

# The True Torah?



From the Aleppo Codex; Book of Chronicles I, 2:26 to 3:4

## The 1,000-year-old Aleppo Codex raises questions about what is the most accurate version of the Hebrew Scriptures.

By Robby Berman

**E**xcommunication. It is rare. And although British-born Dovid Yitzchaki wasn't subjected to the bell, book and candle, he came closer to it than he would have liked. Rabbi Yitzchaki's sole occupation is the study of Torah. He has 10 children, dresses in black garb, and lives in Bnei Brak.

Yet for some people he's not kosher and to understand why requires a little patience.

The story starts 1,100 years ago, but we will begin in

1958. That was the year a Jew risked his life to smuggle an ancient Hebrew manuscript out of Aleppo, Syria, into Turkey. He made his way to Israel where he delivered it to Yitzhak Ben-Zvi, the president of the young state. Ben-Zvi noticed that whole sections of the ancient book were missing and ordered the Mossad to retrieve them. The Mossad was unsuccessful, but where they failed, Bible scholars succeeded.

That ancient manuscript was the Bible. Not just any handwritten copy of the Bible, but – according to many – the most accurate version of the Hebrew scriptures in existence.

"The Aleppo Codex is one of the most important documents in Jewish history," says Prof. Menachem Cohen, head of the Aleppo Codex restoration project at Bar-Ilan University.

This fall, Bar-Ilan published a new edition of Genesis according to the Aleppo manuscript (also known as Keter Aram Tsova), and not everyone is happy about the achievement. While there are no significant differences between the 24 canonized books of the Hebrew Bible and those of the Aleppo manuscript (the narration and the commandments are the same), there are differences of thousands of silent letters, musical cantillations, vowels and page layout.

Enough to ruffle the hairs under more than a few kippot in the Orthodox Jewish community which traditionally believes that every letter, jot and tittle of the Torah we read today is identical to those that were transmitted to Moses at Mount Sinai.

But where does the Aleppo Codex draw its authority? The codex (Latin for book), written in 910 in Tiberias, was produced under the direct supervision of the famous scholar Aaron ben Moses Ben-Asher. Ben-Asher came from a long line of scholarly scribes world-renowned for their diligence in counting and cross-checking every letter of the scriptures to ensure accuracy.

Until the codex, Bible books were written separately; this manuscript contained all 24 books of the Hebrew Bible. The Ben-Asher text was used by scribes who wanted to write a copy of a Torah scroll. For practical reasons, it is much easier to copy from a book than a scroll: The former allows a scribe to quickly flip to a desired page, with the latter he has to roll it. Books are also cheaper to make because both sides of the page are used.

This Ben-Asher book eventually made its way to Cairo, where the great theologian Maimonides copied from it when he wrote his own Torah scroll. (It is a biblical injunction for every Jew to write a Torah.) And, in Maimonides' magnum opus of Jewish legal writings, he attests that this book is the most authentically accurate manuscript of the Bible.

It is believed that sometime in the 13th century, the great-great-grandson of Maimonides brought the book to Aleppo, where it remained in the main synagogue under lock and key.

In December 1947, after the United Nations voted for partition and to create Israel, the Arabs of Aleppo rioted, destroying the synagogue where the codex was kept. Two thirds of the book survived (there are at least nine different accounts as to who salvaged it) and it remained hidden in the Jewish community until 1958. Mordechai Facham then smuggled it into Israel, where it can be seen on exhibit in the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

The codex reached Israel sans the first four and a half books of the Pentateuch, as well as a few books of Writings, the third section of the Bible. The surviving pages were not singed, making it unlikely that the missing pages were burned. It remains a mystery whether the missing sections were destroyed

authoritative Torah text. After another printing in Warsaw, it became the standard for Orthodox communities.

There is just one problem: the Mikraot Gedolot is highly inaccurate. Of that edition, the Five Books of Moses, the Prophets and the Writings together contain several thousands of errors. Not just of musical cantillations and vowels, but letters as well.

Ya'acov Ben-Haim carried out his manuscript comparisons on texts that were within his geographical reach, but they were not accurate themselves. (It is interesting to note that the printing of the Mikraot Gedolot was executed under the aegis of a Christian printer, Daniel Bomberg, and Ben-Haim, who converted to Christianity. It is not clear, however, whether Ben-Haim's conversion was before or after 1524.)

The textual inaccuracies are the impetus for the Bar-Ilan project.

"There is nothing similar known to history as to what the Masoretic scholars did to preserve the biblical tradition, from letters all the way down to minuscule marks," says Prof. Cohen, referring to the cross-references and ortho-

Bar-Ilan's Prof. Jordan Penkower took a different route. While "innocently browsing" through early printed editions of the Bible in the rare-books room of the Jewish Theological Seminary in Manhattan, he came across an incunabulum – a book printed before 1501. Written on the inside cover was a note saying that the book was corrected according to the Aleppo Codex. "I almost fell off my chair," says Penkower. "I spent the next half a year researching that claim and verifying that indeed it was corrected according to the Aleppo Codex and not some other manuscript."

