



## THE END OF THE CHAIN?

Moses ordained Joshua, and Joshua ordained his students. This continued from generation to generation — until it stopped

What happened? What broke the chain of tradition?

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TEACHER'S MANUAL



# JEWISH INSIGHTS

A TASTE OF THE REBBE'S TEACHINGS



PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTCHA

**Book of Bamidbar / Numbers**

*Dedicated by*  
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Shluchim of the Rebbe to Mumbai India

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This week, we read about the concept of ordination for the first time, when Moses ordains the seventy elders (Source 1). He also ordained Joshua before his passing (Source 2) and this ordination continued on throughout the generations (Source 3). In Roman times, the sages risked their lives to ensure that it continued, and Romans did everything to stop them; this demonstrates just how important it was (Source 4).

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At some point, the ordination ceased to exist. Nonetheless, it continued to occupy an important place in Jewish life. In the fourteenth century, the rabbis of Israel attempted to bring it back, based on the rulings of Maimonides (Source 5).

But if it was so important, why did it stop? Roman persecution wasn't enough to snuff the flame of Torah study. Why was ordination different?

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The answer is that the sages themselves avoided ordination for a different, also important, reason: Jewish unity. With the scattering of the exiles, it was difficult to keep track of ordinations. If someone showed up claiming ordination, it would immediately raise questions of legitimacy and create controversy. Therefore, ordination slowly fell into disuse.

This was actually the case with the attempt to reinstate it; the efforts petered out when it became clear that the issue was creating strife.

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# Introduction

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Judaism is very proud of its precise way of passing on the tradition from generation to generation. Maimonides enumerates the names of the teachers and sages of all forty generations, from Moses to the generation of the Talmud. About forty more generations have passed from the Talmud to our generation, and the names of those teachers and sages are well known and engraved in Jewish history.

The sages of each generation carefully passed on their knowledge to the next, ensuring the preservation of Jewish tradition to our day.

The highlight of it all was the 'ordination'. The fact that Moses taught the entire Torah to Joshua and personally ordained him, and he in turn taught the Torah to the sages of the next generation and personally ordained them, emphasized the authenticity and wholeness of the transmission of tradition. Every Jew could point to his rabbi and know that he was personally ordained, in a direct link, to Moses himself.

But for some reason, this amazing link stopped.

Nowadays, we are no longer to Moses. The knowledge, of course, was transmitted in its entirety, and the tradition was preserved with the utmost authenticity, but the unique 'ordination' ceremony and everything it symbolized no longer exists.

In this lesson we will dig into the history of this ceremony, try to find out exactly when it stopped, and why...

# A. The Chain of Tradition

## Source 1 Numbers 11:16-17

In this week's Torah portion, Moses complains to G-d that it is too difficult for him to lead the people on his own. Therefore, G-d instructs him to gather seventy elders and to "ordain" them to lead. This is the first time we read about the concept of ordination.

The L-rd said to Moses:

"Assemble for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the people's elders and officers, and you shall take them to the Tent of Meeting, and they shall stand there with You.

I will come down and speak with you there, and I will increase the spirit that is upon you and bestow it upon them. Then they will bear the burden of the people with you so that you need not bear it alone."

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה:

אֲסַפְּהֶיךָ לִי שִׁבְעִים אִישׁ מִזִּקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָדַעְתָּ כִּי-הֵם זִקְנֵי הָעָם וְשֹׁטְרָיו, וְלָקַחְתָּ אֹתָם אֶל-אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד, וְהִתְיַצְּבוּ שָׁם עִמָּךְ.

וַיֵּרְדֹתִי וְדִבַּרְתִּי עִמָּךְ שָׁם, וְאֶצְלָתִי מִן-הַרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיךָ וְשָׁמַתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם, וְנָשְׂאוּ אִתְּךָ בְּמִשָּׂא הָעָם, וְלֹא-תִשָּׂא אֶתְהָ לְבַדְּךָ.

## Source 2 Numbers 27:18, 22-23

Before Moses died, we find a similar occurrence. In the presence of the entire Jewish people, Moses – accompanied by Elazar, the High Priest after Aaron's passing – publicly ordained Joshua as the next leader. G-d told Moses to place one hand on him, but Moses went further, placing both hands, symbolically giving him a double portion of his spirit.

The L-rd said to Moses, "Take for yourself Joshua the son of Nun, a man of spirit, and you shall lay your hand upon him."

Moses did as the L-rd had commanded him, and he took Joshua and presented him before Elazar the kohen and before the entire congregation.

He laid his hands upon him and commanded him, in accordance with what the L-rd had spoken to Moses.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה קַח-לְךָ אֶת-יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן-נּוּן - אִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-רוּחַ בּוֹ, וְסָמַכְתָּ אֶת-יָדְךָ עָלָיו:

וַיַּעַשׂ מֹשֶׁה כְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' אֹתוֹ, וַיִּקַּח אֶת-יְהוֹשֻׁעַ וַיַּעֲמֵדְהוּ לְפָנָיו אֶלְעָזָר הַכֹּהֵן וְלִפְנֵי כָל-הָעֵדָה.

