

Is Judaism Fake News?

The daily news used to be sacrosanct, but nowadays people always question its veracity. And we're not talking about *The National Enquirer*. We're speaking about respected, primary sources of news. Moreover, fake news, has become such an explosive issue, that the outcomes of national presidential elections are purportedly influenced by false reporting.

1. Hunt Allcott, Associate Professor of Economics, New York University, New York City, New York. Matthew Gentzkow, Professor of Economics, Stanford University, Stanford, California. [Journal of Economic Perspectives—Volume 31, Number 2—Spring 2017—Pages 211–236.](#)

Social media platforms such as Facebook have a dramatically different structure than previous media technologies. Content can be relayed among users with no significant third party filtering, fact-checking, or editorial judgment. An individual user with no track record or reputation can in some cases reach as many readers as Fox News, CNN, or the New York Times.

Following the 2016 election, a specific concern has been the effect of false stories—“fake news,” as it has been dubbed—circulated on social media. Recent evidence shows that: 1) 62 percent of US adults get news on social media (Gottfried and Shearer 2016); 2) the most popular fake news stories were more widely shared on Facebook than the most popular mainstream news stories (Silverman 2016); 3) many people who see fake news stories report that they believe them (Silverman and Singer-Vine 2016); and 4) the most discussed fake news stories tended to favor Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton (Silverman 2016). Putting these facts together, a number of commentators have suggested that Donald Trump would not have been elected president were it not for the influence of fake news (for examples, see Parkinson 2016; Read 2016; Dewey 2016).

Even the paper that was always assumed to be the bastion of credibility, *The New York Times*, was taken to task for recently publishing fake news:

2. Paul Farhi, [Washington Post](#), New York Times Backtracks on a Tale about Expensive Curtains, September 14, 2018.

Late Thursday, the Times published a bit of accountability journalism, detailing extravagant expenditures at taxpayer expense on a Manhattan apartment leased by the government and now occupied by Nikki Haley, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. Specifically, the article noted, federal interior decorators spent \$52,701 on new drapes, including a motorized system to open and close them.

The original headline read: [“Nikki Haley’s View of New York is Priceless. Her Curtains? \\$52,701.”](#) Well, yes. But not exactly.

In fact, readers who merely scanned the headline and photo thinking it was another Trump administration expense-account scandal might have missed several important pieces of information in the body of the story, starting with the sixth paragraph: The drape expenditures were authorized and approved by the Obama administration in 2016. “Ms. Haley had no say in the purchase,” a spokesman for Haley said in the article.

Critics contended that the headline, along with a photo of Haley, made it seem that Haley, or Trump's State Department, was responsible for the expenditure... Breitbart.com was even blunter: "[New York Times Spreads Fake News About Nikki Haley's \\$52,701 Curtains.](#)"

By midafternoon on Friday, the Times reconsidered. It removed the photo of Haley and changed the headline to [the less colorful, but more accurate, "State Department Spent \\$52,701 on Curtains for Residence of U.N. Envoy."](#)

Maybe Judaism is Fake News?

Maybe Judaism – the belief in one G-d who revealed Himself to the entire Jewish nation at Mount Sinai and gave them the Torah – is not factually grounded? Perhaps it's merely a cleverly crafted myth that has found some support over the ages by so-called Jews and non-Jews alike, but cannot be showed to be factually based. After all, there are hundreds of religions and spiritual movements out there. Not the least to note this has been Oprah Winfrey, who produced a seven-part television mini-series in 2015 entitled "Belief" exploring faith and spirituality. *Atlantic Magazine* reported on October 18, 2015:

"The breathtaking aesthetics of 'Belief' are reason enough to watch. Oprah spent a heap of cash over three years to produce a series packed with stunning cinematography and effects and a soaring score. The package is reminiscent of BBC's epic 'Planet Earth,' a similarity that Winfrey has admitted was intentional. Oprah's celebrity status and the big-budget quality she was able to provide make for a powerful combination. But the billionaire media mogul is both 'Belief's' greatest asset and its highest burdle. She was widely admired during her talk show's heyday, but things shifted among her religious fans when she began espousing an eclectic spirituality. She claimed that there are 'millions of ways' to get to G-d and endorsed New Age gurus like Deepak Chopra and Eckhart Tolle."

