

Semikhah

Semikhah (Hebrew: סמיכה, "leaning [of the hands]") or ***Semicha*** or ***Smicha***, also *smichut* (סמיכות, "ordination"), *smicha lerabbanut* (סמיכה לרבנות, "rabbinical ordination"), or *smicha lehazzanut* (סמיכה לחזנות, "cantorial ordination"), is derived from a Hebrew word which means to "rely on" or "to be authorized".

Prevailing *smicha* generally refers to the ordination of a rabbi or cantor within post-talmudic Rabbinic Judaism, and within all modern Jewish religious movements from Reform to Orthodox.^[1] *Smicha lerabbanut* signifies the transmission of rabbinic authority to give advice or judgment in Jewish law. *Smicha lehazzanut* signifies the transmission of authoritative knowledge about Jewish musical and liturgical traditions. Although presently most functioning synagogue rabbis hold *smicha lerabbanut* by some rabbinical institution or academy, this was until quite recently not always required, and in fact many Haredi rabbis may not be required to hold a "formal" *smicha lerabbanut* even though they may occupy important rabbinical and leadership positions. Some cantorial institutions in the United States currently grant *smicha lehazzanut* to their students, while others use the term "investiture" to describe the conferral of cantorial authority onto their graduates.^[1]

Classical *semikhah* refers to a specific type of ordination that, according to traditional Jewish teaching, traces a line of authority back to Moshe ben Amram, The Men of the Great Assembly, and the Great Sanhedrin. The line of classical *semikhah* died out in the 4th or 5th century A.D. but it is widely held that a line of Torah conferment remains unbroken. Some believe evidence existed that classical *semikhah* was existent during the 12th century when *semuchim* from Lebanon and Syria were traveling to Israel in order to pass on Torah conferment to their students.^[2] Others, such as Rav Yisroel of Shklov (1770–1839), believed *semikhah* may not have been broken at all but that it continued outside of the land of Israel. Today many believe in the existence of an unbroken chain of rabbinical tradition dating back to the time of Moshe ben Amram ("Moses") and Yehoshua ben Nun ("Joshua")^{[3][4]} (See "The Unbroken Chain of Torah" below).

A third and distinct meaning of *semikhah* ("leaning") is the laying of hands upon an offering of a *korban* ("sacrifice") in the times of the Temple in Jerusalem, see Semikhah in sacrifices.

Contents

Hebrew Bible

Mishnah and Talmud

- The formula
- The unbroken chain of Torah
- Types

Post-Talmudic

- The decline of classical *semikhah*
- Attempts to revive classical *semikhah*
 - Attempt by Rabbi Jacob Berab, 1538
 - Attempt by Rabbi Yisroel Shklover, 1830
 - Attempt by Rabbi Aharon Mendel haCohen, 1901
 - Attempt by Rabbi Zvi Kovsker, 1940
 - Attempt by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Maimon, 1949
 - Attempt in Israel in 2004

Status of current rabbis

Rav Muvhak

Ordination of cantors

See also

Notes

Further reading

External links

Hebrew Bible

According to the Tanakh, the Hebrew Bible, Moses ordained Joshua through *semikhah*. (Num 27:15–23 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0427.htm#15>), Deut 34:9 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0534.htm#9>)). Moses also ordained the 70 elders (Num 11:16–25 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0411.htm#16>)). The elders later ordained their successors in this way. Their successors in turn ordained others. This chain of hands-on *semikhah* continued through the time of the Second Temple, to an undetermined time.

Traditionally Moses is also assumed to be the "first rabbi" of the Israelites. He is still known to most Jews as *Moshe Rabbeinu* ("Moses our Teacher"). Moses was also a prophet, and it is a fundamental Jewish belief that he was the greatest of all the Torah's prophets. Moses passed his leadership on to Joshua as commanded by God in the Book of Numbers where the subject of *semikhah* ("laying [of hands]" or "ordination") is first mentioned in the Torah:

- Book of Numbers: "Moses spoke to God, saying, 'Let the Omnipotent God of all living souls appoint a man over the community. Let him come and go before them, and let him bring them forth and lead them. Let God's community not be like sheep that have no shepherd.' God said to Moses, 'Take Joshua son of Nun, a man of spirit, and **lay your hands on him**'. Have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the entire community, and let them see you commission him. Invest him with some of your splendor so that the entire Israelite community will obey him. Let him stand before Eleazar the priest, who shall seek the decision of the Urim before God on his behalf. By this word, along with all the Israelites and the entire community shall he come and go.' Moses did as God had ordered him. He took Joshua and had him stand before Eleazar the priest and before the entire community. **He then laid his hands on him and commissioned him as God had commanded Moses.**" (Num 27:15–23 (<https://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0427.htm#15>))
- Book of Deuteronomy: "Joshua son of Nun was filled with a spirit of wisdom, because **Moses had laid his hands on him**. The Israelites therefore listened to him, doing as God had commanded Moses." (Deuteronomy 34:9)

Mishnah and Talmud

Despite the name, the classical *semikhah* did not actually require a literal laying on of hands; the operative part of the ceremony consisted of a court of three, at least one of whom himself had *semikhah*, conferring the authority on the recipient.^[5] Both the givers and the recipient had to be in the Land of Israel, but they did not have to be in the same place.^[6] In the Mishnaic era it became the law that only someone who had *semikhah* could give religious and legal decisions.^[7]

The title *ribbi* (or "rabbi") was reserved for those with *semikhah*. The sages of the Babylonian Jewish community had a similar religious education, but without the *semikhah* ceremony they were called *rav*. The Talmud also relates that one can obtain the title of Rabbi by those to whom he teaches or counsels.