וַיִּסְמַךְ אֶת-יָדָיו עָלָיו וַיְצַוְהוּ, כְּאֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' בְּיַד-מֹשֶׁה:

This ordination continued throughout the generations. Joshua ordained the “elders,” the leaders of the Jewish people after his passing. They passed on this ordination throughout the period of judges, leading down to the period of the prophets. Famous names of prophets like Samuel, Jeremiah and Isaiah were all ordained in a direct chain leading back to Moses himself.

Following the prophets, which lived through the first Temple period, came the period of the sages in the second Temple period. Throughout all this time, the ordination continued, carrying the tradition onward.

Essentially, we carry this tradition until today. The credibility of a rabbi in our day is that he received the Torah’s teachings in a direct link from Sinai.

### Source 3 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of the High Court 4:1-3

At least one of the members of the High Court, Lower Court, or court of three must have received semichah (ordination) from a teacher who himself had been given semichah.

Our teacher, Moses ordained Joshua by placing his hands upon him, as [Numbers 27:23] states: “He laid his hands upon him and commanded him.” Similarly, Moses ordained the 70 judges and the Divine presence rested upon them. Those elders ordained others, and the others still others in later generations. Thus, those who are ordained extend back to the court of Joshua, and to the court of Moses.

How is the practice of semichah practiced for all time? The person conveying ordination does not rest his hands on the elder’s head. Instead, he is addressed by the title of Rabbi and is told: “You are ordained and you have the authority to render judgment, even in cases involving financial penalties.”

At first, whoever had received semichah would

אֶחָד בֵּית דִּין הַגָּדוֹל וְאֶחָד  
סְנֵהֲדָרֵינוּ קֹטְנָה אוֹ בֵּית דִּין  
שֶׁל שְׁלֹשָׁה צָרִיךְ שְׂיִהְיֶה  
אֶחָד מֵהֶן סְמוּךְ מִפִּי הַסְּמוּךְ.

וּמֹשֶׁה רִבְּנוּ סָמַךְ יְהוֹשֻׁעַ  
בְּיַד שְׂנַאֲמַר (בַּמִּדְבָּר כֹּז  
כַּג) “וַיִּסְמַךְ אֶת יָדָיו עָלָיו  
וַיִּצְוֵהוּ.” וְכֵן הַשִּׁבְעִים זְקֵנִים  
מֹשֶׁה רִבְּנוּ סָמְכֵם וְשָׂרְתֶהּ  
עָלֵיהֶן שְׂכִינָה. וְאוֹתָן  
הַזְּקֵנִים סָמְכוּ לְאַחֵרִים  
וְאַחֵרִים לְאַחֵרִים, וְנִמְצְאוּ  
הַסְּמוּךְ אִישׁ מִפִּי אִישׁ עַד  
בֵּית דִּינוֹ שֶׁל יְהוֹשֻׁעַ, וְעַד  
בֵּית דִּינוֹ שֶׁל מֹשֶׁה רִבְּנוּ.

וְכִיצַד הִיא הַסְּמִיכָה  
לְדוֹרוֹת. לֹא שְׂיִסְמְכוּ יְדֵיהֶן  
עַל רֹאשׁ הַזֶּקֶן, אֶלָּא שְׂקוֹרֵין  
לוֹ רַבִּי, וְאוֹמְרִים לוֹ: הֲרִי  
אֶת סְמוּךְ וַיֵּשׁ לְךָ רִשׁוּת  
לְדוֹן אֶפְלוֹ דִּינֵי קְנָסוֹת:

בְּרֵאשׁוֹנָה, הִיָּה כָּל מִי  
שֶׁנִּסְמַךְ סוּמַךְ לְתַלְמִידָיו.

convey semichah on his students. Afterwards, as an expression of honor to Hillel the elder, the Sages established that semichah would not be conveyed upon anyone unless license had been granted by the nasi.

וְחַכְמֵי חֶלְקוֹ כְּבוֹד  
לְהֵלֵל הַזֶּקֶן, וְהִתְקִינוּ  
שֶׁלֹּא יְהֵא אָדָם נִסְמָךְ  
אֲלֵא בְרִשׁוֹת הַנְּשִׂיא.

*Why was ordination so important?*

*In our day, the Torah's financial laws can only be applied with the mutual consent of both parties. However, in biblical times, the Torah's laws were implemented in practice as the legal basis of the justice system. You didn't have the liberty to subscribe to the system or not; you were compelled to obey with the full weight of the law.*

*Therefore, it was important for judges to have real legitimacy. A judge was considered legitimate not because both parties agreed, but because he was ordained in the Divine laws of the Torah going back to Moses at Sinai. This ordination was the basis of the legitimacy of the entire legal system.*

*A second reason was the setting of the calendar. In a time when the holidays and the entire calendar were set according to moon sightings, only ordained scholars were allowed to participate in the deliberations and in the public declaration of the new month.*

## >> The Rebbe

### How Did It All Begin?

The first ordination was the ordination of Joshua by Moses; G-d instructed him to "lay his hand" on him, and he did so: "He laid his hands upon him and commanded him." Similarly, Moses ordained the seventy elders, and, as Maimonides writes, it was those elders who ordained subsequent generations, linking later generations back to Joshua and Moses.

