

History vs. Legend – JewishClarity.com – Rabbi Asher Resnick

The Rebbe Story – Who will inherit the dynasty?

There was once a Chassidic Rebbe who was the leader of a large community. He had three sons, each one of them possessing an important quality. One was the eldest; another, the biggest scholar; and the third, the most charismatic.

It was understood that upon the Rebbe's passing, one of his sons would assume leadership of the community. Since all three were so well qualified, this was clearly a decision that only the father could make. Unfortunately, however, the Rebbe left this world without announcing a successor. Weeks went by and, although each of the three sons wanted to be the new Rebbe, none of them could prove that their father had been leaning more towards him than the other two. One morning, one of the sons came over to his brothers. "Last night I had a dream," he said. {Can you guess what it was?}

"I saw our father. He told me that he wants me to be the new Rebbe."

The mindset of the two brothers

If we were the brothers of this "dreamer," how would we be likely to feel about his claim? What would we respond to him?

{Common responses: "I'd claim that I had the same dream myself"; "Prove it!"; "You're lying!"; or simply "I don't believe you."}

This was a real dilemma. On the one hand, the brother claiming to have had the dream couldn't prove that it **had** really happened. On the other hand, the other two brothers could never prove that it **hadn't** happened. Based on this seeming standoff, the one son told the other two that, since they had nothing better to go with, they should at least accept his claim for now.

To accept or not to accept?

Not surprisingly, the two brothers rejected their third brother's claim. This was based on a very simple point of logic. While they had no problem with the idea that their father *could have* come back in a dream to communicate his intentions on this critically important issue (after all, they were the sons of a Chasidic Rebbe!), the way that their brother claimed it had occurred made no sense.

Once their father was going to announce who he wanted to succeed him, why would he have told only *one* son? Wouldn't it be more reasonable for him to have told the other two as well? In other words, why would the two brothers, as well as the community at large, be expected to accept the claim of one brother as a pure leap of faith, when the father could have given clear knowledge of its truth to all of them?

Please take a moment to ask yourself, "Does this logic make sense to me?"

The Rebbe story and religion

This story, as you may have guessed, is actually an analogy. Let's apply the logic of the Rebbe story to the establishment of Islam, for example.

What would we imagine the Arabs saying when Muhammad came to them and claimed that G-d had designated him to be their leader? Following the Rebbe story model, we would have expected something like, "That doesn't make any sense! If G-d had really wanted us to believe in you, then He would have told us directly that you were His prophet!"

Why the Arabs did not, in fact, offer this type of a challenge is more of a psychological question than a theological one. And, of course, it is a question which is certainly not unique to Islam. All throughout history, charismatic leaders have convinced people to follow them without any objective evidence at all.

What we see, therefore, is that there are two possible foundations a religion could have:

1. Reasonable – the claimed prophet is directly verified by G-d to the people themselves.
2. Unreasonable – the claimed prophet says G-d communicated only to him personally.

Foundations of Religion – Reasonable or unreasonable?

Imagine that we were completely ignorant of all world religions, knowing only the names and the rough number of people that today accept them as true. Which type of a foundation would we guess was the basis of these different religions — the reasonable or the unreasonable one? With all of the billions of people throughout the world today believing in one or another of these various religions, we would naturally assume their foundations were reasonable — that there was originally some sort of logical basis to them. If someone would then inform us that even a single one of these major world religions was actually based on the unreasonable claim of G-d expecting people to blindly follow some lone individual, we would probably be quite surprised. And if, beyond this, we were told that, in fact, every single one of the non-Jewish religions throughout the world was based on this type of a claim, we would be absolutely shocked.

Can it be true?

As incredible as this situation would sound to us, hearing it for the very first time, this happens to be the actual reality. Billions and billions of people are basing their lives in this world, as well as their eternity, on some single individual. That person may be Muhammad (Islam), Paul (Christianity), Buddha (Buddhism), Joseph Smith (Mormonism), or someone else among the thousands of claimed prophets all throughout world history.

What about Judaism?

The Jewish claim is that the entire Jewish people (i.e., every single man, woman, and child that was living 3300 years ago) had Moshe personally verified to them by G-d as they stood at the base of Mount Sinai. This claim of revelation on a national level is the exact type of claim we would have expected from every other major world religion. Why? Because it is the only claim which a reasonable person could possibly deal with.

What's wrong with a leap of faith?

The greatest problem with a religion demanding its followers to base their lives on a leap of faith is actually much more fundamental than the demand of the leap itself. Rather, it is the absolute impossibility of anyone knowing which way they should leap.

Imagine a person that is completely committed to finding truth. If, in fact, G-d had chosen, for reasons unfathomable to human logic, to communicate only to a single prophet, where would that leave this sincere truth seeker? Even if one of the non-Jewish religions was definitely true, the

odds against him picking that one correct one would be overwhelming. Should he leap towards Paul or Muhammed? What about Buddha, or perhaps Joseph Smith? How about towards one of the thousands of lesser known claimed prophets of truth? With no direction as to who to choose, how could G-d expect this person to know who to follow?