In 1994, Penkower published a book of his research, *Nusah Ha-Torah Be-Keter Aram Tsovah* (New Evidence for the Pentateuch Text in the Aleppo Codex), offering yet another source to recreate the Aleppo Codex.

A handful of academic scholars who are also Orthodox Jews have made attempts to educate the Orthodox masses concerning textual inaccuracies, but they have met with resistance.

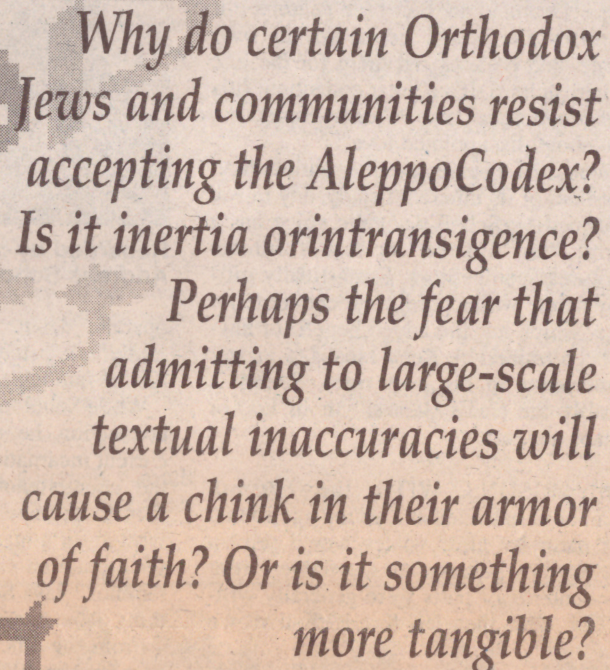
For years, rabbi, scholar and Israel Prize-laureate Mordechai Breuer has been trying to change the custom in synagogues on the Shabbat preceding Purim.

On that day's Torah reading, Orthodox communities read, and then reread with a slightly different pronunciation, a word from the Torah. Interestingly, this is the only instance where textual accuracy is publicly called into question.

With the reconstruction of the Aleppo Codex, it is now known which version is more likely accurate, rendering the double reading superfluous. But with tradition the powerful juggernaut that it is, synagogues continue the double reading.

Recently, a modern Orthodox rabbi from New York, who declined to be identified, refused to permit a lecture in his synagogue about the Aleppo Codex. "I don't want to expose my congregants to the existence of various codices... to textual variations," explains the rabbi. "I don't know what they would do with that information."

"You can put on blinders and cower from codices or you can look at it straight-on and decide how you're going to deal with it," says Penkower, who is Orthodox. "I don't think Judaism ever intended for people to avoid the truth in order to preserve their conception of Judaism and Jewish history. I guess it depends upon how strong you are religiously... there are some people out there whose way of dealing with new information is by



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and a half books of the Pentateuch, as well as a few books of Writings, the third section of the Bible. The surviving pages were not singed, making it unlikely that the missing pages were burned. It remains a mystery whether the missing sections were destroyed in the rioting or subsequently stolen. And if it was stolen, by whom? Arabs or Jews?

Indeed, in 1981, an Aleppo-born Jew living in Brooklyn died; among her possessions was a page from the Aleppo Codex.

In 1994, with the codex in hand and books of the Prophets intact, Yitzchaki, with the help of a scribe, printed a new addition of the Prophets. Rabbi Avraham Yitzchok Hoffman, an American-born haredi residing in Mea She'arim, was outraged. He claims that changing even one letter of the canonized text is heresy. Hoffman galvanized haredi leaders to condemn Yitzchaki and he plastered broadsides throughout Jerusalem denouncing the publication and its editor.

Yitzchaki claims that although Hoffman lives in Mea She'arim he does not speak *ex cathedra* and, he asserts, Hoffman had misled rabbinic leaders about the importance of the codex. "When I explain to these rabbis the context in which the codex was created, they back down and even support my work," says Yitzchaki.

