

Torah as the Ultimate Source of Inspiration

The Meaning of Mishneh Torah

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I.

In a day and age of epistemological crisis, when there is great skepticism about the value of intellectual activities, and even the very process whereby knowledge is gained, Talmud Torah, to a great extent, has not been spared. In educational contexts in particular, we often hear of the need to find sources of inspiration, where it is taken as axiomatic that learning itself cannot serve those purposes. This is not only regrettable, but, to a great degree, at odds with traditional conceptions of the power and potency of Torah study.

II.

While it is commonly understood that Mishneh Torah, the rabbinic appellation for the last of the five books of the Torah, connotes a repetition of the Torah¹, this understanding is extremely difficult to maintain². After all, Sefer Devarim, according to the enumeration of the Sefer Ha-Chinukh, contains no fewer than two hundred mitzvot. Undeniably, there is new material covered in Sefer Devarim, long before we encounter the equally new material surrounding the passing of Moshe Rabbeinu.

There is, however, a different interpretation of Mishneh Torah, which does not understand Sefer Devarim as repetitive in nature. Basing his approach on an interpretation of Onkelos³, the Netziv renders the term Mishneh Torah to mean the sharpening of the Torah.

Moshe's final message to the Jewish people was an exhortation to develop a total, immersive commitment to Torah study, one which would afford them a deep, penetrating understanding of the fundamental precepts of the Torah.

The Netziv utilizes this explanation to justify what is the only usage of the term Mishneh Torah (to be precise, the Torah uses the term Mishneh Ha-Torah) in all of Tanach, which, perhaps unsurprisingly, is found in Sefer Devarim. In the context of the halakhot which govern the behavior of the king, most of which are restrictions against accumulation of excess- money, horses, and wives- the Torah gives one affirmative command,

¹ See Tosafot Masekhet Gittin (2a) s.v. Ha-Mevi Get, who is dealing with a halakhic application of this notion pertaining to the spacing required in a Sefer Torah between the conclusion of Sefer BaMidbar and the opening of Sefer Devarim.

² See the introduction of Ramban to Sefer Devarim, in which he essentially subscribes to the nature of Devarim as a work of repeated admonitions to the Jewish people (as opposed to the Kohanim, who do not require such repetition), and deals with the obvious question of the presentation of completely new information in Sefer Devarim. Surprisingly, he notes that while all of the mitzvot were certainly transmitted to Moshe at Har Sinai, it is conceivable that they were not presented earlier in the Torah because they were not actionable until the Jewish people entered the Land of Israel. Alternatively, and more moderately, especially insofar as personal obligations are concerned, Ramban speculates that they were not presented earlier as they were not practiced regularly.

³ See Devarim 17:18, on the words *mishneh ha-torah*.

Formally speaking, the king is indeed obligated to write a second Sefer Torah⁴, over and above the responsibility with which each individual is charged to produce one Sefer Torah. However, as the Torah states, the purpose of the second Sefer Torah differs fundamentally from the first. The king is required to keep it with him at all times, to study it carefully, to cultivate a modest personality, and to be inspired to a greater degree of fear of heaven through immersive commitment to its contents⁵.

The Netziv, while conceding that the king is obligated to produce a second Sefer Torah, rather audaciously argues that the entire reason that the second Sefer is being produced is for Sefer Devarim which is contained therein⁶. The Torah demanded that the king review Moshe's exhortation of the Jewish people to immerse themselves in Torah, so that the king should remain fully loyal to the one true King. As proof, the Netziv cites a beautiful Midrash in which Yehoshua bin Nun, who indeed had the status of a king⁷, was observed by the Almighty immersively studying Sefer Devarim⁸.

It seems to me that one can take the Netziv's premise one step further, to explain a rather mysterious phenomenon concerning the penultimate mitzvah in the Torah, the mitzvah of Hakhel. In that context, the Torah teaches us that someone must read, every seven years, the Torah to the entirety of the Jewish people.

⁸ Bereishit Rabbah (Vilna ed.) 6.

What is not explicit in the Torah are two critical details: first, who will read the Torah? Second, which sections of the Torah, or perhaps, as the simple reading of the verses would dictate, the entirety of the Torah itself, “tikra et ha’Torah ha’Zot?”