הסמיכה הראשונה היא - הסמיכה שסמך משה ליהושע, כפי שנצטווה משה רבינו: "קח את יהושע גו' וסמכת את ידך עליו"<sup>1</sup>, וכן עשה: "ויסמוך את ידיו עליו ויצווהו"<sup>2</sup>. וכמו כן סמך משה את שבעים הזקנים, "ואותן הזקנים סמכו לאחרים ואחרים לאחרים, ונמצאו הסמוכין איש מפי איש עד בית דינו של יהושע ובית דינו של משה רבינו"<sup>3</sup>.

Since this ordination constitutes a mitzvah (as part of the mitzvah to appoint judges and law enforcement), every person who was so ordained with the link of tradition back to Moses is obligated to teach Torah to students and to endeavor to ordain those who are worthy of ordination. In the words of the verse, "Do not withhold good from its owners." This is an especially worthy endeavor because it continues the link of tradition to the next generation.

ומכיון שסמיכת חכמים היא מצוה (ונכלל ב"מצות עשה של תורה למנות שופטים ושוטרים"<sup>4</sup>), הרי מובן, שכל חכם שהוסמך איש מפי איש עד משה רבינו - יש לו חיוב ללמד תורה לתלמידים (ושננתם לבניך אלו התלמידים"<sup>5</sup>), ולהשתדל לסמוך את אלו הראויים לסמיכה. ובלשון הכתוב "אל תמנע טוב מבעליו". ובפרט - שעל ידי זה ימשך ענין הסמיכה מדור לדור (כשם שהגיע הוא לסמיכה).

## Ordination in Talmudic Times

Just how important is ordination? How far must one go to ordain a new generation of scholars? The following story about Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava, brought in the Talmud, will provide us with some insight:

גודל החשיבות וההכרח שבענין הסמיכה, ועד כמה צריכה להיות ההשתדלות לסמוך חכמים - יש ללמוד מסיפור הגמרא<sup>7</sup> אודות רבי יהודה בן בבא :

## Source 4 Tractate Sanhedrin 14a

*When the Nazis invaded Poland in 1939, they immediately began to hunt down leading rabbis, even while ordinary Jews went relatively unharmed. The Nazis knew well that if they wanted to break the morale of the Jewish people, they needed to target the spiritual leaders.*

*This resulted in hasty campaigns to spirit many leading Jewish figures to safety, among them, the previous Rebbe. It turned out to be quite fortuitous. These leading spiritual figures were able to survive the war and rebuild a new generation of Jewish life, ensuring Jewish continuity after the destruction.*

*The Romans behaved similarly. When they wanted to harm Jewish life, they targeted the leadership, and specifically, the practice of ordination. They knew very well that targeting the chain of tradition would have catastrophic effects on Jewish life – and they behaved accordingly.*



One time, the wicked kingdom of Rome issued decrees of religious persecution against the Jewish people with the aim of abolishing the chain of ordination and the authority of the Sages. They said that anyone who ordains Rabbis will be killed, and anyone who is ordained will be killed, and the city in which they ordain the judges will be destroyed, and the signs identifying the boundaries of the city in which they ordain judges will be uprooted. These measures were intended to discourage the Sages from performing or receiving ordination due to fear for the welfare of the local population.

**What did Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava do? He went and sat between two large mountains, between two large cities, and between two Shabbat boundaries: Between Usha and Shefaram, i.e., in a desolate place that was not associated with any particular city so that he not endanger anyone not directly involved, and there he ordained five elders. And they were: Rabbi Meir, and Rabbi Yehuda, and Rabbi Shimon, and Rabbi Yosei, and Rabbi Elazar ben Shammua. Rav Avya adds that Rabbi Nechemya was also among those ordained.**

**When their enemies discovered them, Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava said to the newly ordained Sages: My sons, run for your lives. They said to him: My teacher, what will be with you? Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava was elderly and unable to run. He said to them: In any case, I am cast before them like a stone that cannot be overturned; even if you attempt to assist me I will not be able to escape due to my frailty, but if you do not escape without me you will also be killed.**

פעם אחת גזרה מלכות הרשעה (רומי) גזירה על ישראל, לבטל את שרשרת הסמיכה ואת סמכותם של חכמי ארץ ישראל, ואמרו שכל הסומך - יהרג, וכל הנסמך - יהרג, ועוד קבעו שעיר שסומכין בה - תיחרב. ואף סמוני תחומין שסומכין בהו - יעקרו, כדי להרתיע את הסומכים והנסמכים מתוך חשש לשלמם של בני מקומות אחרים.

מה עשה יהודה בן בבא? הלך וישב לו בין שני הרים גדולים, ובין שתי עירות גדולות, ובין שני תחומי שבת, (פלומר, במקום שומם, שלא יוכלו לומר שהוא שייך לתחמה של עירה מסוימת ולא יענישו את בני העירה), בין אושא לשפרעם, וסמך שם חמשה זקנים. ואלו הן: ר' מאיר, ור' יהודה, ור' שמעון, ור' יוסי, ור' אלעזר בן שמוע. ר' אויא מוסיף שהיה שם אף ר' נחמיה, בין הנסמכים.