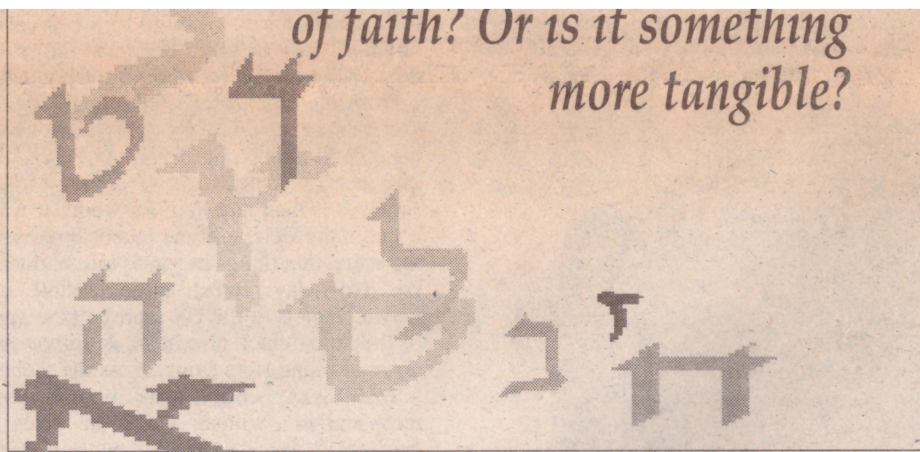
Hoffman disparagingly refers to the Aleppo Codex as a "new archaeological find" and insists that Jews must adhere to the 13 principles of faith as dictated by Maimonides. He is referring specifically to the eighth principle, commonly understood to mean that every letter and dot, no matter how small, is of Divine origin. Indeed, in Orthodox synagogues, if a reader of the Torah makes the most minor of mistakes (which is easy to do since Torah scrolls contain no vowels), the congregants shout the correct version at him until he reads it correctly.

The irony is that Maimonides himself gave currency to the codex. It is, in fact, the Bible of today that differs from Maimonides' edition a millennium ago.

Although there exist various biblical codices containing textual variations, Orthodox Jews are typically exposed to only one unified text. The reason is simple: with the invention of movable type in the 15th century, printed Bibles became uniform.

In Venice, circa 1524, a Tunisian scholar named Ya'acov Ben-Haim used the printing press to produce an edition of all 24 books of the canonized Bible, the first of its kind. With its inclusion of famous Bible commentators such as Rashi and Ibn Ezra, the Mikraot Gedolot Edition, as it became to be known, was accepted as the definitive and

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graphic notes. He and his team of 13 researchers at Bar-Ilan, most of them Orthodox men, have spent the last eight years working on the codex restoration project. To date, the project has published seven out of the 24 books.

This effort, spearheaded by an Orthodox institution, is important to non-Jews as well: All extant Bibles, from the Septuagint and Vulgate to the King James edition, ultimately rest upon a translation from the Hebrew.

So how did researchers recreate a 1,000-year-old, 300,000-letter text?

One method was to compile internal cross-references found in the manuscript itself. In the 10th century, when the codex was written, Bible chapter divisions were not yet created; to refer to another verse one had to quote the verse itself. Inside the margins of the books of prophets of the codex, for example, are masoretic notes that quote whole verses from the Five Books of Moses. The researchers compiled and organized these quotes, much like a jigsaw puzzle, to reconstruct the text.

For parts of the Bible lacking cross-references Cohen took a more modern approach: "Bar-Ilan invested hundreds of thousands of dollars in developing special software and a unique search engine... the computer has saved us years and years of research."

Typically, search engines are built to look for letters. But since Hebrew vowels are dots and dashes under the consonants, Bar-Ilan's software was designed to find letters, dots, and dashes, as well as musical cantillations both above and below letters. "Our computer program tracks and studies patterns of syntax and vowel usage in the existing codex to recreate these patterns for the missing sections," says Cohen.

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Why do certain Orthodox Jews and communities resist accepting the Aleppo Codex? Is it inertia or intransigence? Perhaps the fear that admitting to large-scale textual inaccuracies will cause a chink in their armor of faith? Or is it something more tangible?

Halacha unequivocally states that if the layout of the Torah text is incorrect, or a single letter is missing, the entire scroll is not kosher and may not be read from in a synagogue. If the reconstruction of the Aleppo

Codex means that the most accurate text of the Torah is now available, then Torah scrolls need to be rewritten. (A new scroll costs about \$35,000.)

And what does acknowledgement of textual variations do to the "Codes Theory," which claims that divinely created codes exist in the Torah?

Over the past few years, the Codes Theory has come under increasing criticism from cryptologists and mathematicians who claim the codes are statistically insignificant. Since the "codes" were found in a less faithful edition, doesn't that tilt the argument in favor of those mathematicians who say the coded words are random occurrences?

Rabbi Dovid Lichtman, senior lecturer in the Discovery seminar where the codes are taught, thinks not. "It's a *klutz kasha* [ridiculous question]... If you see a bumblebee that flies and the laws of aerodynamics dictate that the bee's wingspan is too small to lift the bee, your question is not on the bee itself but rather on your understanding of flight... the codes exist. Period."

A codes researcher at Aish Hatorah Yeshiva, Rabbi Moshe Zeldman, adds, "...The variant text would only ruin a code if the code runs through that area of text that has a different spelling. The existence of the Aleppo Codex could affect [the validity of the] codes but it wouldn't destroy them and render them insignificant. Besides, since the Mikraot Gedolot edition has been halachically accepted by the Jewish People it therefore, by definition, is the most authoritative text. It's the one Hashem [God] wants us to have."

Many years of painstakingly slow research performed amidst the solemn silence of libraries around the world is causing a ruckus and possibly a rift in the Jewish community at large. But only history will bear witness to which edition of the Bible becomes, or remains, "authentic." ■