The various religions of the world claim that they are merely asking people to have trust in G-d, which seems quite reasonable. In reality, however, they are demanding that people have faith specifically in their claimed prophet, based on no evidence whatsoever. This is not only quite unreasonable, it would also make it incredibly difficult for anyone in the world to find the correct religion. With so many choices of claimed prophets to follow as a blind leap of faith, it is highly unlikely that anyone could possibly know which of these thousands of people all throughout history they should actually choose to follow.

Chocolate or Vanilla?

While it may seem absurd for human beings to presume to understand how G-d would or wouldn't establish a religion, let's consider the implications of G-d creating man with an intelligent mind. We all constantly use our minds to make decisions, from the most trivial to the most significant. *Will it be chocolate or vanilla ice cream? What profession should I choose?* It would be incomprehensible, therefore, if we were completely incapable of using our G-d-given mind for the single most important decision of our lives; that which determines our relationship to reality itself, in both this world and the next. Therefore, no thinking person could possibly accept as true any religion which says that G-d spoke only to a single prophet.

And beyond our perception of how, logically, G-d would establish a religion, there is also the practical question of how we should make this critically important decision of which religion is actually true. Incredibly, Judaism remains the only religion in the world which a reasonable person could possibly accept.

Has there ever been anything like this?

As striking as the contrast between Judaism and all other religions has been throughout history, perhaps even more remarkable is the fact that this distinction was prophesized in the Torah itself over 3,300 years ago! In Deuteronomy 4:25-39, Moshe speaks to the Jews in the desert about their descendnts who will be exiled from the land of Israel, left few in number, scattered among the nations, and finally searching for G-d in the end of days. Moshe dramatically challenges this "latter days" generation: "Ask now of the days that are past, which were before you, since the day that G-d created man upon the earth, and from one side of heaven to the other: has there ever been anything such as this great thing, or has anything even been heard like it? Did a **nation** ever hear the voice of G-d speaking from the midst of fire, as you have heard, and live?"

By asking this generation in the end of days to look back through the entirety of human history, Moshe stated in the clearest possible terms the absolute uniqueness of national revelation to the Jewish people.

A two-pronged prophecy

It is important to appreciate, however, that this uniqueness has two different aspects to it. Not only did Moshe tell us that no other nation would ever **experience** national revelation, but he further stated that no other nation would ever even **claim** that it had. The Torah hereby outlined two distinctly different prophecies:

1. Never again in human history will there ever be another **national revelation event**.
2. Throughout all of world history there will never even be another **national revelation claim**.

Both of these prophecies are quite striking. It is remarkable that today we are able to look back at the thousands of world religions that have existed, and note the absolute uniqueness of both the Jewish event, as well as the Jewish claim, of national revelation. And, in addition, these two uniquenesses were predicted ahead of time, over 3300 years ago.

In order to fully appreciate the significance of these two prophecies, we need to examine some principles of history.

History or legend?

In a very general sense, we could divide all accounts of past events into two different categories — history and legends. History refers to events which we feel certain actually occurred, based on solid evidence. Legends, on the other hand, are stories which we may or may not accept as true, since they have no objective evidence to corroborate them.

The key question, of course, is: How does one distinguish between history and legend? The Cherry Tree Story and the Black Plague will serve as models for these two categories.

The Cherry Tree

Virtually every American has heard the story of George Washington and the cherry tree. When George Washington was a boy, he chopped down his father's cherry tree. His father was understandably upset and inquired as to what had occurred. Little George is reputed to have said, "I cannot tell a lie. It was I who chopped down the tree." Aside from trying to understand why Americans think that this story paints such a positive picture of their first president, there is a fundamental question to ask about this piece of American folklore: How many of the millions of Americans that have fondly retold it generation after generation feel certain that it actually occurred? Why is it that only a mere fraction of Americans believe it to be true?

The Black Plague

Contrast this story with the account of the Black Plague which occurred in the 14th century. This terrible calamity is estimated to have caused millions of deaths in Europe hundreds of years ago. How many people today regard this as true?

What is the difference?

What is the key difference between the Black Plague and the Cherry Tree Story that causes the vast majority of people today to view them so differently?

The most basic distinction between these two very different accounts is the number of claimed eyewitnesses and participants. Even if the Cherry Tree Story had actually occurred, how many individuals would possibly have been there to testify to its authenticity? On the other hand, millions of individuals at that time would certainly have known about the Black Plague.

History in numbers – Based on this numerical difference, we can formulate a very simple rule:

1. If huge numbers are claimed to have experienced an event, and huge numbers of their own descendents afterwards have accepted this claim as true (as in the case of the Black Plague), then this claim is reliable historical **fact**.
2. If, however, the number of claimed participants or eyewitnesses to an event is small, then even if huge numbers come to accept this claim as true afterwards, the claim will always be properly characterized as **legend**.

It is important to point out that this distinction between history and legend is in no way meant to imply that only claims involving huge numbers should be considered to be true. Plenty of events obviously occur every single day with few participants. The point is rather that when there are huge numbers (both at the event itself as well as in terms of its acceptance afterwards), this single point alone makes us certain that the event actually occurred. In all other cases, about which there is no claim of huge numbers having been present originally, we will either have to rely on some other mechanism for establishing its truth, or, more likely, we will have to conclude that there is simply no means of proving its authenticity.