בין שהפירו אויביהם בהו, שגודע להם הדרך שסומכים שם, אמר להו ר' יהודה בן בבא לחכמים: בני, רוצו וברחו מכאן. אמרו לו: רבי, מה תהא עליך? שאתה זקן ואינך יכול לרוץ? אמר להו: הרי בין כה וכה הרני מטל לפנייהם פאבו שאין להם הופכים (שבנדאי לא אוכל להמלט גם אם תעזרוני,

People say about this incident: The Roman soldiers **did not move from there until they had inserted three hundred iron spears [lunkhiyot] into him, making him appear like a sieve** pierced with many holes.

ואם לא תמלטו לבדקם גם  
אתם תהרגו). אמרו: לא יזו  
האויבים משם, עד שנעצו  
בו שלש מאות לונביאות  
(תניתות) של ברזל ועשאוהו  
ככברה.

*This powerful and tragic story teaches us about the importance of the ordination. Rabbi Yehudah surely realized that the word would get out that five new rabbis were ordained. (As the old Jewish joke goes, “I know how to keep a secret, but the one person who I told was a loud-mouth...”) Nevertheless, he risked his life for the continuation of the Jewish tradition.*

## >> The Rebbe

### Even the Enemies Realized Its Importance

This story teaches us two points: (1) The ‘evil empire’ understood that ordination was a fundamental element of Jewish life – and therefore outlawed it; after all, the decrees all focused on fundamental Jewish practices, such as circumcision, Shabbat observance and so on, and (2), Rabbi Yehudah ben Bava sacrificed his life for the sake of ordaining students.

ומזה למדים - (א) שמלכות הרשעה ידעה והבינה שסמיכה היא ענין עיקרי אצל עם ישראל, ולכן גזרו והחמירו כל כך בענין זה - כידוע שגזירות המלכות היו רק על ענינים עיקריים בתורת ישראל, כמו: מצות מילה, שמירת שבת, וכיוצא בזה, (ב) שרבי יהודה בן בבא מסר את נפשו בפועל ממש כדי לסמוך תלמידים.

## B. Reinstatement of Ordination

### Source 5 Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Laws of the High Court 4:11

At some point in history, the ordination ceased. When and where and why – is the topic of the next sections. But first, a fascinating story:

An initiative to renew ordination began in the year 1538, by the court of Rabbi Yaakov Bei-Rav, the rabbi of Tzfat. What was behind the initiative?

At that time, many Spanish conversos fled Spain and immigrated to Israel. They aspired to return to Judaism, but feared that because they lived as Christians, they were liable for karet and could not return to Judaism.

The rabbi of Tzfat found a certain halakhic way to solve the problem, but it was only possible with a court of ordained judges. But, at that time, there were no longer any ordained rabbis.

So, he found a solution to this as well. He drew attention to this Halacha in Mishneh Torah, which states that if all the sages in the Land of Israel agree to appoint judges, then they are considered ordained.

It appears to me that if all the wise men in the Land of Israel agree to appoint judges and convey semichah upon them, the semichah is binding. And these judges may adjudicate cases involving financial penalties and convey semichah upon others.

If so, why did the Sages suffer anguish over the institution of semichah, so that the judgment of cases involving financial penalties would not be nullified among the Jewish people?

Because the Jewish people were dispersed, and it is impossible that all could agree. If, by contrast, there was a person who had received semichah from a person who had received semichah, he does not require the consent of all others. Instead, he may adjudicate cases involving financial penalties for everyone, for he received semichah from a court.

The question whether semichah can be renewed requires resolution.

נִרְאִין לִי הַדְּבָרִים שֶׁאֵם  
הַסְּכִימוּ כָּל הַחֲכָמִים  
שֶׁבְּאַרְצֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְמִנּוּת  
דִּינָיִם וְלְסִמּוֹךְ אוֹתָם הָרִי  
אֵלוֹ סְמוּכִים וַיֵּשׁ לָהֶן  
לְדוֹן דִּינֵי קְנָסוֹת וַיֵּשׁ  
לָהֶן לְסִמּוֹךְ לְאַחֵרִים.

אֵם כֵּן לְמָה הָיוּ הַחֲכָמִים  
מְצַטְעָרִין עַל הַסְּמִיכָה  
כְּדִי שְׁלֹא יִבְטְלוּ דִינֵי  
קְנָסוֹת מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל.

לְפִי שֶׁיִּשְׂרָאֵל מְפֹרְזִין  
וְאִי אֶפְשֶׁר שֶׁיִּסְכְּמוּ  
כָּלָן. וְאֵם הִיא שֶׁסְמוּךְ  
מִפִּי סְמוּךְ אֵינוֹ צָרִיךְ  
דַּעַת כָּלָן אֶלָּא דוֹ דִּינֵי  
קְנָסוֹת לְכָל שְׁהָרֵי נְסִמּוֹךְ  
מִפִּי בֵּית דִּין.

וְהַדְּבָר צָרִיךְ הִכָּרַע:

Maimonides writes that there are two ways to produce ordained rabbis: one is through an unbroken chain going back to Moses, and the second is if all the rabbis in Israel agree that someone among them is worthy of ordination. In that case, they will be able to ordain him, and it will be considered as if he is linked to Moses.