After the failed revolution by Bar Kokhba in 132–135 CE, the Romans put down the revolt, and the emperor Hadrian tried to put a permanent end to the Sanhedrin. According to the Talmud, Hadrian decreed that anyone who gave or accepted *semikhah* would be killed, any city in which the ceremony took place would be razed, and all crops within a mile of the ceremony's site would be destroyed. The line of succession was saved by Rabbi Judah ben Bava, who took five students of the recently martyred Rabbi Akiva to a mountain pass far from any settlement or farm, and ordained all five students. When the Romans attacked them, Rabbi Yehuda blocked the pass with his body allowing the others to escape, and became one of Judaism's ten Rabbinic Martyrs himself by being speared 300 times. The five new rabbis – Rabbi Meir, Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Yehudah, Rabbi Yose and Rabbi Eleazar ben Shammua – escaped and became entire generation of Torah leadership.^[8]

The exact date that the original *semikhah* succession ended is not certain. Many medieval authorities believed that this occurred during the reign of Hillel II, around the year 360 CE.^[9] However, Theodosius I forbade the Sanhedrin to assemble and declared ordination illegal. (Roman law prescribed capital punishment for any Rabbi who received ordination and complete destruction of the town where the ordination occurred).^[10] It seems to have continued until at least 425, when Theodosius II executed Gamaliel VI and suppressed the Patriarchate and Sanhedrin.

The formula

The ancient formula for Semikhah was 'Yoreh Yoreh. Yaddin Yaddin' ('May he decide? He may decide! May he judge? He may judge!'); and in the early days of rabbinical Judaism any ordained teacher could ordain his students.

The unbroken chain of Torah

Classical semikhah was granted by a court of three judges,^[11] and it later required the participation of at least one who had attained this status, himself. According to Maimonides the other two need not be semukhim.^[12] Semikhah represents an unbroken chain of tradition and authority dating back to the time of Moshe and Yehoshua.^[13] It is believed that Hashem taught the Torah to Moshe Rabbeinu on Mt. Sinai in 1312 BCE and that since that time, the knowledge of Torah has been passed from generation to generation by the conferment of semikhah, rabbinic ordination, or the unbroken transmission of authority dating back to the time of Moshe. This unbroken chain of tradition is believed by many to have continued for over 3,300 years and continues to this day.^{[3][4]}

Types

The Talmud lists three classes of *semikhah* issued:^[7]

Yoreh Yoreh

The recipient of this *semikhah* demonstrated sufficient education and proper judgment to be able to render *halakhic* judgments on matters of religious law as it pertains to daily life such as *kashrut*, *nidda*, and permissible or forbidden activities on Shabbos or Yom Tov.

Yadin Yadin

The recipient of this *semikhah* demonstrated sufficient education and proper judgment to be able to render *halakhic* judgments on matters of religious law as it pertains to monetary and property disputes.

Yatir Bechorot Yatir

The recipient of this *semikhah* demonstrated sufficient education and proper judgment to determine the ritual status of firstborn animals that have developed a blemish. This degree required extensive veterinary knowledge.

While the first two classes are still issued today, the last one is not.

Post-Talmudic

The decline of classical *semikhah*

The original line of succession seems to have died out in the 4th or 5th centuries. The Geonim, early medieval Jewish sages of Babylon, did not possess semikhah, and did not use the title "rabbi". They were formally known as "rav" and were entrusted with authority to make legal and religious decisions.

Some believe that classical semikhah may have even survived until the 12th century when semuchim from Lebanon and Syria were traveling to Israel in order to pass on semicha to their students.^[2]

Sometime after the Black Death struck Europe, the Jewish community was influenced by the formal issuing of diplomas conferred by European Christian universities. In the areas today known as France and Germany, Ashkenazi Jews began using the term *semikhah* again, this time using it to refer to a formal "diploma" conferred by a teacher on his pupil, entitling the pupil to be called *Mori* (my teacher). This practice was at first frowned upon by Sephardi Jews, who viewed the practice as "presumptuous and arrogant", and an imitation of gentile customs (in this case, the university doctorate); eventually however this practice was adopted by the Sephardic Jewish community as well.

Attempts to revive classical semikhah

Maimonides, rules that "if all the sages In Israel would unanimously agree to appoint and ordain judges, then these new ordinants would possess the full authority of the original ordained judges".^[14] His code of law was accepted as normative by the majority of Jewish scholars since that time, though this section was mainly viewed as theoretical, especially because he concludes that "the matter needs deciding". The Sanhedrin of Rabbi Jacob Berab purported to enact this into practical law, changing minor details. However, since the legal existence of this Sanhedrin depends on the validity of Maimonides' view, the question is circular.

Attempt by Rabbi Jacob Berab, 1538

In 1538 Rabbi Jacob Berab of Safed, Land of Israel, attempted to restore the traditional form of Semikhah. His goal was to unify the scattered Jewish communities through the re-establishment of the Sanhedrin. At his prompting, 25 rabbis from the land of Israel convened; they ordained Jacob Berab as their "chief rabbi". Berab then conferred semikhah through a laying on of hands to four rabbis, including Joseph Karo, who was later to become the author of the Shulchan Aruch, widely viewed as the most important code of Jewish law from the 17th century onwards.

