

The Great Communicator

By Rabbi Joshua (comfortingly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In this week's parsha, Moshe continues his oration to the people, calling on them to fulfill the commandments. He addresses Israel, culminating with the verse: "You shall observe His decrees and his commandments that I command you this day, so that He will do good to you and your children after you, and so that you will prolong your days on the land that the Lord your God gives you, for all the days" (Devorim, 4,40). We are then told that Moshe set aside three cities on the bank of the Jordan to serve as cities of refuge. The Torah then says, "And this is the teaching (Torah) that Moshe placed before the children of Israel." The word 'this' as used in the Torah is usually taken to refer to something specific. It is, in fact, this verse that is said in the synagogue when the Torah scroll is lifted up after the prescribed portion has been read. Many people have the custom to point to the scroll as it is raised and displayed, apparently because the word 'this' is taken to refer to a specific item- in this case, the Torah scroll. It is, therefore, interesting to note that, as we will see, the commentators do not refer this verse back to the immediately preceding verses, but to earlier or later sections of the Torah.

Rashi says that 'this is the teaching' refers to the next section of the Torah, while Ramban says that it refers to the entire book of Devorim, going back to its beginning and following through to the end. Neither of them explains it as referring to the immediately preceding verses, which relate to a specific action of Moshe. Both of these explanations apparently understood the phrase "this is the teaching" as referring to the entire Torah. According to Rashi's explanation, that it refers to the next section, the idea is clear. The Ten Commandments, which are included in the next section of the Torah, contain within them all of the six hundred thirteen mitzvos of the Torah. This idea goes back to the midrash, and Rashi himself mentions it in his commentary to Shemos 24:6. According to the Ramban's explanation, too, the entire Torah is included, in that the book of Devorim is referred to by the rabbis as the Mishneh Torah, the repetition of the Torah, encapsulating within it the entire Torah. I would like to suggest a different explanation, which retains the understanding that 'this is the Torah' refers to the entire Torah but connects it to the immediately preceding verses, which, as we have noted, describe Moshe's separation of three cities of refuge.

The rabbis tell us in the Talmud that the cities of refuge, where someone who killed another person inadvertently would be exiled to, were not operative until all six cities were activated-those on the east bank of the Jordan, and those in the land of Israel proper. Since Moshe had been denied entry into that land, the cities that he prepared for these purposes would not fulfill their function in his lifetime. Still, he separated them, doing whatever he could in his lifetime to facilitate the eventual fulfillment of the mitzvah. The Rambam, in his commentary to the mishnah in Avos, 4, "Ben Azai said, 'Run to do a light mitzvah or for one mitzvah drags along another,'" expands on the comments of the rabbis. He writes that if Moshe, who grasped the truth, and who was the most perfect of people, desired to add half of a positive mitzvah to all his previous perfection, it is unnecessary to mention that people of lesser attainment should do so. What the Rambam is saying, in essence, is that Moshe, by running after a mitzvah which he would not be able to see fulfilled in a total sense in his lifetime, gave the Jewish nation the greatest instruction by example in keeping the mitzvos themselves. Despite the fact that he had told them of the reward of long life for observing the mitzvos, it was Moshe's actions, his love for God's Torah that reflected itself in his eagerness to perform even half a mitzvah, that had the greatest impact upon the people. Therefore, immediately after relating Moshe's separation of the three cities, the Torah tells us that this is the teaching that Moshe set before the people. His personal example said more to them than all his words of exhortation, and, ultimately, was the Torah, the teaching, that he left them.

In the great yeshiva of Volozhin, which was considered the mother of all modern day yeshivos, the study of musar, of works of ethical instruction, was not pursued. What was it, then, that served as an inspiration to the students to perfect their character? The students there said that they received their musar lesson when they watched the dean of the yeshiva, Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, walk down the corridor. The manner in which he comported himself said more to

them about how the Torah is to effect a person, and how a Torah personality is supposed to act, than any book of moral instruction could. In a similar way, Moshe's approach to performing mitzvos, his eagerness to bring about even the partial fulfillment of God's command, was the greatest teaching that he left his people, in that it concretized and reinforced all that he had told them. We would all do well to keep the example of Moshe in mind in any efforts we make to attract people to Torah observance. Words that are not supported by actions will not carry the message that we wish to convey. By demonstrating our own enthusiasm for observing the mitzvos and carrying out God's will, we can influence others to follow suit.

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