The rabbi of Tzfat decided to make use of the second option.

The center of Torah in Israel was then in Tzfat; many great luminaries lived there at the time, including Rabbi Yosef Caro, author of the Shulchan Aruch. Twenty-five important rabbis gathered there, and ordained Rabbi Yaakov. After being ordained, he ordained several other rabbis: Rabbi Yosef Caro, Rabbi Elazar Azkari (author of Yedid Nefesh), Rabbi Moses di Trani, Rabbi Avraham Shalom and Rabbi Yisrael Kuriel. Through their actions, they hoped to renew the institution of ordination.

After the incident, they sent a messenger to Jerusalem and informed the rabbi of the city, Rabbi Levi ibn Habib (the Ralbach). Compared to Tzfat, which had a Jewish population of 15,000, Jerusalem was considered small and poor (no more than 1,500 Jews seem to have lived there). Nonetheless, out of respect for Jerusalem and its rabbis, they sent him a message and asked him to join.

A major controversy broke out. The rabbi of Jerusalem refused to take part in it, and along with other rabbis, opposed the act that had taken place. With his opposition, some Tzfat sages withdrew their support as well.

The rabbi of Jerusalem argued, among other things, that (a) in Maimonides' opinion, the consent of all the sages of Israel in the Land of Israel is needed, and the consent of the majority is not enough; since he and some other Jerusalem rabbis do not agree, it is not valid. (b) The ordination had ceased over a thousand years earlier (according to his understanding). How is it possible that throughout all those generations, no sage ever thought of renewing ordination?

The controversy, which involved all the rabbis of Israel, lasted more than a year. But afterwards, Rabbi Yosef Caro ordained Rabbi Moshe Alshich, who in turn, ordained Rabbi Chaim Vital. The chain of ordination continued until the middle of the 17th century, but in the end, the ordained rabbis refrained from attributing real halachic validity to their ordination, due to the opposition of those rabbis.

## >> The Rebbe

Another insight into the importance of ordination:

Many years after ordination had ceased to exist, great Torah authorities gathered to renew it: In the time of

הוכחה נוספת על גודל ההשתדלות בענין הסמיכה:

שנים רבות לאחרי שנתבטלה הסמיכה, נאספו גדולי ישראל כדי לחדש את ענין

Rabbi Yaakov Bei-Rav, many great Torah scholars gathered and ordained him, on the foundation of Maimonides's statement that if all the wise men of the Land of Israel agree to appoint judges and convey ordination, they have the power to do so. Rabbi Yaakov Bei-Rav, in turn, ordained four Torah scholars, among them Rabbi Yosef Karo, who in turn ordained Rabbi Moshe Alshich, who in turn ordained Rabbi Chaim Vital. However, this ordination also ceased due to the controversy that arose from Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib's opposition; the story is well-known.

## Why Did It Cease?

If ordination was so important, as we explained, why did the chain of tradition stop? If every scholar endeavored to ordain his students, and if those students followed suite, continuing so generation after generation, why did it ultimately cease to exist?

On one hand, ordination – as we explained at length – is absolutely fundamental. On the other hand, it doesn't seem too difficult to accomplish; there are no special circumstances necessary, such as a Temple or a High Court in Jerusalem. The only imperative is that the scholar be worthy of ordination – and there were, no doubt, worthy scholars in every generation – and that the ordination take

הסמיכה, כידוע שבזמנו של מהר" יעקב בי רב נאספו כמה וכמה גדולי ישראל וסמכו את מהר"י בי רב - על יסוד דברי הרמב"ם<sup>8</sup> ש"אם הסכימו כל החכמים שבארץ ישראל למנות דיינים ולסמוך אותם, הרי אלו סמוכים", ומהר"י בי רב סמך ארבעה מחכמי ישראל, וביניהם - מרן הבית-יוסף, והבית יוסף סמך את ר' משה אלשיך, והוא סמך את ר' חיים וויטאל. אלא שסמיכה זו בטלה בסיבת המחלוקת של מהרלב"ח [לוי בן חביב] שהתנגד לכך, כידוע ומפורסם פרטי הדברים<sup>9</sup>.

ועל פי כל הנזכר לעיל - גדולה התמיהה: מדוע נפסקה שלשלת הסמיכה בישראל - מכיון שכל חכם שנסמך השתדל לסמוך עוד תלמידים, ותלמידיו השתדלו לסמוך את תלמידיהם, וכך הלך הדבר ונמשך דור לאחרי דור, אם כן, מאיזה טעם נפסק הדבר!?

מצד אחד - ענין הסמיכה הוא דבר חשוב ומוכרח ביותר, כנזכר לעיל בארוכה, ולאידך - אין קושי מיוחד בדבר, שהרי אין צורך בתנאים מיוחדים [קיומו של בית המקדש, סמיכה בלשכת הגזית דוקא], כי אם - שיהיה החכם ראוי לסמיכה<sup>10</sup>, ובודאי היו בכל הדורות תלמידי חכמים שהיו ראויים לסמיכה,

place in the Land of Israel – and there were, no doubt, caravans that traveled regularly between Babylon and the Land of Israel, which would have allowed the scholars of Babylon to come to Israel to be ordained and to ordain others.

