

# PARSHAS DEVARIM - WHAT DOES MISHNAH TORAH REPEAT

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## What Does Mishnah Torah Repeat<sup>1</sup>?

Regarding the purpose of Chumash Devarim, there is near unanimity. Everyone knows what it is about. Following the lead of Chazal who called it Mishnah Torah, we all know that Devarim is about repetition. It is a reprise, in capsule form, of the first four Chumashim.

Much harder is getting people to describe just what it is that Moshe repeats. Theories abound; each has its strengths and drawbacks.

Clearly, Devarim does not touch upon everything discussed before. About one hundred laws come up; seventy of those appear for the first time!

Looking at the treatment of holidays allows us to detect a pattern of what is and what is not included. More precisely, looking at which special events are not treated in Devarim enlightens us about the purpose of the sefer. Shabbos, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Shmini Atzeres are all omitted. All four express truths about an individual's relationship with Hashem, quite apart from any geographical context. Their observance upon entering the Land would not be substantially different from their observance during the forty years of travelling in the wilderness. On the other hand, Devarim does deal with Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkos - each one of which would be transformed when the Bnei Yisrael would settle into their permanent home. (They all deal with the growing cycle; they would be marked by the pilgrimage to Yerushalayim and all the planning and adjustment that came with it.) What we see is the Torah preparing a people about to enter the Land for changes necessitated by the transition to a new life style in Israel.

Many other inclusions and omissions follow the same pattern. Devarim contains an unusual number of admonitions against avodah zarah. What had been theoretical during the wilderness years would now become very practical, as the Bnei Yisrael came into contact with both idolaters and the appurtenances associated with idolatry.

Issues of community organization, leadership and exercise of power would become matters of vital concern. Devarim deals with all of them, including areas we might overlook, like false prophets, rebellious elders, and the accuracy of weights and measures.

Waging war would become a regular and frequent fact of life. The halachos of warfare therefore had to be included.

With people distancing themselves from a central, nearby Mishkan, meat-eating would change character. No longer would offerings in a Mishkan serve as the most important source of meat. Thus, laws of shechitah, purging of blood, flesh taken from living animals, etc. would need to be introduced or reviewed. The very transition from a Mishkan to an eventual Mikdosh required the reinforcing of a concept of connection to a central place of profound kedushah, including institutions like ma'aser sheni which created attachment of people to Israel's most special city.

Social structures would undergo the most dramatic changes. In the wilderness, their needs were provided by the overt miracles of the manna and the be'er. There was no sharp differentiation between classes of people, between haves and have-nots. Coming into the land, with people taking charge of providing for the needs of their families, some would be more fortunate, while others would see their efforts fail. Institutions like tzedakah, shemitah, and workers' rights would soon become relevant and needed. As property - especially real property, the source of national sustenance - would take on immense importance, some social laws that had been important before would now become even more so. Marriage and divorce would no longer concern them only because of their role in maintaining families based upon kedushah. Now, economic considerations became bound up in familial relationships as well, and needed renewed attention.

Briefly, then, Devarim readies a new generation of Bnei Yisrael for a sea-change in life style upon entering the Land. Sefer Devarim is certainly not a random hodge-podge of sundry topics. Rather, it is surgically precise, focusing only on areas that required special treatment.

It is not the content per se of Chumash Devarim that earns the name "Mishnah Torah." As stated above, most laws it contains appear for the first time, not as repetitions. Rather, Devarim was part of Moshe's general review of all his teaching. Within that broader recapitulation of Moshe's message, some of the material - mostly the new material - was preserved by HKBH as the written text of Devarim. The written text, then, is only a small fraction of what Moshe taught in the last weeks of his life.

In one area the Torah does not allow for only partial citation. The first eleven perakim form Moshe's introductory remarks to his final review. Here, nothing is deleted. Moshe revisits fundamental concepts in Man's relationship with Hashem and His Torah. The events of the previous forty years become, in retrospect, teachable moments to reinforce the larger truths that he had taught them. (We can speculate that the Torah devotes so much detail to this section because its usefulness is never exhausted. It speaks not only to those ready to cross into the Land, but to all Jews who periodically need to remind themselves of important components of their avodah.)

Moshe therefore touches on a sizeable number of crucial concepts: yiras Hashem, ahavas Hashem, deveikus, and the Oneness of Hashem. The all-important mitzvah of Torah study - both in regard to individual learning, and to the obligation to teach one's children - comes in for special mention. So does the immutability of Torah, in the form of the commandments not to add or subtract from it.

Although Moshe chiefly addresses the generation preparing to enter the Land, he provides a bundle of essential mitzvos (Shema, tefillin, mezuzah, birkas ha-mazon) that can accompany an individual Jew no matter where Providence will take him. These mitzvos can be effective in neutralizing the pernicious effect of unhealthy non-Jewish influences to which Jews are exposed.

Bnei Yisrael were understandably excited about taking possession of the land promised to them. In anticipating the long military campaign, they may or may not have worried about how steadfast in their beliefs they could remain once they had shifted from the strong central authority of Moshe's leadership to a decentralized one. Moshe, however, was a step ahead of them. Anticipating the problem, he provided much of the arsenal from which people could draw in the years following his death.

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