

The Meaning of Mishneh Torah
The Parting Gift of Moshe Rabbenu

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I.

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,

וְהָיָה כְּשִׁבְתוֹ עַל כִּסֵּא מְמַלְכָתוֹ וְכָתַב לוֹ אֶת מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל סֵפֶר
מִלִּפְנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם: וְהִיְתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל יְמֵי חַיָּיו לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לְיִרְאַה
אֶת יְקֻוֹק אֱלֹהָיו לְשִׁמֹּר אֶת כָּל דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם:
לְבַלְתִּי רוּם לְכַבּוֹ מֵאֲחֵיו וּלְבַלְתִּי סוּר מִן הַמִּצְוָה יְמִין וּשְׂמֹאל לְמַעַן יֵאָרֶיךָ יָמִים עַל מְמַלְכָתוֹ הוּא וּבְנָיו בְּקִרְבֵּי
יִשְׂרָאֵל: (דברים יז: יח-כ)

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*.

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.

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 inspiration¹⁵.

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 שבישראל.

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.

¹⁵ See the comments of Rabbenu Yonah to Avot 1:14 s.v. אם אין אני לי מי לי.