A single mishnah in Masekhet Sotah⁹ provides the answer to both of these questions. First, the unidentified reader is the king of the Jewish people¹⁰, as the mishnah refers to this mitzvah as *parshat ha’melech*. Second, the sections which are read are exclusively from Sefer Devarim.

It seems to me that the mishnah establishes two vital points, both of which support Netziv’s argument that the mitzvah for the king to produce a second Sefer Torah is indeed for the sake of reviewing Sefer Devarim, as Yehoshua was portrayed doing so evocatively by the Midrash.

First, it is evident from this mishnah that there is a special connection between the king and Sefer Devarim, as the texts read from Sefer Devarim are referred to as *parshat ha’melech*. Second, it is quite clear that the point of the mitzvah Hakhel is to recreate Matan Torah every seven years¹¹, and thereby, to inspire the Jewish people towards a deeper sense of religious commitment through Torah study, as the Torah itself states, *l’ma’an yishmiu u’li’ma’an yilmidu v’yaru et Hashem Elokeichem v’shamru la’asot et kol divrei ha’Torah ha’zot*.¹² It is tantalizing that, according to Netziv, the king is enjoined every seven years to share his private source of inspiration, the work he carries with him everywhere, with the entire Jewish people.

The fact that the goal of national spiritual elevation can be accomplished through reading *only* Sefer Devarim firmly establishes the Netziv’s contention that the meaning of the term “Mishneh Torah” is to enjoin the Jewish people to a life of greater religious commitment through the intensive study of the entirety of Torah. In this sense, Devarim is the perfect ending to the Torah, as it immediately triggers and catalyzes a return to the preceding four books¹³.

The pedagogue *par excellence*, Moshe leaves the Jewish people with one final lesson, authoring a Sefer¹⁴ which reminds them not only of what their goals *ought* to be, but with the message that each of them is capable of finding the inspiration necessary for religious life through the work that he is leaving behind.

Moshe’s parting gesture is all the more meaningful based on distinct interpretations offered by Rashi and Ramban at the very outset of the project. Commenting on the early verse in the Sefer, *ho’il Moshe be’er et*

⁹ Mishnah Sotah 7:8.

¹⁰ See, however, Rambam Chagigah 3:6 whose formulation opens the possibility that it need not actually be the king. See also Ha-Emek Davar 31:11 s.v. Tikra who explicitly states that in the absence of the king, it is read by the putative leader of the Jewish people, גדול שבִּישְׂרָאֵל.

¹¹ A careful reading of Sefer Devarim’s own presentation of the giving of the Torah at Sinai as יום הקהל establishes this point quite explicitly (Devarim 9:10). The Rambam’s entire presentation in Hilkhos Chagigah Chapter 3, with his emphasis on the role of the trumpets in parallel to the horns which blasted at Sinai, also establishes this point clearly. Nothing, however, does so with greater emphasis than Rambam’s own words (ibid 3:6) in which he twice states that the listener should imagine that he is receiving the Torah from Sinai.

¹² Devarim 31:12.

¹³ We might even suggest, in light of this explanation, a different interpretation of the term Mishneh Torah itself, namely, a Sefer which *causes* one to review the rest of the Torah, as opposed to an actual review of the Torah.

¹⁴ Axiomatically, no different in Divine inspiration than the rest of the Torah, down to the letter.

HaTorah HaZot, Ramban¹⁵ notes that Moshe did this on his own accord. There was nothing that Moshe thought was more important to do with the brief time he had remaining in his life than to continue to explicate and illuminate the laws of Torah.

Commenting on the same verse, Rashi¹⁶, citing the Tanchuma, notes that Moshe explicated the Torah in seventy languages. It would appear that Chazal sought to convey the transcendent nature of Torah, unbound by any cultural or historical context, eternally relevant.

The great rebbe may be departing the scene, but he is leaving the students, the entire Jewish people, with the singular tool necessary to succeed after his departure. And this, of course, is the greatest gift any teacher can provide, the gift of independence from the teacher himself, the capacity to find one's own inspiration, in any generation¹⁷.

¹⁵ Ramban to Devarim 1:1, s.v. eleh ha'davarim.

¹⁶ Rashi to Devarim 1:5, s.v. be'er et ha'Torah.

¹⁷ See the comments of Rambam and Rabbenu Yonah to Avot 1:14 s.v. אם אין אני לי מי לי.