There seems to be no reason for the ordination to cease to exist at any point in time. This raises a difficult question: why and how did the ordination come to an end?

*The Rebbe asks: From all these stories – the rabbi who he gave his life for ordination, and the sages of Tzfat who wanted to renew it – we see how important ordination is. On the other hand, what could be the great difficulty in continuing it from generation to generation? Why did it stop?*

## Not Because of Persecution

The common understanding of the matter is that ordination ceased for fear of the Roman government. However, if ordination is so integral to Judaism, it is unlikely that the Roman persecution managed to stop it everywhere within such a short period of time.

There is no doubt that despite the Roman decree against ordination, the Torah sages made every effort to continue the institution of ordination due to its importance. What about the danger of engaging in prohibited activity? They could have certainly found ways to deal with it; they could have done the

וכן שתהיה הסמיכה בארץ ישראל<sup>11</sup>, ובודאי היו שיירות מצויות בין בבל לארץ ישראל, כך שגם תלמידי חכמים שבבבל היו יכולים לבוא לארץ ישראל כדי לקבל סמיכה ולסמוך אחרים.

ומכיון שכן, הרי אין כל סיבה שבשלב מסויים יפסיקו לסמוך, ואם כן, תמוה ביותר כיצד ומתי נפסקה הסמיכה בישראל!?

ההנחה המקובלת היא - שהפסיקו לסמוך מפני גזירת המלכות. אמנם, על פי האמור לעיל אודות גודל חשיבותה של הסמיכה - לא יתכן לומר שמצד גזירת המלכות נפסקה הסמיכה בכל המקומות בפרק זמן אחד:

מובן וגם פשוט, שגם לאחר גזירת המלכות שלא לסמוך - הרי מפני גודל החשיבות וההכרח שבענין הסמיכה, בודאי עשו חכמי ישראל את כל המאמצים האפשריים כדי להמשיך את קיומה של הסמיכה. ובאשר לפחד מפני גזירת המלכות - בודאי היו יכולים

ordination secretly, or in a distant town in a forsaken corner of the country where the government was presumably not searching for sages capable of ordaining – because sages were usually found in the famous yeshivah centers teaching Torah to many students, not in far-flung villages.

למצוא עצות לכך, כמו: לסמוך בחשאי, או בעיירה רחוקה ונדחת בארץ ישראל, ששם יש להניח שהמלכות לא תחפש אחר תלמידי חכמים שיכולים לסמוך כו', כי מקומם של החכמים - בישיבות המפורסמות, ששם מרביצים תורה לכל התלמידים, ולא בעיירה ופנה נדחת.



## C. Avoiding Controversy

### >> The Rebbe

#### The Scattering of Exile

The following explanation could resolve the fact that ordination ceased (as well as the custom to establish the new month based on moon sightings):

A time came when there wasn't a central established court, the sages were scattered in many different locations, and as time passed, it was no longer clear who was ordained and who was not. Therefore, a Torah scholar may have been ordained by a sage in one location, but he may have moved to another location where his 'patron' sage was not well-known as a qualified 'ordainer,' and a controversy may have arisen as to the legitimacy of his ordination. This would definitely be the case if the scholar wished to establish the new month according to new-moon sightings; the controversy would no doubt be even greater.

Therefore, the sages no longer went to great lengths to convey ordination, and over time, the numbers of ordained scholars dwindled, until they became entirely extinct.

*Remember that an ordained rabbi has the power to give financial penalties and lay down the law. Imagine a rabbi showing up in town and declaring himself ordained – there is no doubt that it would draw opposition from the local leadership and laypeople if they didn't recognize his name or the name of this rabbi. Because it became a source of controversy, it began to fall into disuse.*

על פי האמור לעיל, יש לבאר גם את הטעם והסיבה לכך שבמשך הדורות נתבטל לגמרי קידוש החודש על פי הראי', וכן ענין הסמיכה:

מכיון שלא הי' בית דין קבוע, והחכמים הסמוכים נתפזרו במקומות שונים, ובמשך הזמן כבר לא הי' ברור ומפורסם לכל מי מהם סמוך איש מפי איש - הרי חכם שקיבל סמיכה מחכם הנמצא במקום פלוני, בבואו למקום אחר ששם לא יודעים שהחכם הנמצא כמקום פלוני הוא סמוך, עלולה להתעורר מחלוקת אם יש תוקף לסמיכה שלו אם לאו. ובפרט כאשר החכם המוסמך ירצה לקדש על פי הראי' - שאז בודאי תגדל המחלוקת ביותר.

ולכן, גם בנוגע לענין הסמיכה פחתה ונתמעטה השתדלותם של חכמי ישראל הסמוכים, וכך במשך הדורות פחתו והלכו הסמוכים איש מפי איש, עד שנתבטלה תורת סמיכה מישראל.



In the earlier sections, the Rebbe explained how integral ordination was to Jewish life. But the moment it became controversial, the question changed. The rabbis of the Mishnah were willing to sacrifice their life for ordination, but was it worthwhile if it would tear apart the Jewish community? Not necessarily. Disunity among Jewish communities can have terrible effects on Jewish life, and a controversy is something that should not be taken lightly.