So how can we know that Judaism is not, in fact, fake news?

As the springboard to show the credibility of Judaism, we're going to analyze the first two Mishnayos in *Pirkei Avot*, part of the Talmud.

3. Mishnah, Avot 1:1 – The chain of tradition stretches from Moshe, who received it from G-d, through the Prophets until the Men of the Great Assembly.

Moshe received the Torah from Sinai and gave it over to Yehoshua (Joshua). Yehoshua gave it over to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and the Prophets gave it over to the Men of the Great Assembly. The latter said three things: Be patient in judgement, establish many students, and make a fence for the Torah.	משה קבל תורה מסיני ומסרה ליהושע ויהושע לזקנים וזקנים לנביאים ונביאים מסרוה לאנשי כנסת הגדולה. הם אמרו שלשה דברים: הו מתונים בדין, והעמידו תלמידים הרבה, ועשו סייג לתורה.
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There are several questions that arise at first glance at this Mishnah. Why does the Mishnah teach that *Moshe* received the Torah at Sinai? Wouldn't it be more powerful and inclusive if it were to state, as the Chumash does, that *the entire nation* received the Torah there?

Furthermore, Moshe didn't receive the Torah from *Sinai*. He received it from G-d! But he did receive it *at* Sinai. Why does the Mishnah state Moshe received it *from* Sinai?

To answer these questions, we certainly know from the Book of Exodus that the entire nation of 2.5 million Jews received the Torah at Mount Sinai. But that is not the primary message of this Mishnah. First of all, the 15th century commentator, Rav Ovadya of Bartenura, relates that this section of the Talmud, *Pirkei Avot*, "Ethics of the Fathers," intends to teach ethics and moral principles. There are many non-Jewish philosophers who have also postulated ethical teachings, which are relativistic. But our Mishnah teaches us that Jewish ethics are Divine, given by G-d at Mount Sinai.

Furthermore, the eighteenth century commentator *Tosafos Chadashim* explains that the Mishnah here is subtly underscoring the merit of Moshe Rebeinu. "*Moshe received the Torah from Sinai*" hints to us that it was a quality that Moshe shared with Sinai that made him worthy to be the one to receive the Torah. Sinai was not the highest mountain in the region. It represents the trait of humility. It was this trait that enabled Moshe and those who model themselves after him to receive the Torah. There is a lesson here for all of us: To properly learn, we need to be humble. Otherwise we will not make headspace for the ideas of others.

Now let's look at the principles taught by the Great Assembly: Be patient in judgement, establish many students, and make a fence for the Torah. On the surface, they seem to be important. Nevertheless, they seem to pale when compared to the lessons taught by the second Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot*:

4. Mishnah, Avot 1:2 – The world rests on three major principles.

<p>Shimon the Righteous was among the last members of the Great Assembly. He taught that the world rests on three principles, on Torah (study and observance), Divine Service and acts of kindness.</p>	<p>שמעון הצדיק היה משירי כנסת הגדולה. הוא היה אומר, על שלשה דברים העולם עומד, על התורה ועל העבודה ועל גמילות חסדים.</p>
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The second Mishnah is seemingly more fundamental than the first one! Why was the Talmud redacted in this order? Shouldn't the principles for which the world was created have been mentioned first?

The first Mishnah in Avot teaches us about the chain of tradition – the distinct stages of transmission from Sinai down to the Sages of the Mishnah: first from G-d to Moshe, then from Moshe to Yehoshua, Yehoshua to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets, and then from the Prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly. As such, the essential theme of the first Mishnah is establishing the *groundwork* for the transmission of the Torah. Without first establishing a proper system of transmission, there will be no mechanism to ensure the Torah is taught and properly applied throughout history. Therefore, the first Mishnah highlights Torah transmission. This entails three principles that ensure the proper transmission of the Torah from one generation to the next: Being careful in applying Torah laws, educating many students, and protecting Torah laws.