In 1541, Karo succeeded Berab and he perpetuated the tradition by ordaining Moshe Alshich, Elisha Gallico and Jacob Berab II. In the 1590s, Alshich ordained Hayyim Vital, and between the years 1594 and 1599, Jacob Berab II ordained seven more scholars: Moses Galante, Elazar Azikri, Moses Berab (Jacob's brother), Abraham Gabriel, Yom Tov Tzahalon, Hiyya Rofe and Jacob Abulafia.^[15]

Berab made an error in not first obtaining the approval of the chief rabbis in Jerusalem, which led to an objection to having a Sanhedrin at that time. This was not an objection to the semikhah, but to reinstituting a Sanhedrin. Levi ibn Habib, the chief rabbi in Jerusalem, wrote that when the nascent Sanhedrin took the authority of a Sanhedrin upon itself, it had to fix the calendar immediately. However, by delaying in this matter, it invalidated itself. Rabbi David ibn abi Zimra (*Radvaz*) of Egypt was consulted, but when Berab died in 1542 the renewed form of semikhah gradually ground to a halt.

Attempt by Rabbi Yisroel Shklover, 1830

In the 1830s, Rav Yisroel of Shklov, one of the leading disciples of the Vilna Gaon who had settled in Jerusalem, made another attempt to restart semikhah. Rav Yisroel was interested in organizing a Sanhedrin, but he accepted the ruling of Levi ibn Habib and David ibn abi Zimra that we cannot create semikhah by ourselves.

At the time the Turkish Empire was crumbling, and losing wars against Russia, Prussia, Austria and others. In attempt to modernize, the Turkish Empire opened itself up to more and more Western "advisors". For the first time the Arabian Peninsula and the Yemen was opened up to westerners. Scientists and Sociologists were convinced that in the Yemen lay communities that had been cut off and isolated from the western world for centuries. At the time, leading European scientific journals seriously considered that the remnants of the "Ten Tribes" would actually be found in the Yemen.

Rav Yisroel of Shklov, influenced both by this rush of scientific thought and interested in utilizing a suggestion of the Radvaz of receiving semikhah from one of the "Ten Tribes", specifically Reuven and Gad. Rav Yisroel charted out where he thought the Bnei Reuven were probably located, and sent an emissary, Rav Pinchas Baruch, to locate them (Sefer Halikutim to the Shabsei

Frankel edition of Rambam, Hilchos Sanhedrin 4:11). Unfortunately, Rav Baruch did not succeed in locating the shevet of Reuven and he was either killed or died while attending to the medical needs of poor Yemenite villagers.

An interesting point of Jewish Law arises in that Rav Yisroel raised the question how could the Tribe of Reuven have kept the semikhah alive, since they were outside the Land of Israel and the semikhah can be granted only in Land of Israel. He answered that since this tribe had been distant from the rest of the Jewish people before this ruling had been accepted, there is no reason to assume that they accepted this ruling, and there was a chance that they were still keeping the institution of semikhah alive.

Attempt by Rabbi Aharon Mendel haCohen, 1901

Rabbi Mendel collected the approval of approximately 500 leading Rabbis in favor of the renewal of Semikhah according to the view of Maimonides. His involvement in the founding of Agudath Israel and the intervening of World War I distracted him from implementing this plan.

Attempt by Rabbi Zvi Kovsker, 1940

Rabbi Zvi Kovsker came to the Holy Land from Soviet Russia. Seeing the condition of Jews in the years leading up to World War II, he undertook an effort to contact and work with many Rabbinic leaders in the Holy Land towards getting their approval for the renewal of Semikhah, and the reestablishment of a Sanhedrin, as an authentic government for the Jewish people (this was before the establishment of the State of Israel).

Attempt by Rabbi Yehudah Leib Maimon, 1949

In 1948, with the establishment of the modern State of Israel, the idea of restoring the traditional form of *semikhah* and reestablishing a new "Sanhedrin" became popular among some within the religious Zionist community. Rabbi Yehuda Leib Maimon, Israel's first minister of religious affairs, promoted this idea in a series of articles in the Religious Zionist periodicals "Sinai" and "Hatzofeh," later gathered together in monograph form as "Renewing the Sanhedrin in our New State." A small number of religious Zionist rabbis of Modern Orthodox Judaism's Rabbinical Council of America voiced support for this idea; some rabbis within Conservative Judaism entertained the idea as a potentially positive development. However, most secular Jews, most Haredim, and most non-Orthodox Jews did not approve of this goal. Israel's Chief Ashkenazic rabbi at the time, Yitzhak HaLevi Herzog, was hesitant to support this goal, and the idea eventually died away.

Attempt in Israel in 2004

On October 13, 2004, orthodox rabbis of various streams met as a group in Tiberias and declared themselves to be a re-established Sanhedrin. The basis for re-establishing semikhah had been made by Rabbi Jacob Berab's Sanhedrin, as recorded by Rabbi Yosef Karo (author of Shulchan Aruch). An election was held, as required by halakha. Seven hundred rabbis were reached either in person or by writing, and Rabbi Moshe Halberstam of the Edah Charedis was the first to receive semikhah after Rabbis Ovadia Yosef and Yosef Shalom Eliashiv found him fit, although he was too old to actually serve as a judge. He then ordained Rabbi Dov Levanoni, who ordained more rabbis.^[16]

This attempt was intended to improve upon Rabbi Jacob Berab's attempt by contacting seven hundred rabbis across Israel, as opposed to Jacob Berab's election by twenty-five rabbis of Safed. The current members mostly behave as place holders and have publicly expressed their intention to step aside when more worthy candidates join. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz (the Nasi of this Sanhedrin) said, "I'd be happy if in another few years these chairs are filled by scholars who are greater than us [sic] and we can say: 'I kept the chairs warm for you.'"^[17]

The current attempt to re-establish the Sanhedrin is the sixth in recent history.

