Beginning the Review of the Torah: Thoughts for Parashat Devarim

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Sefer Devarim is a unique book of the Torah, in that Moshe recounts previous happenings throughout the journey in the wilderness; he rebukes the Israelites, and offers a final encouragement before they go on their journey to the land of Israel without him. For this reason, Devarim is known as “Mishneh Torah,” a second Torah. This week’s parasha is the start of this new Sefer of review and rebuke.

The Talmud, Masechet Avodah Zarah 25a, quotes two biblical verses (Joshua 10:13 and Samuel II 1:18) which mention a book called Sefer haYashar,“The book of the Upright.” The Amoraim dispute the identity of this book. There are three opinions on what Sefer haYashar is: Rabbi Yohanan says it is the book of Bereishit because Bereishit is all about our forefathers who were upright and righteous. Rabbi Elazar says that it is Sefer Devarim because of the verse in next week’s Parasha: “Do what is upright and good in the sight of the Lord…” (Devarim 6:18). Rabb Shemuel bar Nahmani says that it is Sefer Shofetim, citing the verse: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did as he pleased.” (Shofetim 17:6)

The Maharsha wonders why Devarim is mentioned as one of the opinions. He understands why Bereishit and Shofetim would be options, since Bereishit is about the righteous actions of our forefathers, and Shofetim is about Bnei Yisrael rebelling against God, and the judges attempting to bring them back. The Maharsha says that just mentioning the word yashar is not enough to name the whole book of Devarim after it. After all, the word yashar is also mentioned in Sefer Shemot, in the verse “…If you will heed the Lord your God diligently, doing what is upright in His sight, giving ear to His commandments and keeping all His laws…” (Shemot 15:26).

So how can one verse define the entire Sefer? The Maharsha answers that the Torah lists a great many commandments for us to follow and live by; but the observance of the Torah is complete only if one does what is upright and just. Rabbi Moshe Weinberger explains that the book of Devarim is wrapping up the details of the entire Torah into this one phrase. A true “Jew” is someone who brings the whole Torah together into one's identity and seeks to do the will of God.

The Ramban, in his commentary on the Pasuk in Devarim, offers a beautiful explanation: “...even regarding what God did not command, pay attention to do what is good and right in God's eyes, because God loves goodness and righteousness.” The Ramban explains that there is not a verse in the Torah for every single behavior and action one can come across. For that reason, this verse serves to remind us that we also must strive to do what is the will of God, even in a situation that is not mentioned explicitly in the Torah.

So as we begin the book of Devarim, and as we approach Tisha B’av, it is important to not only focus on observance of the Mitzvot, but also to always try to be “upright and just,” and to seek to make the will of God our will.

Angel for Shabbat