Once the Talmud has created a system for the very transmission of the Torah, it can go on to teach the second Mishnah, the basic principles for which the world was created: Torah study, Divine Service and the performance of *mitzvot*, and the practice of *chesed*, kindness.

How Do We Know if the Torah was Transmitted Accurately?

The following material is from the Olami Morasha Syllabus Module on the [System of Halacha – Jewish Law](#).

Commonly, the word “Torah” conjures up the image of a scroll written down by Moshe Rabbeinu (Moses our teacher) according to G-d’s dictation. However, there is another Torah, which bears just as much significance in Judaism – the Oral Torah. A fundamental principle of Judaism is that G-d taught Moshe a comprehensive oral explanation of the Torah along with the written text. G-d taught the Oral Torah to Moshe on Mount Sinai, repeated to him in the *Ohel Moed*, and again in the Plains of Moav. Moshe passed on this tradition verbally to the people, who in turn taught it to the subsequent generation, and so it was passed on by word of mouth from teacher to student for over one thousand years. Eventually, it was preserved in writing in the form of the Mishnah, Talmud and the Midrashim. We thus speak of two Torahs: the Written Torah (*Torah SheBiKetav*) and the Oral Torah (*Torah SheB’Al Peh*). The Mishnayot we discussed above in *Pirkei Avot* are part of the Oral Torah.

How do we know that the Written Torah Scrolls as well as the redactions of the Oral Law in the Mishnah and Talmud are a faithful transmission of their original forms?

Accuracy of Torah Scrolls

Before his death, Moshe wrote thirteen Torah scrolls. Twelve of these were distributed to the Twelve Tribes. The thirteenth was placed in the Ark of the Covenant. This was eventually transferred to the Holy of Holies in the Temple. This last Torah scroll was the standard by which all others were judged. (See the Morasha class, [Evidence for Torah MiSinai II](#), which addresses the remarkable conformity of Torah scrolls worldwide today, after three thousand two hundred years, including two thousand years of scattered exile!)

The following Talmudic insight reflects how seriously the scribes take their profession:

5. Talmud Bavli, (Babylonian Talmud), Eruvin 13a – Scribes must take great care when writing Torah scrolls.

<p>When [Rabbi Meir] came to Rabbi Yishmael to learn Torah, he was asked, “What is your profession, my son?” “I am a scribe,” was the reply.</p>	<p>וכשבאתי אצל רבי ישמעאל אמר לי בני מה מלאכתך אמרתי לו לבלר אני אמר לי בני</p>
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<p>He said to him, “My son, be careful with your work, for it is the work of Heaven. Should you perhaps omit one letter or add one letter – you could thereby destroy the entire world.”</p>	<p>הוי זהיר במלאכתך שמלאכתך מלאכת שמים היא שמא אתה מחסר אות אחת או מויתר אות אחת נמצאת מחריב את כל העולם כולו.</p>
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6. Comparing Torah scrolls worldwide to those in Yemen, the only place where discrepancies exist; and these differences are only in spelling, not in meaning.

Maintaining the accuracy of any document as ancient and as large as the Torah is very challenging even under the best of circumstances. But consider that throughout history, Jewish communities were subject to widespread persecutions and exile. Over the last 2,000 years, Jews have been spread to the four corners of the world, from Yemen to Poland, from Australia to Alaska.

Furthermore, the destruction of the Temple 1,900 years ago saw the dissolution of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish central authority which traditionally unified the Jewish people when disagreements occurred.

Let’s investigate the facts as we have them today. If we collect the oldest Torah scrolls and compare them with those written in our times, we can see if any discrepancy exists, and if so, how much.

How many letters are there in the Torah? 304,805 letters (or approximately 79,000 words).

The fact is, that after all the trials and tribulations, communal dislocations and persecutions, only the Yemenite Torah scrolls contain any difference from those of the rest of world Jewry. For hundreds of years, the Yemenite community was not part of the global checking system, and only a total of nine letter-differences are found in their scrolls.

Furthermore, these are all spelling differences – in no case do they change the meaning of the word. For example, how would you spell the word “color?” In America, it’s spelled C-O-L-O-R. But in England, it’s spelled with an extra “U”: C-O-L-O-U-R. Such is the nature of the few spelling differences between Torah scrolls today. The results over thousands of years are remarkable!