Status of current rabbis

Although presently most functioning synagogue (i.e. "pulpit") rabbis hold *semikhah*, this was until quite recently not always required, and in fact many Haredi rabbis may possibly not be required to hold a "formal" *semikhah* even though they may occupy important rabbinical and leadership positions. The reasons being that what is prized in the communities they serve and lead is most of all a supreme mastery of the Talmud with a vast knowledge of the commentaries of the Rishonim and Acharonim and Responsa, added to knowledge of the Shulchan Aruch and Halakha ("Jewish Law"). Many Hasidic rebbes and Rosh yeshivas of major Orthodox yeshivas are not required to "prove" to their flocks that they do or do not hold formal *semikhah* because their reputations as Torah-scholars and sages is unquestioned and esteemed based on the recommendations of trusted sages, and the experiences and interactions that many knowledgeable Torah-observant Jews have with them, which thus gives practical testimony based on experience that these great rabbis are indeed worthy to be called as such. For example, Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, also known as the *Chafetz Chayim*, probably one of the most famous rabbis of the early 20th century, was trained and recognized as a rabbi, but did not hold *semikhah* until he had to apply for a passport. He realized that unless he obtained a written document of *semikhah*, he could not technically enter "rabbi" as an occupation without lying. He then received his *semikhah* by telegraph from Rabbi Chaim Ozer Grodzinski of Wilna, an unusual arrangement - especially in the early 20th century.

Most current poskim, however, do have *semikhah*. Just as a debate exists about who is a Jew, there is little consensus as to who is a rabbi. The Reform movement in a Responsa states that for their Temples, pulpit rabbis need to attend and complete their academic program at the Reform movement's Rabbinic schools. But they further state that this does not negate other sects of Judaism from accepting the time-honored *semikhah* of one-on-one. Nor do they deal with the issue of rabbis who are not pulpit rabbis but teach, study, and do research. They do say that the need for three rabbis is unneeded as the two additional rabbis are just witnesses and cannot attest to the new rabbi's knowledge.

In the UK, a communal minister who does not have *semikhah* has the title "Reverend" rather than "Rabbi".

Rav Muvhak

The term Rav Muvhak (Hebrew: רב מובהק, alternative pronunciation: Rebbe Muvhak, Movhok, Movhak) refers to the person who taught a student rabbi "most of his knowledge".^[18] Thus, *Muvhak* could be understood as "principal", or "primary". Typical usage is to state that a particular student-Rabbi's *Rav Muvhak* is *Rabbi A* but the student-Rabbi *also* studied (or received *Semikhah*) from *Rabbi B*. Rabo (Hebrew: רבו, alternative pronunciation: Ravo) means *his* Rav/Rebbe/Rabbi, hence the term Rabo Muvhak, i.e. "his Principal Rabbi".^[19] Special honour must be given to a Rav Muvhak.^[20] In modern times most student rabbis are educated by a number of different rabbis. Therefore the term *Rav Muvhak* is now uncommon.^[20]

Ordination of cantors

In the US, some institutions "ordain" cantors (i.e. grant them *semikhah*), while others "invest" them. The term "investiture" was originally intended to make a distinction between the ordination of rabbis and that of cantors. However, in response to the increased responsibility of the cantor in contemporary American synagogues, some institutions such as Hebrew Union College (Reform) have recently begun to use the term "ordination" instead of "investiture."^[1] Other institutions that ordain cantors include Hebrew College (pluralistic), the Academy for Jewish Religion (pluralistic), and Aleph (Renewal).^{[21][22][23]} The Jewish Theological Seminary (Conservative) currently invests its cantors.^[24]

See also

- Chief Rabbinate of Israel
- Rabbinic Judaism

Notes

1. <http://www.jta.org/2012/05/01/life-religion/whats-in-a-word-for-ordained-rather-than-invested-cantors-a-lot>
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5. Talmud, Sanhedrin 13b (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Image:Sanhedrin13b.jpg>)
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10. *A History of the Jewish People*, by Hayim Ben-Sasson, Harvard University Press (October 15, 1985), ISBN 978-0-674-39731-6
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12. Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Sanhedrin 4:3
13. http://www.ou.org/public_affairs/article/diaspora_israel_relationsa_study_in_halakha_and_contemporary_issues/
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17. Nadav Shragai, *Now that there's a Sanhedrin, who needs the Supreme Court?* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20071001111002/http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/objects/pages/PrintArticleEn.jhtml?itemNo=641039>)
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21. <http://hebrewcollege.edu/cantorial>
22. <http://ajrsem.org/programs/cantreqmnts/>
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24. "Archived copy" (https://web.archive.org/web/20150507164019/http://www.jtsa.edu/H_L_Miller_Cantorial_School_and_College_of_Jewish_Music/The_Cantorial_Program.xml). Archived from the original (http://www.jtsa.edu/H_L_Miller_Cantorial_School_and_College_of_Jewish_Music/The_Cantorial_Program.xml) on 2015-05-07. Retrieved 2015-05-31.

Further reading

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- Julius Newman: *Semikhah (ordination). A study of its origin, history, and function in Rabbinic literature*. Manchester University Press. Manchester 1950.

