

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : ואתחנן

1. The first part of this week's Sidra continues the speech that Mosheh our Teacher made to the entire assembled Jewish People in the Plains of Mo'av. He had reviewed the events which had led to our conquest of the territories that we now held on the east of the River Jordan where we were encamped. He tells us how, having apportioned these lands to the two-and-a-half Tribes, he had hoped that HaShem would now allow him to come with the Jewish People into Eretz Yisroel proper and help to settle them there, too. Mosheh tells us that he made numerous pleas to HaShem that he be allowed to come with us into Eretz Yisroel, but that HaShem had told him to desist, for it was HaShem's Will that he shall not enter the Promised Land, though he would be given the ability to see it all.
2. Mosheh tells us again that our future well-being depends solely upon our careful observance of the Torah, without adding to it nor taking anything from it, pointing out that all those who went astray (for instance, at Baal Pe'or) perished, and only those who remained loyal to HaShem were alive today. Indeed, says Mosheh, by carefully studying and observing the Mitzvos of the Torah, the nations of the world will recognize us as the wise and understanding People of HaShem and they will acknowledge HaShem's wisdom in choosing us as His People. On the other hand, should we not faithfully keep the Torah, the nations of the world will consider us as fools, for they know that the laws and statutes of the Torah are wise and righteous, and only a stupid nation would reject these Divine laws given to it.
3. Mosheh our Teacher reminds us of the spectacular event of the Giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai and tells us never to forget this, the greatest happening in our history, and that we are to ensure that this memory is passed on to all our generations after us, for it was through this most awesome display of the Glory of HaShem ever experienced by living mortals that we learned to fear HaShem. Indeed, it is this lesson which has been faithfully passed down through all our generations to this day that has made it axiomatic that the loyal Torah Jew is a Jew who has in him also the fear of HaShem.
4. Mosheh tells us to remember how we saw no image or form of HaShem at the Giving of the Torah, for He has none, and that we must forever be on our guard not to portray HaShem in any physical or material manner. Neither are we to make images of any of His creatures great or small. Even if we should be aware of the nations of the world making such images and, through them, even worshipping HaShem, we are not allowed to follow their ways. For we, the People chosen by HaShem to be close to Him, have experienced His Presence and His Glory first-hand: it is not for us to copy the poor and weakly efforts of these nations of the world who, trying to comprehend HaShem with their little minds, thereby limit His greatness and indeed falsely ascribe to Him their own faults and

shortcomings. For if we were to do as they do, then we will lose the pure knowledge that we have of HaShem and the reality of HaShem will be lost to all Mankind — and we will have forsaken our very *raison d'être*, which is to teach all Mankind of HaShem as He is. The purpose of our Redemption from Egypt and our task as His People is to make known the reality of HaShem as the G-d of Creation and the Sovereign of All throughout the world. Mosheh reminds us that whereas we will come into Eretz Yisroel, there to function as the model nation of HaShem and as exemplar to all other nations, he himself has been denied this privilege. But we must take heed not to become complacent in our Land: we must be continuously on guard against straying after false cults and alien ideas.

5. In a clear prophetic warning, Mosheh our Teacher exhorts us to always remember that the G-d-given gift of Eretz Yisroel is ours only so long as we remain true to HaShem and His Torah: this is the sole condition upon which our secure and peaceful possession of Eretz Yisroel depends. Extraordinarily, the warning of the Exile and Dispersion which will follow if we forsake the Torah was given before we had even come into Eretz Yisroel — for our observance of the Torah is the precondition to our taking possession of Eretz Yisroel. Only through living our lives totally in accordance with the Torah and Mitzvos will we deserve to enjoy Eretz Yisroel in peace and tranquillity. *(This part of the Sidra, in fact, is the Torah Reading of Tish'ah b'Av morning, for Tish'ah b'Av has now become the national day of mourning which commemorates the Exile and Dispersion that have come true, just as Mosheh warned us.)* Then, says Mosheh, when we are suffering humiliation and affliction in the lands of our oppressors and are sorely pressed, then will we turn back to HaShem and listen to His Voice, and HaShem will remember the Covenant with our forefathers and take us back again. Mosheh tells us that we need not marvel at this unusual chain of cause and effect. Right from our beginnings, our emergence as a nation was unusual, and in the same way does our continued existence depend upon our being loyal to HaShem. “Ask anyone anywhere,” says Mosheh, “if any nation on earth has ever been chosen by HaShem as His special People in such a spectacular way as we have. Ask anyone anywhere if ever a whole nation heard the Voice of HaShem from the midst of the fire — and lived — as we did ... so too will our coming into Eretz Yisroel be spectacular; and when we carefully observe the Torah of HaShem it will be good with us and we will enjoy long life in the land that He gives to us to be ours forever.”
6. It was as we were encamped in the Plains of Mo'av on the east side of the River Jordan that Mosheh designated three towns as Cities of Refuge. (Although they would not function as Cities of Refuge until three corresponding towns in Eretz Yisroel proper were taken and likewise set aside, Mosheh wanted to have a part in the Mitzvah.) These Cities are to afford a haven for a person who killed someone inadvertently: as long as the manslayer is in his City of Refuge he is protected from the next of kin of his victim, until such time as he may return to his own home. (For a fuller treatment of the institution of the Cities of Refuge, see **SIDRA OF THE WEEK : מִסְעֵי**) The three towns that Mosheh set aside were Betzer, in the desert flatlands, in the territory of the Tribe of