Accuracy of the Oral Law

To ensure the accurate and faithful transmission of the Oral Torah, the Prophets and Sages employed a system that protected it from distortion. Four aspects of this system are:

(1) incentive, (2) *semichah*, (3) yeshivah, and (4) private notes.

A great motivator to maintain the accurate understanding of the Torah is knowing there is certain reward for your efforts.

7. Mishnah, Avot 2:14 – The great reward for Torah study.

Rabbi Elazar said: Be diligent in your Torah study, so you will know how to answer a scoffer. Realize for Whom you are toiling, and that your Employer can be trusted to pay you in full for your labor.	רבי אלעזר אומר הוי שקוד ללמוד תורה ודע מה שתשיב לאפיקורוס ודע לפני מי אתה עמל ונאמן הוא בעל מלאכתך שישלם לך שכר פעולתך:
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On the other hand, there are high stakes involved if the system gets corrupted, not to speak of forgotten.

8. Ibid. 3:8 – Severe warning not to forget the Torah one has learned.

Rabbi Dostai, son of Rabbi Yannai, said in the name of Rabbi Meir: Anyone who forgets even a single word of his studies is considered by the Torah as if he has incurred the death penalty.	רבי דוסתאי ברבי ינאי משום רבי מאיר אומר כל השוכח דבר אחד ממשנתו מעלה עליו הכתוב כאילו מתחייב בנפשו.
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Importantly the Sanhedrin, the Jewish High Court, ensured that Torah law, halachah, be applied properly, and instituted a system of ordination known as *semichah*, to authorize qualified sages to adjudicate Torah law.

9. Rambam, Hilchot Sanhedrin 4:1 – The process of *semichah* started with Moshe Rabbeinu and continued from teacher to student throughout the generations.

At least one of the members of the Supreme Sanhedrin (High Court), or a minor Sanhedrin of three judges must be ordained by someone who was ordained himself. Our teacher, Moshe, ordained Yehoshua (Joshua) by placing his hands upon him, as Numbers 27:23 states: "And he placed his hands upon him and commanded him." Similarly, Moshe ordained the seventy judges, and the Divine Presence rested upon them. Those elders ordained others, who ordained others, etc. Therefore, it turns out that whoever is ordained can trace his status back to the time of Yehoshua's court and even to the court of Moshe our teacher. It makes no difference whether a person is ordained by the president of the Sanhedrin	אחד בית דין הגדול ואחד סנהדרין קטנה או בית דין של שלשה צריך שיהיה אחד מהן סמוך מפי הסמוך. ומשה רבינו סמך יהושע ביד שנאמר ויסמוך את ידיו עליו ויצוהו, וכן השבעים זקנים משה רבינו סמכם ושרתה עליהן שכינה, ואותן הזקנים סמכו לאחרים ואחרים לאחרים ונמצאו הסמוכין איש מפי איש עד בית דינו של יהושע ועד בית דינו של משה רבינו, ואחד הנסמך מפי הנשיא או מפי אחד מן הסמוכין אפילו לא היה אותו סמוך בסנהדרין מעולם.
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or by an ordained scholar who never became a member of a Sanhedrin.	
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In addition, Torah study became a national and personal enterprise, ensuring the proper understanding and transmission of Torah law and philosophy.

10. Kuzari 3:65 – Yeshivot, academies of Torah study, produced hundreds of thousands of Torah scholars through the generations engaged in the proper transmission of the Torah.

In addition to the well-known individuals, in addition to the multitude of Sages, and in addition to the Kohanim and the Levites, whose sole occupation was Torah study, these generations had a continuously operative Sanhedrin of seventy Sages... There were hundreds of Sages lower in rank, and there were in turn thousands who stood at a level under that of the hundreds...	ובאלה הדורות זולת אלו המפורסמים וזולת המון החכמים וזולת הכהנים והלויים שהיתה תורתם אומנותם, לא פסקו השבעים סנהדרין וחכמתם... ונמשכים אחר השבעים מאות שלא היו כמותם, ונמשכים אחר המאות אלפים...
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The Oral Torah remained unwritten until the redaction of the Mishnah and Talmud in 200 and 500 CE respectively. Until that time, students maintained private notebooks to ensure the tradition remained accurate.