The Rebbe himself was not afraid of controversy; he famously took very strong stands when it came to matters that were important for the Jewish people, like the questions of “Who-is-a-Jew” and “Land-for-Peace.” But there were other cases in which the Rebbe clearly chose peace over controversy.

To quote one example:

During the Amidah prayer, we pray for rain in the winter. Countries in the southern hemisphere have winter in the opposite season, but they still recite the prayers according to the seasons of the Land of Israel.

During one gathering, the Rebbe cited an opinion of the Rosh, a medieval Rabbinic figure, who said that they should be following their own seasons. The Rebbe mentioned that this opinion seemed to be correct.

A controversy immediately arose. Some Chabad rabbis in South Africa announced that they would be changing the local custom, drawing criticism from others. As usual in Jewish communities, it was an opportunity for everyone to jump in and give an opinion.

Word got back to the Rebbe, and during the next farbrengen, he reprimanded those who had attempted to change the local custom. Reciting one prayer or another is a halachic dispute; it will not impact the continuity of the Jewish people. In that case, peace among Jewish communities was a much higher priority (See Rosh Chodesh Elul 5742).

This seems to have been a similar case. Torah study was continuing; it was only the formal ordination that was causing strife. In that case, it simply wasn't worth it.

## The Tzfat Saga

A story that actually happened could serve as a basis for this suggestion:

ויש להביא הוכחה לדבר ממעשים שהיו  
בפועל:

Earlier, we mentioned the famous controversy which had Rabbi Yaakov Bei-Rav and the Torah scholars of Tzfat on one side, and Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib and the scholars of Jerusalem on the other, regarding the reinstatement of ordination. There too, when the scholars of Tzfat realized that it was creating a controversy, and that Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib was insistent that the reinstatement was inappropriate, they had no choice but to cancel their plans.

This is to the extent that Rabbi Yosef Karo, one of the scholars ordained by Rabbi Yaakov Bei-Rav, makes no mention of his ordination in his *Code of Jewish Law*, and he even determines how we are to conduct ourselves in the modern-era in the absence of ordination – despite being ordained himself! This was because he realized that the ordination had not been widely accepted as legitimate, due to Rabbi Levi Ibn Habib's opposition.

## Source 6 Maggid Meisharim, end of Parshat Vayikra

*There is a fascinating sequel to the story: In Jewish tradition, there are a number of cases in which a higher power, an angel or soul, communes with a righteous person and reveals to him various heavenly secrets. This phenomenon is called a "Maggid".*

*Rabbi Yosef Karo wrote a book called Magid Meisharim, a personal diary where he documents conversations he had with a 'maggid' from the upper world. This 'maggid' is revealed to him following the study of Mishnah, and even identifies by name: "I am the Mishnah..." He usually appeared early on Shabbat morning and told him insights into the week's Torah portion.*

*In one revelation, the maggid says as follows:*

Since you demonstrated self-sacrifice to return the crown of ordination to its former glory, may you merit to be ordained by all the wise men of the land of Israel and the wise men of the Diaspora, and through you, I will reinstate ordination to its former glory, and give you the merit to conclude your work.

הוזכר לעיל (סל"ט) אודות המחלוקת המפורסמת שהיתה בין מהר"י בי רב וחכמי צפת למהרלב"ח וחכמי ירושלים ע"ד חידוש הסמיכה. וגם כאן רואים שכאשר חכמי צפת ראו שהדברים מביאים לידי מחלוקת, שכן, מהרלב"ח עמד כתוקף על דעתו שאין מקום לחידוש הסמיכה - לא היתה להם ברירה אלא לבטל ענין זה.

ועד כדי כך, שהבית יוסף, א' מאלו שנסמכו על ידי מהר"י בי רב - לא הזכיר ענין זה בשולחן ערוך! ולא עוד אלא שפוסק בשולחן ערוך<sup>12</sup> כיצד יש לנהוג בזמן הזה כאשר אין סמוכים - אף שהוא בעצמו הי' סמוך! וטעם הדבר - בראותו שהדבר לא נתקבל בתפוצות ישראל מפני התנגדותו של מהרלב"ח.

וַיַּעַן כִּי מִסֵּרְתָּ נִפְשְׁךָ עַל  
חֲזַרְתָּ עֲטֹרַת הַסְּמִיכָה  
לְיִשְׁנָה, תִּזְכָּה לְהִיּוֹת  
מִסְמָךְ מִכָּל חַכְמֵי אֶרֶץ  
יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּמִחַכְמֵי חוּץ  
לְאֶרֶץ, וְעַל יָדְךָ אֲחֻזֵּיר  
הַסְּמִיכָה לְיִשְׁנָה, וְאַזְכֶּךָ  
לְגִמְרַת חֲבוּרְךָ וְכוּ'.

## D. Historical Accuracy (Optional)

### >> The Rebbe

#### The Real Question

Now, we are only left with determining exactly when ordination ceased entirely.

Many of the most recent scholars to deal with this issue bring evidence that the ordination continued to exist throughout the Geonite period!

Moreover: There is a letter from Rabbi Evyatar Gaon, written in the year 4854 [1094 CE], in which he mentions several people who were ordained in his time (himself being among them), and he says that one of them traveled to Haifa to sanctify the new year!