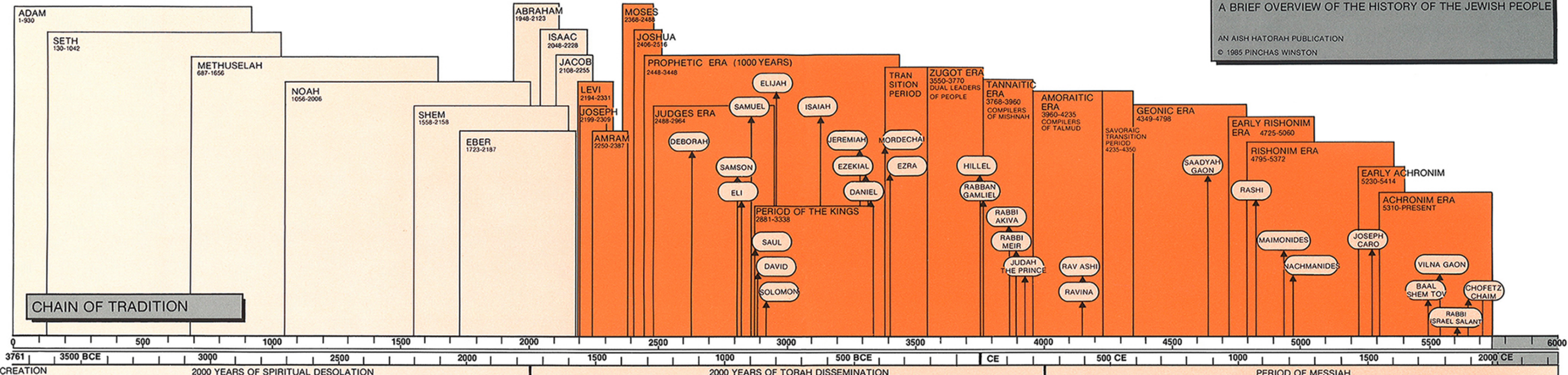
External links

- Rabbi Yaakov Beirav's attempt to re-establish a Sanhedrin in 1538 (<http://thesanhedrin.org/en/main/rabbibeirav.html>)
 - 130 "Documented" "Generations" of Semicha (<http://rabbi.bendory.com/docs/shalshet.php>), from Mt. Sinai to the present
 - Rabbi Judah Leib Maimon, "Renewing the Sanhedrin in our New State" (<http://blog.rabbilarrybach.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Hiddush-HaSanhedrin-Complete-copy.pdf>) (English translation).
 - Curriculum for the Semikhah Tests of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel (<http://www.virtualgeula.com/semicha/semicha500.pdf>)
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TIMELINE TWO: AN OVERVIEW OF ANTI-SEMITISM

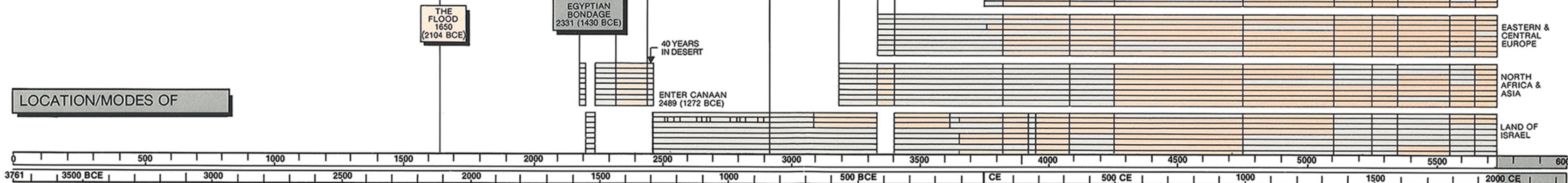
THE MOST DIFFICULT TIMELINE IN THE SERIES TO PORTRAY, TIMELINE TWO DISPLAYS A GRAPHIC OVERVIEW OF THE ANTI-SEMITISM THE JEWISH PEOPLE HAVE EXPERIENCED OVER THE CENTURIES. AS MENTIONED IN THE INTRODUCTION, THIS TOPIC REQUIRES IN-DEPTH RESEARCH AND THOUGHT. TIMELINE TWO DISPLAYS:

1. JEWISH ASCENDANCY (DARK ORANGE) PRECEDED BY THE LINEAGE OF MANKIND (LIGHT ORANGE)
2. SOME DISASTERS THE JEWISH PEOPLE HAVE FACED
3. A LINE GRAPH DISPLAYING THE MOST PREVALENT FORMS OF ANTI-SEMITISM; EACH BAR CORRESPONDS TO ONE OF EIGHT LISTED FORMS AS FOLLOWS:

FORMS OF ANTI-SEMITISM	AMERICAS
MASS MURDER	
VIOLENT ATTACKS	
EXPULSION	
FORCED CONVERSION	
RESTRICTIONS	
DISTINCTIVE DRESS	
SPECIAL TAXATION	
LIBEL (WRITTEN & ORAL)	

4. A QUOTE FROM MARK TWAIN WITH GRAPHIC ILLUSTRATION

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IF THE STATISTICS ARE RIGHT, THE JEWS CONSTITUTE BUT ONE PERCENT OF THE HUMAN RACE. IT SUGGESTS A NEBULOUS DIM PUFF OF STAR DUST LOST IN THE BLAZE OF THE MILKY WAY GALAXY. PROBABLY THE JEW OUGHT HARDLY TO BE HEARD OF, BUT HE IS HEARD OF. HAS ALWAYS BEEN HEARD OF. HE IS AS PROMINENT ON THE PLANET AS ANY OTHER PEOPLE, AND HIS COMMERCIAL IMPORTANCE IS EXTRAVAGANTLY OUT OF PROPORTION TO THE SMALLNESS OF HIS BULK. HIS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE WORLD'S LIST OF GREAT NAMES IN LITERATURE, SCIENCE, ART, MUSIC, FINANCE, MEDICINE, AND ABTRUSE LEARNING ARE ALWAYS OUT OF PROPORTION TO THE WEAKNESS OF HIS NUMBERS. HE HAS MADE A MARVELOUS FIGHT IN THIS WORLD IN ALL THE AGES, AND HAS DONE IT WITH HIS HANDS TIED BEHIND HIM. HE COULD BE VAIN OF HIMSELF AND BE EXCUSED FOR IT. THE EGYPTIAN, THE BABYLONIAN, AND THE PERSIAN ROSE, FILLED THE PLANET WITH SOUND AND SPLENDOR, THEN FADED TO DREAM-STUFF AND PASSED AWAY. THE GREEK AND THE ROMAN FOLLOWED, AND MADE A VAST NOISE, AND THEY ARE GONE. OTHER PEOPLES HAVE SPRUNG UP AND HELD THEIR TORCH HIGH FOR A TIME, BUT IT BURNED OUT, AND THEY SIT IN TWILIGHT NOW, OR HAVE VANISHED. THE JEW SAW THEM ALL, AND BEAT THEM ALL. ALL THINGS ARE MORTAL BUT THE JEW. ALL THEIR FORCES PASS, BUT HE REMAINS.

