

Parashat Devarim – Tisha b’Av 5783, 2023:

Sefer Devarim and Tisha b’Av

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Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra 14b-15b teaches that the *Tanach* was written by a community of writers:

Who wrote the *Tanach*? Moshe wrote his own book and the portion of Bilam and Iyov. Yehoshua wrote the book, which bears his name, and [the last] eight verses of the Torah. Shmuel wrote the book which bears his name, and *Shoftim* and *Megillat Rut*. David wrote *Tehillim*, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Avraham, Moshe, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korach. Yirmiyahu wrote the book, which bears his name, *Sefer Melachim*, and *Megillat Eicah*. Chezkiyahu and his colleagues wrote *Yeshayahu*, *Mishle*, *Megillat Shir HaShirim* and *Kohelet*. The Men of the Great Assembly wrote *Yechezkel*, the *Twelve Minor Prophets*, *Daniel* and *Megillat Esther*. Ezra wrote the book that bears his name and the genealogies of *Divrei HaYamim* up to his own time. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations)

The phrase, “Moshe wrote his own book,” refers to the Torah. In fact, the *Nevi'im* and Nehemiah call the Torah, “*Torat Moshe*,” as we find in *Sefer Yehoshua* 8:31:

As Moshe, the servant of Hashem, commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moshe (*b’sofer Torat Moshe*) an altar of whole stones, upon which no (man) has lifted up any iron. And they offered upon it burnt-offerings to Hashem and sacrificed peace-offerings. And he wrote there upon the stones a copy of *Torat Moshe*, which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel. (This, and all *Tanach* translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, with my emendations)

While the entire Torah is *Torat Moshe*, *Sefer Devarim* stands out most prominently as Moshe’s book. The very first *pasuk* proclaims the personal nature of this final volume of the Torah. Instead of the oft-found phrase, “And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying,” we encounter: “These are the words which Moshe spoke to all Israel on that side of the Jordan

in the desert, in the plain opposite the Red Sea, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazeroth and Di Zahav.” In other words, this *sefer*, is at one and the same time, *divrei Elokim emet* and the heartfelt expression of Moshe’s unique love and concern for *klal Yisrael*.

Chazal refer to *Sefer Devarim* as *Mishneh Torah*. Tosafot (11th-13th centuries) and the Ramban (1194-1270) explain this term as “repetition of that which was already stated.” In essence, it is primarily a review, or summary, of previously known narrative and halachic passages. In contrast, the Netziv (Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 1817-1893), maintains:

[The name “*Mishneh Torah*”] may be properly interpreted and explained as referring to [understanding the Torah] in a holistic fashion—in regard to the specifics and details of its terms and language. Since this is the case, the entire book and its substance is, [in reality,] coming to encourage us to be extensively involved in Torah study so that we will be able to explain the nuances of the text (*dikdukei hamikra*), as this is [the fundamental nature of] Torah study. Moreover, all of the ethical exhortations (*musar*), and multiple rebukes of Moshe, were solely for the purpose of [encouraging us] to accept the yoke of Torah study upon ourselves. This idea is based upon the many principles of faith and belief that will be explained within the *sefer* itself. It is for this reason that it is called by its name “*Mishneh Torah*,” since it refers to exactitude in Torah study (*shinun shel Torah*). (*HaEmek Davar*, Introduction to *Sefer Devarim*, translation and brackets my own)

In sum, according to the Netziv, our Sages coined the name *Mishneh Torah* to connote *Sefer Devarim*’s emphasis on meticulous Torah study. Consequently, *mishneh*, in this instance, means depth-level analysis and knowledge of the Torah, inclusive of its language, laws, and *musar*.

The Netziv cites a fascinating *midrash* that gives voice to the preeminent position of *Sefer Devarim* within Rabbinic thought:

Rabbi Shimon ben Yochai said: “*Sefer Mishneh Torah* was the standard (*signon*) of Yehoshua. [We know this because] at the very moment the Holy One Blessed be He revealed himself to Yehoshua, He found him sitting [and learning] with the *Mishneh Torah* in his hands.” (*Midrash Bereishit Rabbah*, Parashat Bereishit, section 6, translation my own)

Why was Yehoshua deeply engaged in studying *Sefer Devarim* rather than one of the other books of the Torah? After all, they, too, incorporate crucial *halachot* (laws) and ethics. The Netziv's answer helps us understand the unique nature of *Mishneh Torah*: "We may learn [from this *midrash*] that this *sefer*, in particular, incorporates the entire gamut of moral and ethical principles [that are found throughout the Torah]."

In a few days, we will commemorate the heartbreaking events that befell our people on Tisha b'Av. Based on the Netziv's interpretation of *Mishneh Torah*, *Sefer Devarim* emerges as the most appropriate *sefer* of *Chamisha Chumshei Torah* to read and study on the Shabbat preceding this day. Beyond question, Tisha b'Av teaches us the necessity to treat our fellow Jews with compassion and understanding—whoever and wherever they may be. This lifelong quest is fraught with innumerable trials. As such, we are blessed that *Torat Moshe* in general, and *Mishneh Torah* in particular, provide the roadmap we need to guide us on this challenging journey. Like Yehoshua, may Hashem grant us the wisdom to implement its eternal message as our own. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and a truly meaningful fast.

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Please contact me at rdbe718@gmail.com to be added to my weekly email list.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)