

Parashat Devarim 5780, 2020:

Rabbi David Etengoff

The Unique Nature of Sefer Devarim

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, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Dovid Shmuel ben Chasiyah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

If someone were to ask you to list the Hebrew names of the Five Books of the Torah, you would readily respond with *Bereishit*, *Shemot*, *Bamidbar*, *Vayikra* and *Devarim*. These, however, are by no means the only names by which these holy *seforim* are known. *Talmud Bavli*, *Avodah Zarah* 25a, calls *Sefer Bereishit* “*Sefer HaYashar*,” based upon our righteous *Avot* (Patriarchs) and *Emahot* (Matriarchs) whom we find therein. The Ramban (1194-1270) named *Sefer Shemot* “*Sefer HaGeulah*” since, in his estimation, the redemption of the Jewish people is its overarching theme. *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) universally use the term “*Torat Kohanim*” as an alternate name for *Vayikra*, as the laws regarding *Kohanim* comprise most of its content. Our Sages agree, as well, that *Sefer Bamidbar* should be known as “*Chumash Pekudim* — the Chumash of Counting,” since it contains two instances wherein Hashem commanded Moshe to take a census of our forebears. Lastly, *Talmud Bavli*, *Megillah* 31a, refers to *Sefer Devarim* as “*Mishneh Torah*,” a phrase that appears in *Sefer Devarim* in the context of a king’s obligation to write his own *Sefer Torah*: “And it will be when he sits upon his royal throne that he will write for himself this *Mishneh Torah* upon a scroll...” (17:18) Nonetheless, it remains unclear as to why *Chazal* chose this expression as the name for this portion of the *Chamishah*

Chumshei Torah.

One way to shed light on this problem is to focus on the linguistic similarity between *mishneh* and *mishnah*. We see this reflected in the suggestion of my rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), that *Sefer Devarim* is the pivot point between *Torah Shebichtav* (Written Law) and *Torah Sheb'al Peh* (Oral Law) and is consequently called *Mishneh Torah*:

Originally, *Sefer Devarim* was given as Mishnah, as *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, the Oral Law. Only later, the last day of Moses' life, do we read that *Moses finished writing the words of this Torah in a scroll, until their very completion* (31:24). *Sefer Devarim*, which to that point had the status of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*, became incorporated into *Torah Shebichtav*, the Written Law. The phrase *Mishneh Torah* therefore means Mishnah (Oral Law) which is also Torah (Written Law). (This and the following quotes, *Chumash Mesoras HaRav, Sefer Devarim: with Commentary Based Upon the Teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*, Dr. Arnold Lustiger, editor, pages 2-3)

According to Rav Soloveitchik, *Sefer Devarim* is the very beginning of *Torah Sheb'al Peh*; yet, it is a singular kind of *Torah Sheb'al Peh* since, for though “it became part of *Torah Shebichtav*, it did not lose its *Torah Sheb'al Peh* character.” How is this dual nature and “double sanctity” expressed? In the Rav's view, the *Torah Sheb'al Peh* essence of *Sefer Devarim* is manifested in two crucial ways:

In the first four books of the Torah, G-d addresses the community, while in *Sefer Devarim* it is Moses who is addressing them. In the first four books, Moses is the medium through which G-d addresses the people: Moses served in the role of the prophet, repeating verbatim what G-d told him. In *Devarim*, however, Moses is not [acting in the role of] a prophet but a teacher: *Moshe Rabbeinu*. He imparted *bei'ur haTorah*, the explanation of the Torah, and thus it is Moses himself who addresses the people.

Rav Soloveitchik suggests that *Sefer Devarim* is *Mishneh Torah* precisely because Moshe takes on an entirely new role in this *sefer*, namely, as teacher of the entire Jewish people. As the Rav said on many other occasions, a *navi* (prophet) can act in two very different

capacities, as the *shaliach* (messenger) of Hashem or as a *talmid chacham* (Torah scholar). In the first four *seforim* of *Chamishah Chumshei Torah*, Moshe is the *navi* of Hashem par excellence. In the *Mishneh Torah*, however, he is the greatest *talmid chacham* in Jewish history, and he remains *Moshe Rabbeinu*, the rebbe of *Klal Yisrael*, forevermore.

The unique nature of *Sefer Devarim* is now quite clear. It is the only one of the Five Books of the Torah that is simultaneously *Torah Shebichtav* and *Torah Sheb'al Peh*. As such, it serves as the crucial bridge between the Tanach and the dynamic world of Rabbinic thought and Halacha. Truly, “*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu, u'mah nayim goraleinu* — We are fortunate, how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, and how beautiful our heritage.”

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

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 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* 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.