

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



TO-L'DOT

KEEPING THE TORAH

There is an ancient debate about the relationship between the Patriarchs and normative Torah observance. For millennia we have imagined those Tzadikim as Bubbys and Zeidies serving cholent and honey cake to guests while wearing KIPOT and SHEITELs. I'm sure our Sefardi brethren have similar images reflecting Moroccan or Halabi customs. Clearly, those images are very sweet, and very wrong. This week's Torah reading contains the verse which most encourages those fantasies.

Here's the verse: Inasmuch as Avraham obeyed Me and kept My charge: My commandments, My laws, and My teachings (B'reishit 26:5).

In Hebrew the four categories which Avraham 'kept' or observed are MISHMARTI, MITZVOTI, CHUKOTI and TOROTI. The last three terms strongly suggest our traditional legal system.

So, based on those terms, different commentaries describe various competing realities. Reb Avraham Ibn Ezra, who is generally a literalist, sees the four terms as describing actual

communications of God to Avraham: MISHMARTI are specific Mitzvot or behaviors that he received from God; MITZVOTI are literally 'commands' which God ordered Avraham to do, like LECH L'CHA ('go forth') or bring Yitzchak up as an offering; CHUKOTAI are more nebulous, less direct, and include Avraham's effort at IMITATIO DEI, emulating the behavior patterns of God, kindness and empathy; finally, TOROTI implies more involved legal commitments like BRIT MILA, which will be passed on to future generations.

However, far and away the most popular approach is that of Rashi (and the Midrash) that our saintly ancestors pretty much kept the Torah and Mitzvot as we understand them. Here's the relevant Rashi:

MISHMARTI refers to measures intended to help us avoid Biblical prohibitions: like marriages between relatives in the second degree and not doing certain acts on Shabbat; MITZVOTI are matters which we would have legislated, like robbery and murder; CHUKOTAI are things with no apparent reason but are King's decrees, such as eating pig and the wearing SHATNEZ; TOROTI, includes the Oral Law also given to Moshe at Sinai.

Before I go on, I must mention the famous problem. This idea that the AVOT kept the Torah before it was

given presents a very serious conundrum: How could Ya'akov marry two sisters? How could Moshe's father, Amram, marry his aunt, Yocheved? So, the Ramban posits that, yes, our ancestors kept the whole Torah before it was given at Sinai, but only in Eretz Yisrael.

This position agrees with the very popular concept that our Patriarchs and Matriarchs kept the Torah just like we do. I know that many of us were taught this idea at a very early age, and most of us find tremendous comfort in this idea. It just isn't very likely.

We know that in the Biblical period Jews wore cloak-like garments which had four corners, and we have archeological evidence (Assyrian obelisk, c. 830BCE) that our Jewish ancestors put TZITZIT on those corners. However, they didn't wear our contrived four cornered garments. Those were adopted when people started wearing shirts and pants.

We also know that KIPOT were probably invented in the second century of the Common Era, which means that for about 2000 years of our history (in other words, the majority of our history) there were no YARMULKES. I know this may come as a shock, but Sarah IMEINU did not make a 'chulent' for Shabbos.

So, what is our verse really teaching

us? First of all, before going into detail, we're being informed that Avraham was very careful to follow every item and detail which God told him. That alone is very important.

But Reb Chaim Volozhin adds an important twist. They did know and, generally, did keep the Torah, but because the Torah hadn't yet been given they had the option to avoid Torah laws when deemed necessary. Ya'akov knew that the world would benefit greatly if he married both Rachel and Leah, because they were both destined to be the mothers of the House of Yisrael. Our saintly ancestors saw with their lucid perception that the world would greatly benefit from their keeping the Torah and Mitzvot. They generally fulfilled the concepts which we call Torah, and the world was a better place because of it.

However, I really love the explanation given by Rav Judah Goldberg on the Har Etzion website. He explains: The answer, I believe, highlights a key distinction between brit Sinai and brit Avot. At the heart of brit Sinai lie laws; at the heart of brit Avot lie values. Brit Sinai takes the form of a contract... Brit Avot, in contrast, constitutes what we would more appropriately term a "covenant", in its most literal sense. A covenant denotes not merely an agreement, but a union of sorts between the participants. They bond around a

common vision, a shared purpose which inspires their mission... Whereas a contract sets terms, a covenant determines expectations.

That's the coolest approach to this whole issue of how did our Patriarchs keep Torah. They fulfilled the Torah by living the kind of lives which the Torah (and God) demands of us to live. That undertaking actualized the Brit Avot. To a certain extent we keep the Torah; they lived the Torah.

We could only benefit from emulating that lifestyle. So, let's keep the Torah very punctiliously so that we will live the Torah and eventually embody the Torah in every possible way. 