

The Heart of the Matter

By Rabbi Joshua (heartily known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In parshas Shoftim we are presented with laws pertaining to a Jewish king. Among these laws is included the requirement for the king to write Mishneh Torah. We are told, "And it shall be when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself 'this Mishneh Torah' in a scroll.....It shall be with him, and he shall read from it all the days of his life, so that he will learn to fear God, his Lord, to observe all the words of the Torah, and these decrees, to observe them" (Devorim 17 : 18-19). What is the meaning of 'this Mishneh Torah' ? Rashi brings two explanations. First, citing the Talmud (Sanhedrin 21b), he explains it to mean a 'doubling of the Torah,' or two Torah scrolls. One of these constitutes the same obligation as that incumbent upon all Jews, to write a Torah scroll, and it is to be stored in his treasury. The second scroll is a special mitzvah incumbent only upon the king. He needs to have a Torah scroll with him at all times, to remind him that he is subject to the laws of the Torah despite his majestic leadership role. Rashi's second explanation is from Targum Onkelos, who translates the word 'mishneh' as 'an account,' according to which the king needs to have only one Torah scroll, just as others are commanded, the only difference being that the king must carry his scroll with him at all times, to remind him of his subjugation to it.

There are, however, other explanations of the term "Mishneh Torah" in our verse that do not explain it as referring to the entire Torah. The author of the medieval compendium Da'as Zekeinim MiBa'alei Tosafos, for example, writes that he heard that 'Mishneh Torah' here refers to the ten commandments, better coined the Decalogue. Since the text of the Decalogue, from the first word 'anochi' to the last word 'reiecha' contains six hundred thirteen letters, it is referred to as a scroll of the Torah. This explanation seems to reflect the idea, first found in the midrash and later expanded upon by authorities such as Rav Saadia Gaon and Ramban, that the Decalogue contains all of the mitzvos within it. Each one of the mitzvos in the Decalogue, according to this approach, represents a certain category of mitzvos, which contains many other mitzvos. Thus, the king must carry around this constant reminder of his duty to follow all of the mitzvos. Perhaps the reason it is written only as the Decalogue is in order to make it easier, physically, for the king to carry it around with him all day, or perhaps it is so that he realize that the mitzvos of the Torah constitute its central aspect.

There is yet another explanation of the term Mishneh Torah in our verse, found in the midrash Bereishis Rabbah, as well as in the Sifrei to parshas Shoftim. These sources explain the term as referring to the book of Devorim. Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, in his Emes L'Ya'akov, explains that the book of Devorim contains many mitzvos that pertain to the way in which the community should be run, and therefore it is important for the king to have a copy of it constantly at hand. I would like to offer a different explanation of why the king should carry around a copy of sefer Devorim, one which touches on the very essence of the personality of the king as envisioned by the Torah.

In parshas Pinchas, when Moshe asks God to appoint someone to lead the people after he dies, he refers to God as "God of the spirits of all flesh" (Bamidbar, 27 : 16). Rashi there explains that Moshe asked for a leader who could relate to the personality of each person, just as God is able to. Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, in an essay on kingship in Israel included in a recently published collection of some of his articles and talks, HaAdam VeOlamo, expands on this idea, referring to King Shlomo's prayer at the inauguration of the Temple. Shlomo refers to the Temple as the place where each person should come to pour out his heart to God and present him with his requests. The king, too, writes Rabbi Soloveitchik, should follow the lead of the King of kings and be receptive to the requests and needs of each person in his kingdom. It is partly in this sense, he writes, that the Rambam, in his Laws of Kings, refers to the king as the heart of all Israel. He must be a man who responds, or is prepared to respond, to the needs of each person over whom he rules. It is actually to the king's advantage to respond to each person in this way, because each person has his own unique contribution to make to the collective of the Jewish people, and the more the king is responsive to this reality, the more each person is able to make his own,

unique contribution to the people.

Taken in this context, we can understand why it is the book of Devorim that the king must carry with him. The rabbis point out that the section of blessings and curses in Devorim was said by Moshe himself. Some commentators, such as Ramban and Abarbanel, expand this idea to refer to the entire book of Devorim (for the varying opinions on this matter, see the introduction to the book of Devorim in sefer Sha'arei Aharon). This does not mean that Moshe wrote this book on his own. Rather he couched the divine message in his own language, and God later approved of the way he had presented what he did, and dictated to Moshe to write it down as he said it (see 'Explorations' by Rabbi Ari D. Kahn on parshas Devorim for a further discussion of this concept). The point here is that Moshe invested his own personality into the book of Devorim, and in this way served as an example for the rest of the nation to bring out their own unique personalities as well. It was the king's job to assist them in this endeavor, and therefore, he needed to carry the book of Devorim with him as a reminder of his responsibility to the people.

(For another, similar application of this idea of the nature of the book of Devorim, see Netvort to parshas VaEschanan, 5758, at the netvort archives, which can be accessed at heights.yucs.org).

Please address all correspondence to the author (Rabbi Hoffman) at the following address - JoshHoff @ AOL.com.

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