What is it about large numbers that makes us sure?

Why are large numbers such an effective means of establishing historical certainty? This is based on a simple and intuitive principle in human psychology — while masses of people will **often** accept as true some claim which they have **no evidence** for in either direction (if for some reason they feel it is in their interest to do so), they will **never** accept a claim which they **know for certain to be false**. [This rule is only relevant to history and claimed events, i.e., where a particular event either did or did not occur. When it comes, on the other hand, to ideology and propaganda, which are often not black and white issues, this principle does not apply. And, of course, there have certainly been no shortage of examples of huge numbers of people accepting false ideology in all societies.] If we apply this principle to history, we will see why the numbers of claimed participants or eyewitnesses to an event are so significant. If a particular event is claimed to have occurred only to a tiny number of people, and there is no additional evidence of any kind, then its acceptance afterwards will clearly have nothing at all to do with evidence. The acceptance or rejection of this event will then be a function of other factors, such as desire or convenience. If, however, a particular historical event is claimed to have occurred to large masses of people, then the situation for later generations will be crystal clear. Either the event will be widely known and spoken about, in which case it would be absurd to deny it; or it will never have been heard of, in which case it would be absurd to believe in it. (With small numbers claimed, and no expectation of the event being widely known, this lack of general awareness would obviously be irrelevant.)

National history cannot be fabricated

This principle that huge numbers of claimed participants or eyewitnesses (accepted afterwards by similarly huge numbers) constitutes reliable history is absolutely ironclad. To deny it would require believing that huge masses of people would accept as true claims which they all know with certainty are false. Even leaving Judaism and the Torah aside, throughout all of the thousands of years of world history, there has never been even a single exception to this rule. In other words, every single instance in which an historical claim has had huge numbers as its basis (i.e., both at the original event as well as afterwards) the event is reliable history. It is clear, therefore, both from logic as well as historical precedent, that it would be an absolute impossibility to fabricate national history.

The implications of this are very significant. In order to appreciate them, let's go directly to the central question that this argument is dealing with.

Human or Divine? Was the Torah authored by a human being or by G-d?

1. If people fabricated the Torah, then this means the revelation at Mt. Sinai **never** happened, and it is somehow **possible** to invent national history.

Aside from the obvious difficulty of believing this in terms of all that has been discussed until now, the double prophesy of uniqueness (Deuteronomy 4:25-39) raises two new questions:

A. If a human author was so successful at fabricating national history, why would he then prophesize that no one else would ever even attempt it? (If he had, in fact, successfully fooled the entire Jewish people, then how could he say that no one else would ever be able to do the same? And if anyone else had managed to do this, this prophesy would have clearly been self-destructive, since it would have been shown to be false.)

B. Additionally, what would then explain this incredible prophesy of the uniqueness of Sinai, i.e., that no one else ever even attempted to do what the Torah's author is supposed to have done so successfully?

2. If, however, the words of the Torah did actually come directly from G-d, then that would mean the revelation at Mt. Sinai **did** happen, and there is **no** reason to believe that national history could be falsified. The double prophesy of uniqueness would then be perfectly understandable.

A. Since G-d can obviously decide to never appear before any other nation again, there is no difficulty in Him declaring this in the Torah.

B. Since it is impossible for a claim of this magnitude to be fabricated, there is no problem in understanding how the Torah could predict that no other group or nation would ever even claim that it did occur.

Insurmountable difficulty vs. no difficulty at all

In summary, the absolute uniqueness of both the event as well as the claim of national revelation, in both fact as well as prophesy, is either:

1. An insurmountable difficulty if one believes that the author of the Torah was a human being, and Sinai never occurred, **or**
2. No difficulty whatsoever if one believes that the Author of the Torah was G-d, and that He did, in fact, speak to the entire Jewish people at Mt. Sinai.

Appreciating the uniqueness of the "Sinai claim" – One concept not borrowed

One final point underlining the striking uniqueness of the Sinai claim is to appreciate just how much of the rest of the Torah has been borrowed by various groups and religions: mitzvot like Shabbat, Kashrut, circumcision, pilgrimage, Mikvah, and Sabbatical year; concepts like monotheism, love your neighbor, and peace on earth. The fact is that there is virtually no major concept in all of Judaism which has not been borrowed by some other group or religion, aside from that which is the very basis of the entire system — the national revelation at Mt. Sinai. This foundation separates Judaism from every other religion, and this is the claim which we would have expected every other religion to at least have attempted to make. As we discussed, it is the only claim which a thinking person can reasonably deal with, and therefore it is the only way which makes sense to us that G-d would have established a religion.

Why not borrow the Sinai claim?

How, therefore, do we account for the absolute uniqueness of this **claim** of national revelation among all world religions? One obvious answer, of course, is that the **event** of national revelation was, in fact, both true and unique. G-d really did speak to the entire Jewish people at Mt. Sinai, 3300 years ago, and the history of that encounter has been passed down from one generation to the next, up until and including the present day.

The question we need to ask ourselves is whether any other approach is even a possibility.