11. Rambam, Introduction to Mishnah Torah – Even though the Oral Torah was taught orally, every student could write his own private notes of what he had been taught.

Each student would write, to the best of his ability, personal notes on explanations of the Torah and its laws, as he had heard, as well as the new matters that developed in each generation, which had not been received by oral tradition but had been deduced using one of the Thirteen Principles for Interpreting the Torah and had been ratified by the Supreme Rabbinical Court. This was the practice until the time of Our Holy Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi].	כל אחד ואחד כותב לעצמו כפי כחו מביאור התורה ומהלכותיה כמו ששמע. ומדברים שנתחדשו בכל דור ודור בדינים שלא למדום מפי השמועה אלא במדה משלש עשרה מדות והסכימו עליהם בית דין הגדול. וכן היה הדבר תמיד עד רבינו הקדוש.
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In addition to the leaders, judges, and rabbis of every generation since the time of Moshe, the Oral Torah is also confirmed through the millions of chains consisting of the individuals, families, and communities throughout Jewish history, each of whom has faithfully observed

the Torah's mitzvot according to dictates of the Oral Torah. Further proof of the veracity of the Oral Torah is contemporary halachic observance. Such observance, begun at Mt. Sinai, has continued in an unbroken chain until today. The Oral Torah also includes principles that entrust rabbinic authorities to address contemporary problems as they arise.

12. Based on Rabbi J. David Bleich, Contemporary Halakhic Problems I & III, Ktav Publishing House, p. xiv. – The Torah was entrusted to man to address any possible situation.

Although the Torah is immutable, the Sages teach that the interpretation of its many laws and regulations is entirely within the province of the intellect. Torah is Divine but “lo bashamayim hi – it is not in the Heavens” (Deut. 30:12); it is to be interpreted and applied by man...Man is charged with the interpretation of the text, resolution of doubts, and application of the provisions of its laws to novel situations.

The contemporary problems that arise – and their resolution – testify to the vibrant and dynamic nature of the Torah. Technological advances and changing social institutions have given rise to issues that could not possibly have been confronted by rabbinic authorities of preceding generations.

In conclusion, we clearly see Judaism is not fake news! The Torah was given in the presence of the entire nation, 2.5 million Jews. From then, it was taught systematically and transmitted from generation to generation, amidst a rigorous system of oversight, checks and balances down to our times.

An overview of the transmission of the Torah, in the context of the redaction of Jewish law – halachah – anchored in the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, is found below.

Written Torah & Oral Torah⁽²⁾

Written Torah⁽³⁾

Torah MiSinai⁽⁴⁾ 1313 BCE

Bereishit—*Genesis*

Shemot—*Exodus*

Vayikra—*Leviticus*

Bamidbar—*Numbers*

Devarim—*Deuteronomy*

Nevi'im—*Prophets*⁽⁵⁾ 1273 BCE-420 BCE

Ketuvim—*Writings*⁽⁶⁾ 760 BCE-350 BCE

Categories of Oral Torah⁽⁷⁾

Explanations Received and Transmitted by Moshe (Moses) Relating to the Text of the Torah

Halachah LeMoshe MiSinai— *Laws Transmitted Orally* (Not Based on Text)

Laws Derived by Interpretive Rules
13 Middot

Gezeirot (*Decrees*) Enacted by the Prophets and Sages to Safeguard Torah Laws

Legally Binding Minhagim (*Customs*) and Rabbinic Takanot (*Amendments*) for the Benefit of the People

