

The TikTok Controversy

Category: Vayikra, Vayikra

The original Hebrew font.

Negating Outside Influences

TikTok, a social media platform boasting over one and a half billion global users, including 150 million in the United States alone, is currently facing a critical moment in its history. Several senators propose a law that would prohibit the use of the application across the United States.

The cause of this impending ban is TikTok's ownership by a Chinese company. Chinese law mandates that, upon government request, companies must provide their user information, and reports have emerged that employees of the Chinese company monitored American journalists covering TikTok. The US government fears that the Chinese government may use the data stored on TikTok to manipulate American citizens' public opinion, meddle with their elections, and advance their agenda. As such, the US seeks to sever ties with the platform entirely.

Throughout the generations, the Jewish people have faced similar challenges, frequently confronting foreign influences, and Jewish leaders have had to employ extreme measures to counteract these influences.

The Change in Script

Visitors to the Israel Museum in Jerusalem's lower level will find a display of the Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered in the caves of Qumran. Attempting to read these scrolls reveals that they were written in an ancient Hebrew script from the days of the Second Temple, which differs from today's familiar script. While extensive portions of the Torah were discovered from over two millennia ago, the average person cannot read them — quite a frustrating reality.

What, precisely, occurred here?

Evidently, prior to Ezra the scribe, the Torah was written in Hebrew script, while

during Ezra's era, it was changed into Assyrian script, the form of script that is familiar to us today.

To explain, the script employed by the Jewish people for writing the Torah scrolls and mezuzot until 2000 years ago was the "Hebrew" script. As noted in the Talmud, "In the beginning, the Torah was given to Israel in Hebrew script and the Holy Language. It was later given during the time of Ezra in Assyrian script and Aramaic language."

As the Talmud explains, "They clarified for Israel the Assyrian script and the Holy Language, leaving the common people with Hebrew script and Aramaic language. Who were these common people? Rav Chisda says: The Samaritans." (Sanhedrin 21b).

What led to the sudden change in script? The Jewish people have always zealously guarded their traditions and are willing to sacrifice their lives for even the slightest deviation from the sages' customs. How could they allow a change in the form of the letters of the Torah?

The answer lies in the Talmud's final statement, that it had to do with the Samaritans.

The External Influence

The expression "Good Samaritan" is a famous one, evoking the image of the compassionate stranger who selflessly lends a helping hand to someone in need. But despite the phrase's positive connotations, it is worth noting that it did not originate from Jewish sources, and the Jewish community historically had a strained relationship with the Samaritans.

Who were the Samaritans, and how did they come to the land of Israel?

Many of us have heard of "the ten lost tribes," who were exiled from the Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrian kingdom. The Assyrian king's method of control was to swap populations, ensuring that no one could claim to have lived in a particular area for generations. Therefore, after exiling the Ten tribes, "Kutim," were settled in Samaria, and later became known as Samaritans. They originated from Kutah, which is located in present-day Iraq, (2 Kings 17:24.)

Upon arriving in Samaria, the Kutim were attacked by ferocious lions. They understood it to be because of their ignorance of the “local G-d,” so they sought the aid of the Assyrian king. According to Pirkei D’Rabbi Elazar, upon hearing of the lion attacks in Samaria, the king summoned the Jewish elders and questioned why this was happening. He asked, “All these years the wild animals did not harm you, and now they refuse to accept humans in their midst?” The Jewish elders saw an opportunity to remove the new gentile population and responded by telling the king that the land could not sustain a nation that was not circumcised.

They didn’t get the response they were hoping for. The king proposed that they send two of their own elders to teach Torah to the Samaritans and convert them!

Left with no choice, the elders sent Rabbi Dostai and Rabbi Yanai. They circumcised the Samaritans and taught them the Torah, but in their eyes, it was an absolute tragedy. These gentiles didn’t convert wholeheartedly; they followed a strange combination of the laws of the Torah and their own pagan practices, creating their own, pagan, version of Judaism. In the Talmud, these Samaritans are referred to as “converts of lions.”

These Samaritans were always a pariah. When Ezra returned to Israel from Babylon, he did not include them in the construction of the second Temple, which angered them greatly; they fought and disrupted the building of the Temple for years.

This is where the change in script arrived. In order to distinguish between the Samaritans and the Israelites, and to prevent any unwanted influence or pagan worship from infiltrating the Israelite community, Ezra changed the script of the Torah from Hebrew to Assyrian. This is what the Talmud means in Tractate Sanhedrin — that they left it for the Samaritans.

The leaders of the Jewish people were obviously willing to go to great lengths to strengthen Judaism and prevent negative influences. This even included altering the Hebrew script, which had been used to transcribe the Torah for many generations. To them, preserving Judaism was more important than preserving the script.

A Change of Love

Throughout history, Jews have believed that isolation and detachment is the key to shielding oneself from foreign influences. Nevertheless, the chassidic movement offers a different perspective: that a positive approach, focusing on doing good and embracing positivity, is far more effective in reinforcing Jewish identity.

Passover is one of the most challenging holidays in the Jewish calendar, and also one of the most beloved. How can we utilize this holiday to “preserve Judaism and prevent outside influence”?

There is no more powerful way to preserve Jewish identity than through the food, the smells, the songs of the holidays. Regardless of how far one may be from Judaism, everyone wants to be invited to a Passover Seder. That’s why the Rebbe made such a focus on holiday campaigns, encouraging us to strengthen holiday observance and remind Jews before each holiday of its significance and importance. Especially before Passover, the Rebbe strongly encouraged the distribution of matzah to every single Jew.

As a child, I remember traveling with my father just a few hours before the Seder to the Sheba hospital. We walked through many empty rooms — the doctors made every effort to release as many patients as possible to celebrate the holiday with their families — to visit the many patients who had to remain in the hospital. I recall the joy that spread across their faces when we approached their beds and handed them “shmurah matzah from the Lubavitcher Rebbe.” It was the most beautiful way to reach out to our brethren and strengthen their connection to Yiddishkeit.

We have ten days until the holiday. Each of us can influence a family member, friend, or acquaintance — and make a real difference.