission of the Torah.

IV

(c) However, we have not yet addressed our third question: Can it be scientifically demonstrated that our text is indeed the correct one (i.e., that the eclectic process worked)? Halachically, we are secure in our reliance on the eclectic process (Teshuvot Ginat Veradim 1:2:6). This does not mean, though, that our Mesorah is 100% in agreement with the original text that was handed to us by Moshe. It only means that we are doing our best and are following the dictates of Halachah in determining how to write our Torahs. In fact, many authorities write that our texts may very well not match up with the true Mosaic text (authorities in OC 143:4, Sha'agat Aryeh. Chatam Sofer and Minchat Chinuch cited at the beginning of section I, see Hagaon Rav Moshe Sternbuch in "Mitzvat ha'Yom," pp. 32-43, who discusses the Halachic aspects of this statement in detail.). But does that mean that our texts may be "wildly inaccurate", or that "one or two" discrepancies may exist? Or, returning to our first question, can it be proven that enough attention was given to preserving the Mesorah and that copyists' errors were usually nipped in the bud before assuming the part of "Mesorah?" Or did too long a time pass between Masoretic overhauls, and many errors became independent Mesorahs over the years? (This theoretical question has been brought to the forefront in recent years by the great Torah Codes debate.) An exercise regarding this very question has been conducted by Dr. Mordechai Breuer of Yerushalayim, with fascinating results.

In his work, "The Aleppo Codex and the Accepted Text of the Torah", Dr. Breuer describes his years of meticulous research and discusses his conclusions in attempting to demonstrate the scientific usefulness of the eclectic process. In fact, Dr. Breuer's purpose was to demonstrate that a single Mesorah already existed in the years prior to the RaMaH, even though the RaMaH did not have such a Mesorah at his disposal. (The existence of such a single Mesorah is flatly rejected by many academicians.) Dr. Breuer began by selecting four texts of ancient origin to compare and contrast in his study. Each of these texts predates the RaMaH. The texts were all of the type written by the Tiberian Masorites (as opposed to the Babylonian Masorites) yet clearly differed from each other in certain significant formatting areas, indicating that they were not copied from an immediate common source. In addition, he included the text of the Mikra'ot Gedolot of Yaakov ben Chaim, printed in Venice, 1525. (It should be noted that the orthography of these 5 texts differed widely from one another, in one case by more than 200 letters from the others.) Using the eclectic process, he suggested that if a broad majority of 4 out of 5 texts (and not just 3 of the 5) agreed with each other, it could be assumed that the fifth, inconsistent text was a copyist's error. His results were startling. There are 304,805 letters in the Torah. All five texts were in **total** agreement in all but about 220 letters. Of these, all but **20** were resolved by a majority of at least 4 texts against 1! Of the 20 remaining conflicts, Dr. Breuer was able to clarify all but **6** by applying another Masorite method, that of carefully studying thousands of early Masoretic notes (a broader topic similar in style to the eclectic process). These final 6 he was not able to clarify because three of the Torahs presented one spelling, while the

remaining **two** presented another. It was apparent that nearly all of the inconsistencies between the Torahs were caused by copyists errors, and not by Masoretic uncertainties.

Next, the resultant `eclectic' text was compared with the RaMaH's text (i.e., our present text). It was found that the RaMaH differed in but **6** places from the eclectic. That is, the margin of uncertainty of our Torah scrolls is probably not more than 12 (out of 304,805!) letters -- the 6 indeterminate ones, plus the six in which the RaMaH's text differed from Dr. Breuer's eclectic! When he compared the results of his experiment with the Teimani text (which, as we mentioned, is probably identical to that of Ben Asher), the results were even more startling. The texts were in perfect agreement! Their margin of uncertainty may be no more than 6 letters! Equally amazing is that **all** the above mentioned differences involve Vavs and Yuds, which do not affect the meaning of the word at all. (As for the remaining six uncertainties in Dr. Breuer's eclectic survey, in three of the instances the RaMaH and Teimani texts agreed with the 3-against-2 majority text. In the other three cases, the RaMaH and Teimani texts were themselves split over the same variant spellings as were the pre-RaMaH texts. In total, that means that the Teimani text differs from the RaMaH's text in but **9** letters -- see endnotes for details.)

In conclusion, the transmission of our Torah text has been well tended to and well preserved. The methods of Chazal have proudly withstood the tests of time. Such demonstrations of the strength of our Mesorah are indeed a Kiddush Hashem.

The author welcomes your comments on the above article:

ENDNOTES: Torah variants of Dr. Breuer's results, as compared to our (=RaMaH's) Torahs, in order of appearance (E=eclectic; T=Teimani): (1) Bereishit 4:13 "Mineso" (E&T w/o Vav); (2) Bereishit 7:11 "Ma'ayanos (E&T w/o Vav); (3) Bereishit 9:29 "Vayehi" (E&T Vayiheyu); (4) Bereishit 46:13 "v'Shimron" (E with Vav); (5) Shemot 14:22 "Chomah" (E w/o Vav); (6) Shemot 25:31 "Te'aseh" (E&T w/o Yud); (7) Shemot 28:26 "ha'Efod" (E&T w/o Vav); (8) Bamidbar 1:17 "b'Shemot" (T w/o Vav); (9) Bamidbar 10:10 "Chodsheichem" (T with Yud); (10) Bamidbar 22:5 "Be'or" (T w/o Vav); (11) Bamidbar 33:52 "Bamotam" (E w/o Vav); (12) Devarim 23:2 "Daka" (E&T with Alef instead of Heh. Lubavitch Chassidic texts are in agreement with T in this matter).