MARK TWAIN, FROM THE ARTICLE 'CONCERNING THE JEW' HARPER'S MAGAZINE, SEPTEMBER 1899

How Do We Know Judaism is the True Religion?

Dr. Shira Weiss

Faculty, Stern College for Women

On Shavuot we celebrate *Zman Matan Torateinu*, God's giving of the Torah to Israel, which has served throughout the ages as the most cogent basis for belief. Throughout history, philosophers have attempted to uncover various theological proofs, based on deductive reasoning or philosophical speculation. One of the most well-known arguments, the Argument by Design, claims that the sophistication and intricacies of the universe could not have happened by chance and, therefore, *implies* the existence of a Divine designer. Each of these proofs speculates that, because of our experience in this world, there must be a God, but none conclusively demonstrate the existence of the Deity. God's mass revelation on Sinai, however, was witnessed by all of Israel and, therefore, demands no speculation.

Yehuda HaLevi (also referred to by his acronym, Rihal, 1075-1141) argues that one cannot achieve religious truth solely through philosophical speculation, but rather arrives at belief as a result of historical experience. For HaLevi, ideal faith is that which is clear without philosophical speculation, exemplified by the faith of the Jewish People which is based on eye-witness testimony and, therefore, requires neither proof nor [philosophical] demonstration. In his book, *Sefer HaKuzari*, HaLevi juxtaposes Judaism to the other prevalent religions of the medieval period through the story of a foreign king's search for the true religion. In this tale, the king reports to having persistent dreams in which an angel of God reveals to him: "Your (intention) is indeed pleasing to the Creator, but your way of acting is not pleasing. (Kuzari 1:1)"

Due to the lowly status afforded to the Jewish people at the time, the king investigates Aristotelian philosophy, Christianity, Islam and only then Judaism, in pursuit of a religion to call his own. The king initially approaches the Philosopher who discounts the angel's message on three grounds: God cannot disfavor human actions, God is not concerned with the individual, and human contemplation (intentions) is superior to physical actions.

*There is no favor or dislike in God, because He is above
desire and intention. For an intention intimates a desire in*

אין אצל הבורא לא רצון ולא שנאה כי הוא
נעלה מכל החפצים ומכל הכונות, כי הכונה

the intending person: by the fulfillment of this desire he becomes complete; as long as it remains unfulfilled, he is incomplete. In a similar way God is, in the opinion of the philosophers, above the knowledge of individuals, because they change with the times and there is no change in God's knowledge. He does not know you, much less your intentions and actions, nor does He listen to your prayers or see your movements... Endeavor to reach true knowledge of things, in order that your intellect may become active.

Kuzari 1:1

מורה על חסרון המכוין וכי השלמת כונתו שלמות לו ובעוד שלא תשלם הוא חסר, וכן הוא נעלה אצל הפילוסופים מידיעת חלקי הדברים מפני שהם משתנים עם העתים ואין בידיעת הבורא שנוי. והוא אינו יודע אותך כל שכן שידע כונתך ומעשיך וכל שכן שישמע תפלתך ויראה תנועותיך ... וכללו של דבר בקש זך הלב באיזה אופן שיתכן לך אחרי אשר תבין כללי החכמות על אמתתם. ואז תגיע אל בקשתך, ר"ל הדבק ברוחני ר"ל השכל הפועל.

ספר הכוזרי א:א

The Philosopher explains that the king should not heed the angel's message and concern himself with finding a religion of deeds since the contemplative life will enable him to achieve perfection. Unsatisfied with that response, the king approaches the Christian who attests to the divine origin of the Torah, but not its continued validity. He claims that while Israel had been the chosen nation, due to their sins, they have been rejected by God and replaced by the Christians, led by their prophet, Jesus.

In short: I believe in all that is written in the Torah and the other books of the Israelites, which are undisputed, because they are generally accepted as everlasting and have been revealed before a vast multitude. Subsequently, the Divinity became embodied in the womb of a noble Israelite virgin; she bore Him having the semblance of a human being, which concealed nevertheless a divinity, seemingly a prophet, but in reality a God sent forth. He is the Messiah, whom we call the Son of God, and He is the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.

Kuzari 1:4

וכללו של דבר בכל מה שבא בתורה ובספרי בני ישראל אשר אין ספק באמתתם, בעבור פרסומם והתמדתם והגלותם בהמונים גדולים. ובאחריתם ובעקבותם נגשמה האלהות, והיה עובר ברחם בתולה מנשיאות בני ישראל וילדה אותו אנושי הנראה אלהי הנסתר, נביא שלוח בנראה, אלוה שלוח בנסתר, והוא המשיח הנקרא בן אלהים והוא האב והבן והוא רוח הקדש

ספר הכוזרי א:ד

The Christian's argument failed to convince the king since Christianity originated in Judaism and Christian beliefs were based on the hearsay of revelations presented to one individual. The king then approaches the Muslim, who, like the Christian, attests to the Divine origin of the Torah. He, too, claims that while Israel had been the chosen nation, Muhammed became the 'seal' of the prophets. Additionally, he argues that the beauty and sophistication of the language of the Koran reflects Divine authorship.

