

Eyewitness Testimony

What is the best proof that something occurred? How do we know there was a holocaust? How do we know the Torah is from G-d? And what if science claims to find conflicting evidence?

Are There Facts?

Several years ago, the Iranian government held a conference to officially prove that the Holocaust never happened. They want the world to believe that the whole thing was invented by the Zionists as an excuse to create the Jewish State.

The problem is that although they can legitimately question the authenticity of some of the pictures, documents and even video clips, it is impossible to ever negate the millions of men and women who lived through that horrid era. The testimonies given by living witnesses can never be denied. No matter how many books the enemy will write or how many (pseudo) philosophers they will attract to their cause, they cannot succeed in their quest to rewrite history. For there are millions of eyewitnesses to the atrocities committed against our people.

This is not the first time the Arabs have tried to change the facts. During the Six Day War, when the Arab country were being decisively beaten from the very get-go, the Arab radios were broadcasting such victorious announcements as, "We are already advancing on Tel Aviv!" while at that very moment the Arab soldiers were running for their lives.

The communists also tried to rewrite the history of their reign of terror, but it doesn't help at all, for no power can stop the force of the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions of witnesses telling the tales and reliving the horror of their communist oppressors in the former Soviet Union.

Who is Right?

In this week Parsha we also find such a struggle for authenticity:

What is stronger—archeological proofs or a tradition that was passed from generation to generation?

This week, G-d commands Moses to have the Jewish people construct the Mishkan, the Tabernacle. G-d then instructs Moses to make vessels for the Mishkan, the Holy Ark, and the Table for the Face Breads, the Altar and so on. For some reason, of all the vessels in the Mishkan, the Menorah became the symbol of the Jewish people. Rarely will you find a Jewish organization that does not include a Menorah, in one form or another, on its stationary. The Menorah was even chosen as the national symbol of the State of Israel.

However there is a certain uncertainty about this Jewish symbol. What in fact was the true form of the Menorah as made by Moses by G-d's instructions? Most, including Israel's national symbol, depict the branches of the great Menorah as being rounded.

The source of this depiction is in Rome. As the Rebbe explains, "The destruction of the Second Temple was started by Vespasian and finished by Titus. After destroying the Temple,

Titus commanded his legions to take all of the Temple's vessels, the Great Menorah among them, back to Rome to be displayed at the Victory parade that was to be held upon his return.

“Since Titus wanted his victory to be remembered forever, his servants were instructed to build an arch in honor of the occasion. On the arch, which would come to be called ‘The Arch of Titus,’ they were to illustrate the captive Jews being led to Rome along with the Holy Temple’s vessels. Finally, ‘Judea Capta,’ which means ‘Judea has been captured’ was to be engraved.

“It is because of this Roman artist’s rendition of the Menorah with rounded branches that many are sure that the Menorah’s branches were rounded.”

The fact is that many archeological discoveries with round branches on the Menorah have been found.

It would seem that we have irrefutable evidence that the menorah was rounded. If you have doubts about the authenticity of this school of thought, Google “the arch of Titus” and you can see a very nice picture of the menorah from two thousand years ago.

The Tradition

Here however is the dilemma. Rashi on the verse describing the menorah explains that the branches rose “diagonally upward.” In other words, the branches rose in a straight line, not round.

If that is not enough to shake your belief in the round branches, Maimonides, who lived at the same time as Rashi, but lived in

Egypt and apparently did not even know of Rashi's existence, also declared that the menorah's branches were straight. He even went so far as to draw the menorah, in which he depicts the menorah's branches as straight lines rising diagonally from each side of the stem.

Rabbi Avraham, the scholarly son of Maimonides, writes, "The six branches of the menorah extended from the stem to each side in straight lines, as my father drew them, not rounded as others draw them."

How does it happen that two Torah giants who lived at two different ends of the world have the same opinion and remain unshakable in their conviction that they are correct?

The answer is: Tradition. They obviously received a tradition dating back to scholars who lived in the times of the Bet Hamikdash. After the destruction of the Temple these scholars would describe everything they remembered from the Holy Temple to their children and students in great detail, including the menorah, and they described the menorah as having straight branches.

In the old city of Jerusalem there is a beautiful Menorah on display in the Cardo. This is supposed to be a replica of the Great Menorah in the Temple. This Menorah has rounded branches.

A friend of mine once asked the attendant if he hadn't heard that Rashi and Rambam explicitly state that the branches were straight. The attendant responded, "Rashi, Rambam and the Lubavitcher Rebbe never saw the Menorah! The menorah on the

Arch of Titus is proof of that!”

So we are faced with the question, whom do we believe? Do we believe the Roman artist or do we believe the tradition as it was passed down from eyewitnesses?

There are many possible explanations why the image on the Arch of Titus may be inaccurate.

a. It's very possible that the artist thought that round branches would be nicer and he possibly used the privilege of “artistic license”!

b. It could be that the Jews of that era knew that war was imminent so they hid the Menorah and set a different candelabrum in its place, so that the Romans should not confiscate the original.

This trick had also been used earlier by King Yoshiyahu. Anticipating the destruction of the first Temple, the king ordered that the Ark of the Covenant be hidden in a chamber beneath the Temple floor built for that purpose by King Solomon.

Why would the replacement Menorah look different than the original? Halacha states that it is forbidden to build a building or to create vessels in the exact form of the Bais Hamikdash and its' vessels. So, by giving the replacement Menorah round branches, the leaders were making a clear statement that this is not the real Menorah.

The reasoning of the Roman artist is actually irrelevant. We

have a tradition that passed through the generations and reached the time of the Rambam and Rashi that the branches of the Menorah were straight. That outweighs any archaeological and philosophical proofs.

The Headplate

We find a similar case in last week's portion Parshas Tetzaveh. The verse states that one of the garments worn by the Kohen Gadol, the high priest, was the Tzitz. The Tzitz was made of pure gold and two words, Kodesh LaHashem, Sacred to G-d, were embossed on it.

In the Talmud, the sages argued about the format of these words. Some said the words were written in a single line while others said that they were in two lines.

Then Rabbi Eliezer ben Yosi said, "I saw the Tzitz in Rome and the words were on a single line."

That should have ended the argument. But the sages did not accept this as proof and in fact ruled against Rabbi Eliezer.

The Meiri would later explain, "Although some of the greatest sages attested to having seen the Tzitz in Rome, the others did not pay their testimony heed." And the Rebbe explains why. "Since the Rabbis knew by tradition that was passed on to them from the leaders of the days of the Temple that the words were written in two lines, they did not honor the testimony of eye witnesses who saw it in Rome, for surely this is not the Tzitz worn by the High Priest."

And it is no great mystery how one could come to see a Tzitz in

Rome. Being a beautiful piece of golden jewelry, many people would have copied it for themselves – of course not exactly the same as the High Priests, because that would be forbidden. Perhaps the real Tzitz was hidden from the Romans and an inexact replica was made to replace it.

From time to time a historian will “discover” that the Torah’s stories are not true, or that there is no proof that the Jews were in Egypt in the days of Pharaoh or there is no archeological proof that the Jews were in the desert for 40 years. For all of these arguments there is a clear rebuttal. It may be true that there isn’t sufficient proof. There may, in fact, be proof against the Torah. Yet, just like with regards to the Holocaust, the millions of eyewitnesses outweigh any logical proof that it never happened. So too with regards to Torah. Millions and millions of people have heard the same stories from their fathers who were told by their fathers and so on. This remains the strongest proof of the Torah’s truth.