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Text Message Q&A

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## Text Message Q&A

[Summary of a talk delivered by Ha-Rav Aviner at Heichal Shlomo in Jerusalem during a conference on "Halachic Responsa on the Internet and in Electronic Media"]

**Question:** When one answers text message responsa, isn't there a danger of "cheapening" Halachah?

**Answer:** There have been and always will be questions and difficulties raised about short answers and brief rulings.

This question was already asked about the work of one of the greatest Rabbis of our Nation: the Rambam's Mishneh Torah. The Mishneh Torah contains only the laws, without explanation or sources. The Ra'avad asks: how can one analyze the halachah without providing sources? The Kesef Mishneh explains the Rambam's rationale: not everyone has the ability to delve into the sources himself. Balebatim, "laymen", only need the rulings, and not the sources from which they derive. The Mishneh Torah answers this basic need of the Balebatim (see introduction of the Kesef Mishneh to the Mishneh Torah).

Later on, there was a further "deterioration": the Shulchan Aruch. The Shulchan Aruch is even shorter than the Mishneh Torah! And not only does it

lack sources, but it also only gives the Sefardic rulings. The Rama asks: where are the Ashkenazic rulings? Are there only Sefardim in the world?

And there were others who took issue with the Shulchan Aruch and its brevity: the Maharal, in his book *Netivot Olam*, is shocked at the idea that someone might make a ruling based on the sourcesless Shulchan Aruch. The Meharsha (*Chidushei Agadot* on *Sotah 22a*) writes: "In these generations, those who rule from the Shulchan Aruch without knowing the reasoning and Talmudic basis [behind the rulings]... are among those who destroy the world, and should be reprimanded." But the *Pitchei Teshuvah* (*Yoreh Deah 242:8*) explains: this fear was justified during the time of the Meharsha, since there were not yet commentaries on the Shulchan Aruch. But now that we have the *Taz*, *Shach*, *Magen Avraham* and the rest of the *Acharonim*, and each law has been fully elucidated, it is proper to rule from the Shulchan Aruch and *Acharonim* on it.

We see in our time that although there is a decline in the quality of the Q&A, there is a great increase in the quantity. There are also a number of ways to receive "quick" answers: fax, telephone, our radio program, letter and, of course, text message. If someone is interested in a more extensive reply, I have four volumes of *responsa* and numerous other books that they can consult.

But many people want nothing more than a "yes-or-no" answer. There is a joke: A person texts a Rabbi: I have a big problem. Is there a G-d? The answer: Yes. The sender replies: Thank you so much, Rabbi. You helped me greatly.

I do not force anyone to send questions by text message, or ask people to read the text message *responsa*. But there are many people who want it. There are people in situations which do not permit asking questions at length, as for example, in *Army Q&A*. A soldier cannot come to the *Yeshiva* whenever he wants. Similarly, when someone is on a trip and runs into an

issue. And then there are those who do not have a personal relationship with a Rabbi, and need someone to ask.

The Pele Yoetz writes (Erech Asufah) that one should not belittle those who gather halachic rulings. You are not required to read those books, he continues, but do not mock them, since these books are of great aid to the community at large. And so it is with text message responsa, and collections that are made of them.

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