We acknowledge the Unity and Eternity of God and that all men are derived from Adam and Noah. We absolutely reject embodiment (of God), and if any element of this appears in the Writ, explain it as metaphoric, serving to make the doctrine acceptable to our comprehension. At the same time we maintain that our Book (Koran) is the Speech of God,

אנחנו מקיימים האחדות והקדמות לאלהים ית', והחדוש לעולם, והיחס אל אדם ונח, ונרחיק הגשמות בכלל, ואם יראה ממנו שום דבר בדברינו, נפרשהו ונאמר כי הוא דרך העברה וקירוב, עם הודאתנו, כי ספר תורתנו דברי אלהים, והוא בעצמו מופת, התחייבנו בקבולו

being itself a miracle which we are bound to accept for its own sake, since no one is able to produce anything comparable to it, or to one of its verses. Our prophet is the Seal of the prophets, who abrogated every previous law, and invited all nations to embrace Islam.

Kuzari 1:5

בעבור עצמו, מפני שאין אדם יכול לחבר ספר אחר כמוהו, ולא כפרשה אחת מפרשיותיו, ושנביאנו הוא חותם הנביאים ומבטל כל תורה שקדמה, וקורא כל האומות אל תורת ישמעאל
ספר הכוזרי א:ה

The king is not persuaded by the Muslim since Islam, like Christianity, has Jewish origins and the Divine nature of the language of the Koran is not perceptible to he who is illiterate in Arabic. Unsatisfied with the responses of each of the respective religions' adherents, he feels compelled to inquire about Judaism and the Old Testament, despite its despised status, since it had been acknowledged by the Christian and Muslim respondents as the origin of their respective faiths. The Jew's convincing argument of the legitimacy of his religion to the king is not based on philosophical proofs, but rather based on the collective national experience of God's intervention throughout Jewish history.

I believe in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel, who led the Israelites out of Egypt with signs and miracles; who fed them in the desert and gave them the [Holy] Land, after having made them traverse the sea and the Jordan in a miraculous way; who sent Moses with His Law, and subsequently thousands of prophets, who confirmed His law by promises to those who observed, and threats to the disobedient. We believe in what is contained in the Torah- a very large domain.

Kuzari I: 11

אני מאמין באלהי אברהם יצחק ויעקב אשר הוציא את בני ישראל באותות ובמופתים ממצרים וכלכלם במדבר והנחילם את ארץ כנען אחרי אשר העבירם את הים ואת הירדן במופתים רבים ואשר שלח אליהם את משה בתורתו ואחריו אלפי נביאים שכלם קראו אל תורתו ביעדם שכר טוב לכל שומרה וענש לכל עובר עליה אנחנו מאמינים בכל הכתוב בתורה הזאת והדברים ארכים:

כוזרי א:יא

HaLevi argues that the superiority of Judaism over other religions is demonstrated by the fact that the Jews were the only nation to experience a mass Divine revelation which has been recounted throughout the generations by an unbroken chain of tradition, (which HaLevi equates with experience). Therefore, the chosenness of the Jews cannot be disputed because it was publicly seen and transmitted without dissent by thousands of people, as opposed to the more private revelatory experiences of the other major contending faiths, in which there were few (if any) witnesses. Everyone, including Christians and Muslims, concede that God had participated in the history and redemption of the Jewish people. This authentic and undisputed historical tradition of the Jewish faith provides the most certain foundation for truth.

HaLevi chose to describe the God of Judaism as He who redeemed the Jews from Egypt and revealed His Torah to them on Sinai, instead of the Creator of Heavens and Earth, since the Divine creation is speculative and, unlike the former, has not been experienced or proven. HaLevi elaborates how experience and tradition, the preservation of that experience, reflects the truth through an analogy. He explains to the king that one would only be convinced of the existence, beneficence and justice of another king if one had personally experienced demonstrations of such

attributes. For instance, if a messenger brought him presents which were only procurable in that king's particular country, including drugs to cure diseases and preserve health, accompanied by a letter in which it was explicitly stated from whom it comes, he could be persuaded about the concern and generosity of such a monarch. HaLevi reveals that the king of another country represents God, his country reflects God's dominion, the messenger who brings the goods is Moses, the letter testifying to its authenticity is the Torah and the medicine to cure disease is the commandments prescribed in the Torah. Just as it would be incumbent upon the recipient king to acknowledge his indebtedness, appreciation and intentions to use such goods for their intended purpose, so too, HaLevi argues, we must recognize our indebtedness and appreciation to God and our commitment to act in the world according to His commandments. Convinced that Judaism must be the way of life with deeds that would be pleasing to God, the king embraces Judaism and wins over many members of his nation.

HaLevi wrote his work, which he subtitled, *The Kuzari: The Book of Argument and Proof In Defense of a Despised Religion*, for the Jews in his generation (late 11th century) who were the object of political oppression and religious disrespect in the wake of the bloody conflicts generated by the Reconquista and First Crusade. Through his book, he sought to restore to the Jewish people the exalted status that they had achieved on Mt Sinai. HaLevi's reaffirmation of the authenticity and superiority of Judaism was intended to strengthen the commitment of the Jews of his time and give them the fortitude to defend their beliefs against the rival truth claims and coercive proselytizing by the other religions. His book is not a defense of the despised religion, but rather in defense of the chosen religion.