Philosophic Component of Oral Torah—Aggadata

Redactions of the Oral Torah⁽⁸⁾

Midrash Halachah⁽⁹⁾ 135 CE **Mechilta, Sifra, Sifri**

Zohar⁽¹⁰⁾ 170 CE **Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai**

Mishnah⁽¹¹⁾ 170-200 CE

Seeds

Times

Women

Damages

Holiness

Purity

Talmud⁽¹²⁾ Yerushalmi 350 CE, Bavli 500 CE

Explanations of the Mishnah

Legal Decisions from the Mishnah

New Legislation

Aggadata

Midrash Aggadah⁽¹³⁾
400 - 600 CE
Midrash Rabba, Tanchuma

Commentaries, Codifications & Responsa⁽¹⁴⁾

Sevoraim⁽¹⁵⁾ 500 -700 CE **Rav Yosei, Rav Sama**

Geonim⁽¹⁶⁾ 700-1040 CE **Rav Saadiah Gaon, Rav Hai Gaon**

Rishonim⁽¹⁷⁾ 1040-1500 CE

Rashi 1105

Rabeinu Tam 1171

Ramban 1270

Rashba 1310

Ritva 1320

Rif 1103

Mishnah Torah (Rambam) 1204

Rosh 1327

Tur 1340

Code of Jewish Law⁽¹⁸⁾ 1565 CE **Rabbi Yosef Karo**

Rema⁽¹⁹⁾ 1571 CE **Rabbi Moshe Isserles**

Achronim⁽²⁰⁾ 1500-Present

Bartinora 1516

Maharal 1609

Shach 1622

Maharsha 1632

Ohr HaChayim 1743

Vilna Gaon 1797

Chidah 1806

Netivot 1832

Chatam Sofer 1839

Ben Ish Chai 1909

Chafetz Chaim 1933

Rabbi M. Feinstein 1986

Rabbi Y.S. Elyashiv 2012

Rabbi O. Yosef 2013

Rabbi C. Kanievsky

Legend to the *System of Halachah Schematic*

- (1) For an explanation of the topics listed in the Schematic, see the Morasha System of Halachah (SH) shiurim cited below unless otherwise indicated.
- (2) SH I: Revelation of the Torah, SH II: The Written Torah, Oral Torah, & their Interrelationship, SH IV: Necessity, Advantages and Accuracy of the Oral Torah
- (3) SH I: Sections IV – VII, SH II: Section I, SH V: The Chain of Torah Transmission, Section I & II, SH VI: Rabbinic Authority,
- (4) SH I: The Revelation of the Torah, Sections IV – VI, SH V: Section II
- (5) SH I: Revelation of the Torah, Section VII, SH II: The Written Torah, the Oral Torah, and their Interrelationship, Section I, SH V: Section II
- (6) SH I: Revelation of the Torah, Section VII, SH II: The Written Torah, the Oral Torah, and their Interrelationship, Section I, SH V: Section II
- (7) SH III: The Contents of the Oral Torah, Sections I & II, SH VI: Rabbinic Authority,
- (8) SH II: Section III, SH III: Section III, SH IV, SH V: The Chain of Torah Transmission, Section III, SH VI, SH VII Machloket, Sections I-III, SH VIII Halachic Process*
- (9) See Rabbi Zechariah Fendel, Challenge of Sinai, Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, Volume II, p. 481.
- (10) See Rabbi Zechariah Fendel, Challenge of Sinai, Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, Volume II, p. 481.
- (11) SH: III, Part A, SH V: The Chain of Torah Transmission, Section III, Part A., SH VII Machloket, Sections I,II,III, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I
- (12) SH: III, Part B, SH V: Section III, SH VII Machloket, Sections I,II,III, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I
- (13) See Rabbi Zechariah Fendel, Challenge of Sinai, Rabbi Jacob Joseph School, Volume II, p. 481.
- (14) SH: III, Part C, D, SH V: Section IV, SH VI: Rabbinic Authority, SH VII Machloket, Sections I – IV, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I*
- (15) SH: III, Part C, SH V: Section IV
- (16) SH: III, Part C, SH V: Section IV
- (17) SH: III, Part C, D, SH V: Section IV, SH VII Machloket, Sections I – IV, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I
- (18) SH: III, Part D, SH V: Section IV, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I
- (19) SH: III, Part D, SH V: Section IV, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I
- (20) SH: III, Part D, SH V: Section IV, SH VII Machloket, Section IV, SH VIII Halachic Process Section I

**The Redactions of the Oral Torah, as well as the Commentaries, Codifications and Responsa, are situated under the Categories of Oral Torah to which they correspond*