Re'uven (its location is not known today); Rammos in the Gile'ad region, in the territory of the Tribe of Gad (possibly today's Tell Remith, about twenty-five miles east of the River Jordan and twelve miles south of the Kinnerres); and Golan in the Boshon region, in the territory of the Tribe of Menasheh (today's Jaulan, or Schem el Jolan, approximately eighteen miles east of the Kinnerres).

7. In his second speech to us, Mosheh our Teacher reviews the events at Mount Sinai, when we received the Torah and heard the Decalogue. Mosheh points out that the Covenant of Chorev (that is, Sinai) is not something that the Jewish people inherited from their fathers, nor is it something that was entered into through some broker or middleman. Nor anything like that but face to face, as it were, in the most direct manner ever experienced by living mortals, our entire People beheld the Glory of HaShem and heard His Voice as the Decalogue thundered out in grand and spectacular majesty and might. Mosheh our Teacher then repeats these Commandments, paraphrasing and explaining the words that we heard (and which we later saw engraved on the Two Tablets). He reminds us of the fear and trembling that took hold of us at that time, so much so, that the people feared for their very lives. If only this fear of HaShem would last for all time, says Mosheh (in the Name of HaShem) then we would always keep the Torah and it would be well with us and all future generations.

8. Nevertheless, to observe the Torah and Mitzvos of HaShem only out of fear is not as good as fulfilling His Will out of love, for the loyalty of the King's subjects is more likely to endure if it is motivated by love than if it is prompted by fear. Therefore, says Mosheh, we must firstly recognize HaShem as our G-d, to accept upon ourselves the yoke of His Rulership and Sovereignty, and then resolve to love him with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might. This, says Mosheh, is to be our creed: it is the basis of our very existence, it is the foundation of our calling and our commitment, the foundation upon which is built our special relationship with HaShem. We must take it to heart, and teach the Torah to our children, and occupy ourselves with it continuously. We must make it central to everything we do when we are at home and when we venture abroad, at night and at day, in our actions and in our thoughts, wherever we live. (This paragraph in the Torah is, of course, the first part of the Sh'ma, recited every evening and morning. It is taught to our children just as soon as they can talk, it is in the Tefillin which we wear, every weekday, upon the arm and the head — respectively symbolic of action and thought — and is included in the Mezuzos which are fixed to our doorposts.)

9. When we come into Eretz Yisroel, Mosheh tells us, we will be coming into possession, not of a wilderness or desolate land, but of a country that is built-up and developed, with cities and houses and vineyards and olive groves. (In fact, one of the reasons that HaShem allows our Land to be occupied in our absence by these squatters is just so that when the time comes for us to re-possess our Land, it should be ready for living in.) But it is when one is blessed with an abundance of good that one can come to forget HaShem Who provides all. Therefore, warns Mosheh, we must be careful to remain loyal to HaShem

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despite all the good that we enjoy from His Hand, and remember our duties and responsibilities as His People. We are not to slip back into our mistakes of the past, when we tested HaShem's patience, but rather always seek to do that which is right and good, just as He has commanded us in His Torah. We are to educate our children to understand the Torah, to observe the Mitzvos of HaShem and to be mindful of our history and purpose as HaShem's People.

10. Mosheh our Teacher warns us not to make any alliances with the idolatrous peoples of Eretz Yisroel, nor are we to tolerate any of their shrines or temples, for such misplaced tolerance leads to our own harm. We are to remember always our calling as HaShem's holy People, and that He will reward our loyalty to Him just as surely as He punishes those who do not keep the Torah. Therefore, says Mosheh, take care to live by the Torah of HaShem always, for HaShem rewards His faithful followers for their every good deed.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra וַאֲתַחֲנֶנּוּ please go to HAFTORAHS.