While critics have characterized HaLevi's description of the exclusivity of the chosenness of the Jewish people to be racist, the Divine selection of the Jews need not be viewed in such a manner. HaLevi's understanding of Israel's eternal status as God's '*am segula*' [chosen nation] was to serve as a constant reminder of their historic experience as the only people of the ancient world worthy of God's public communication of His will to mankind. As such, HaLevi elaborates that the Jews' chosenness, as a result of their acceptance of the covenant on Sinai, does not make the Jewish people racially superior to other nations, but rather serves as a challenge for the Jews to be morally exemplary in order to fulfill their side of the mutual partnership with God. The covenant does not afford privileges to the Jews, but rather demands special responsibilities of them. To fulfill their commitment to God, Israel must worship God alone and obey His laws. In return, God assures Israel protection, national survival and prosperity in their homeland. It is this covenant that we commemorate on Shavuot. Not only do we celebrate God's selection of the Jewish people and bestowal of His Torah upon them, but we remind ourselves of our commitment to the *brit* with God that we sealed by our ancestors' response of '*naaseh v'nishmah*'. We can only maintain our exalted status as God's '*am segula*' if we live up to our promise of obedience to the Torah which has been continuously reaffirmed throughout the generations through an unbroken chain of tradition.

While HaLevi argues that religious experience is far superior to deductive reasoning in forming the basis for religious commitment, he does not discount philosophy altogether. Rather, he is warning the reader not to ground his faith solely in philosophical speculation which can be

inconclusive or unstable since philosophy cannot solve every theological problem. He explains that it is preferable to base one's faith on experience, or on the tradition of historical experience, and then seek philosophical or rational understanding to enhance or further substantiate one's commitment.

In contemporary Jewish philosophy, a distinction has been made between 'Belief That' and 'Belief In' theology. 'Belief That' is the intellectual acceptance that certain propositions about God are true, while 'Belief In' describes a feeling or a commitment to God based on experience. In the Medieval times in which HaLevi lived, the 'Belief That' theology became popular as philosophical speculation became more prevalent in the enlightened culture. HaLevi, feared that Jews would base their faith on such philosophical speculation which could be fragile and potentially harmful since it could lead to doubt. He, therefore, attempted to restore the 'Belief In' theology of Biblical and Rabbinic times, in which one believed because one had been experientially convinced of the truth. As Rabbi Norman Lamm explains in 'Faith and Doubt':

Hence, while it is a religious virtue (*mitzvah*) to adumbrate the rational foundations of Judaism, the way to regain a faith beset by doubts, where cognitive efforts have failed, is to reverse the situation of the believer-doubter from a belief-that frame to a belief-in situation, to go from the periphery to the core, to relocate himself from the outer world where the object of faith is an It to the inner sanctum of relation where the object of faith is not an object at all but the holy Thou.

After achieving the 'Belief In' commitment, one can then seek intellectual, philosophical understanding to further enhance religious meaning.

HaLevi wrote *The Kuzari* in order to reaffirm the imperative of the 'Belief In' theology based on experience and expressed through the perpetuation of that tradition. By contrasting Judaism to the other religions, HaLevi demonstrates that religious experience, the source of our faith, is precisely what makes Judaism the chosen and authentic religion. It is this 'Belief In' theology that we celebrate on Shavuot, as we reflect upon the mass Divine Revelation of *Matan Torah*. By reliving our historical experience every year, we act as a link in the unbroken chain of tradition and allow the legacy of our ancestors to live on.

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סְמִיכָה


קומיקס | גיליון 192

אֶשְׁלַח עִמָּךְ מִכְתָּב הַמְלָצָה, וְכֵן אֶת הַקּוֹנְטֵרָס הַזֶּה לְשִׁמְכָתִי בְּעֵינֵי חֲדָשׁ ה"סְמִיכָה" שֶׁנֶּעֱשֶׂה בְּצִפָּת קָעַת... מֶה דַּעַת רַבְּנוּ בְּעֵינֵינוּ?

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houkat - série 1995 - Manitou l'hébreu : pour poser la Bible sur ...

C'est une catastrophe qui nous a atteints quand les Romains ont interdit la סְמִיכָה. Cela rejoint notre question du רָשָׁע pour savoir de quel côté se trouve la ...

 www.manitou-lhebreu.com › [ki-tissa-serie-1985,206](#)- [Translate this page](#)


ki tissa - série 1985 - Manitou l'hébreu : pour poser la Bible sur ...

Jusqu'à obtenir la Méhila la סְמִיכָה etc... qui sont des niveaux différents. D'autre part, il y a la racine de reniement. Un renégat c'est bien un kophos. Ici c'est le ...

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Mikraot Gedolot – ספרא ויקרא ויקרא א – Sifra Vayikra 1 AlHaTorah.org

מֶה סְמִיכָה בְּטוֹהָרִים, אֵף שְׁחִיטָה בְּטוֹהָרִים. [ב] "וְשָׁחַט" – שְׁחִיטָה בְּכָל לְשָׁרָה, בְּזָרִים, בְּנָשִׁים וּבַעֲבָדִים, אֶפְלוּ בְּקֹדֶשׁ יְקֹדְשִׁים. אוֹ אֵינָה ...

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סְפָרָא אוֹ תוֹרַת כְּהֻנִּים הוֹכֵן עַל יְדֵי דֵן בֹּאֲרִי. הַטְקֵסֵט מִיּוֹסֵד עַל כְּתָב ...

אֶשְׁרֵי פֶתַח אֶהְל מוֹעֵד. ["וְסִמָּךְ... וְשָׁחַט", בְּמִקְוֵם שְׁשׁוּמְכִין שׁוֹחֲטִין.. וְנִתְקַף לְסְמִיכָה שְׁחִיטָה. מֶה סְמִיכָה בְּטוֹהָרִים.. אֵף שְׁחִיטָה בְּטוֹהָרִים. [ב].