

Parashat Devarim, 5778, 2018:

Sefer Devarim: A Beacon of Light

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Eliezer ben Sarah, Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina and Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

In the famous first *mishnah* of *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*), our Sages teach us that the Written Law, *Tanach*, was given to us by Hashem at Mount Sinai at the selfsame time as the Oral Law, i.e. the entire corpus of Rabbinic literature: “Moses received the [entire] Torah at Mount Sinai, transmitted it intact in content and meaning to Joshua, who did so in kind to the Elders, the Elders to the Prophets and they, in turn, to the Men of the Great Assembly.” (Translation my own) All of *Tanach* is *divrei Elokim emet* (the words of the One true G-d). As the *Talmud Bavli* teaches us in *Baba Batra* 14b-15b, it was communicated - in humanly accessible form - by a trans-historical community of writers:

Who wrote the Scriptures? — Moses wrote his own book and the portion of Balaam and Job. Joshua wrote the book, which bears his name and [the last] eight verses of the Pentateuch. Samuel wrote the book which bears his name and the Book of Judges and Ruth. David wrote the Book of Psalms, including in it the work of the elders, namely, Adam, Melchizedek, Abraham, Moses, Heman, Yeduthun, Asaph, and the three sons of Korah. Jeremiah wrote the book, which bears his name, the Book of Kings, and Lamentations. Hezekiah and his colleagues wrote Isaiah, Proverbs, the Song of Songs and Ecclesiastes. The Men of the Great Assembly wrote Ezekiel, the Twelve Minor Prophets, Daniel and the Scroll of Esther. Ezra wrote the book that bears his name and the genealogies of the Book of Chronicles up to his own time. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*)

The above-found phrase, “Moses wrote his own book,” certainly refers to the Torah. In fact, the Prophets and Nehemiah call the Torah, no less than seven times, “*Torat Moshe*”

(“Book of the Law of Moses”). *Sefer Yehoshua* 8:31-32 serves as a prime example of this nomenclature:

As Moses, the servant of the L-rd, commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses (*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 the L-rd and sacrificed peace-offerings. And he wrote there upon the stones a copy of the law of Moses (*Torat Moses*), which he wrote in the presence of the children of Israel. (This, and all *Tanach* translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

While the entire Torah is the Book of the Law of Moses, *Sefer Devarim* stands out most prominently as Moses’ book. Indeed, the very first verse proclaims the highly personal nature of this final volume of the Torah. Instead of the oft-found phrase, “And G-d spoke to Moses saying,” we encounter: “These are the words which Moses 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 Moses’ unique love and concern for *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people).

Chazal (our Sages of blessed memory) 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 their view, our *sefer* is primarily a review, or summary, of previously known narrative and halachic passages. In the introduction to his commentary on *Sefer Devarim*, Rav Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (known as “the Netziv,” 1817-1893), takes a very different approach to the term “*Mishneh Torah*”:

[The name “*Mishneh Torah*”] may be properly interpreted and explained as referring to [understanding the Torah] in a holistic fashion - in regards to the specifics and details of its terms and language. Since this is the case, the entire book and its essence 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*) – [and] this is [the fundamental nature of] Torah study. And all of the ethical exhortations (*musar*), and multiple rebukes of Moses, 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*). (Translation and brackets my own)

In sum, according to the Netziv, *Chazal* coined the name “*Mishneh Torah*” to connote *Sefer Devarim*’s emphasis on meticulous Torah study. Therefore, *Mishneh*, in this instance, means depth-level analysis and knowledge of the Torah – including its language, laws, and *musar*.

The Netziv underscores his understanding of “*Mishneh Torah*” by quoting a fascinating Midrash that shows the preeminent position of *Sefer Devarim* within Rabbinic thought:

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

Perhaps we might well ask: “Why not one of the other books of the Torah? Don’t they also incorporate crucial *halachot* (laws) and ethics? Why was this *sefer* Joshua’s touchstone?” The Netziv’s answer reveals the unique nature of our *sefer*: “We may learn [from this Midrash] that this book, 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 poignant and heart-rending events that befell our people on Tisha b’Av. As such, in light of the Netziv’s understanding of the authentic nature of the term “*Mishneh Torah*,” there is no more appropriate book than *Sefer Devarim* to begin to read and study on the Shabbat immediately preceding this day. Beyond question, Tisha b’Av teaches us the necessity to reach out with compassion to our fellow Jews – whoever and wherever they may be. This is a lifelong journey fraught

with many challenges and trials. We are blessed that *Torat Moshe* in general, and *Sefer Devarim* in particular, provide the roadmap we need to guide us on the proper path of understanding. As the Netziv teaches us, *Mishneh Torah* uniquely encapsulates the *musar* that can serve as a beacon of light to guide us through the darkest of spiritual times. Like Joshua of old, may G-d grant us the wisdom and discernment to implement its eternal message in our lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and a truly meaningful fast.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org/> using the search criteria of Etengoff and the parasha's name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* for Women 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.