ועתה, לא נותר אלא לברר מהו הזמן המדוייק שבו נפסק לגמרי ענין הסמיכה.

ובכן: רבים מן החוקרים האחרונים שעסקו בזמן ביטול הסמיכה, מביאים הוכחות להאריך את הסמיכה לכל הפחות עד לתקופת הגאונים!

ולא עוד אלא שמצינו מכתב של ר' אביתר<sup>13</sup> שנכתב בשנת ד' אלפים תתנ"ד, ותוכנו - אודות אחדים שקיבלו סמיכה בימיו (והוא אחד מהם), וממשיך שם שאחד מהם הלך לחיפה לקדש את השנה!

*A letter from the year 1094 AD, written by Rabbi Evyatar Gaon, was found in the Cairo Geniza. He was the head of a yeshiva that operated between the sixth and twelfth century, first in Tiberias, then Jerusalem and Ramleh, and in his days, it moved north, to Tyre, from the terror of the Seljuks who conquered Jerusalem.*

*Rabbi Evyatar describes what happened a few years earlier, in the days of his father, Rabbi Eliyahu Cohen Gaon, who reinstated the yeshiva after moving to Tyre:*

*“Two years before my father passed away, he gathered all the Jews of Tyre and the Galilee and he ordained us in the name of the entire Yeshivah, and we ascended to the position of Gaon.”*

*He goes on to say that in one of the years, he went down to Haifa to sanctify the year!*

*Clearly, ordination didn't stop as early as some assumed.*

*The following is a timeline of what we know about ordination:*

1300 BC - The ordination of Joshua by Moses. In the years that follow, ordination continues from teacher to student.

Second Century AD - Rabbi Yehuda ben Bava ordains five of his disciples, and is executed by the Romans.

1090 AD - Rabbi Eliyahu Cohen Gaon ordains his son Rabbi Evyatar.

1538 AD - Most of the rabbis of the Land of Israel ordain the rabbi of Tzfat, and he ordains some of his disciples.

With all our questions about the unlikelihood of the cessation of ordination, the opposite seems to be the case – we should assume that it continued to exist for much longer, until we find concrete evidence that it ceased at a certain time period. Although we do not have evidence of ordination in later eras, a lack of evidence does not mean that it didn't happen; it is quite logical to assume that ordination continued far beyond the Talmudic period.

It would be very worthwhile to find scholars to fully investigate this issue in the manuscripts that are available (unfortunately, this research is usually done by scholars who are not observant Jews). Being that new manuscripts occasionally come to light, it is likely that newly discovered manuscripts will shed light on this complicated issue.

ועל פי כל אריכות הדברים הנזכרים לעיל אודות גודל התמיהה שבענין ביטול הסמיכה, הרי אדרבה, מסתבר להאריך את זמן הסמיכה ככל האפשרי, עד שימצאו הוכחה ברורה שבתקופה מסויימת בודאי בטלה הסמיכה לגמרי בכל המקומות. ואפילו אם לא מצינו הוכחות ברורות לקיומה של הסמיכה בדורות מאוחרים יותר - הרי אדרבה : לא ראינו אינה ראייה<sup>14</sup>, שכן, הסברא נותנת שהסמיכה נמשכה זמן רב לאחר סוף חכמי הגמרא, כנזכר לעיל בארוכה.

אי לזאת, כדאי ביותר שימצאו כאלו שינסו לחקור בכתבי יד (שבעוונותינו הרבים, אין חקר כתבי היד נעשה על ידי יהודים שומרי תורה ומצוות), כדי לברר נושא זה לאשורו ולבוריו. ויש להניח, שמכיון שמזמן לזמן מתגלים כתבי יד נוספים - הנה במשך הזמן יתגלו כתבי יד נוספים שיהי' בהם כדי להפיץ אור בסוגייה מסובכת זו.

משיחת שבת פרשת בראשית -  
התוועדות ב' - ה'תשמ"ה  
תורת מנחם, ה'תשמ"ה, חלק א' עמוד 467

- (1) פינחס כז, יח.
- (2) שם, כג.
- (3) רמב"ם הל' סנהדרין רפ"ד.
- (4) רמב"ם שם רפ"א.
- (5) ספרי ופרש"י ואתחנן ו, ז. רמב"ם הל' ת"ת א, ב. הל' ת"ת לאדה"ז א, ח.
- (6) משלי ג, כז.
- (7) סנהדרין יד, א.
- (8) הל' סנהדרין שם הי"א.
- (9) ראה קונטרס הסמיכה שבסוף שו"ת מהרלב"ח.
- (10) ראה ירושלמי חגיגה א, ח. רמב"ם שם ה"ח.
- (11) סנהדרין שם. רמב"ם שם ה"ו.
- (12) ראה שו"ע חו"מ בתחלתו: בזמן הזה כו'. ובטור שם: "האידנא דליכא סמיכה", ובב"י שם: "אנהדיוטות אנן".
- (13) מכת"י הגניזה האנגלי חי"ד דף 458 - נעתק בתורה שלימה חי"ג ע' פה. חט"ו ע' 186.
- (14) ראה כתובות כג, א, זבחים קג, ב - במשנה. עדיות פ"ב מ"ב.