

## SIDRA OF THE WEEK : עקב

1. This week's Sidra begins with the continuation of the speech of Mosheh our Teacher which started in last week's Sidra (ואתחנן) . It follows along the same themes of this series of speeches which are the main part of the Chumash Devorrim. As well as reviewing the Mitzvos of the Torah (which is why the Sefer Devorrim is called the "Review of the Torah" "מִשְׁנֵה תּוֹרָה" ) Mosheh our Teacher intersperses this review with words of rebuke for our various backslidings and he exhorts us to learn from our past mistakes.
  
2. As the greatest leader ever of our People, Mosheh our Teacher feels our trepidation and anxiety as we stand at the threshold of a new era and he gives us words of encouragement for the future, all the time reiterating the warning that our well-being and indeed our very survival depends solely upon our faithfulness to HaShem and His Torah. These themes run through all of his speeches to us: we have no need to fear any man if we but put our trust in HaShem and diligently learn his Torah to live by it and keep His Mitzvos conscientiously.
  
3. This last point is the beginning of this week's Sidra: Our conscientiousness in fulfilling the Mitzvos of HaShem is seen in how carefully we observe even those Mitzvos which are somewhat neglected. If we are careful to do even those Mitzvos which one tends to take lightly (perhaps because they are everyday Mitzvos or because they demand a greater effort) then HaShem will see us as His faithful servants and He will happily bestow upon us all the benefits of that special bond that He made with our forefathers who also were such faithful servants of HaShem. When we use His blessings to comply with His Word, He will bless us with ever-greater prosperity, this, not so much as a reward, but more as a matter of course. As a direct result of our observing the Mitzvos, "in the footsteps of the observance of the Mitzvos" as it were, HaShem's lovingkindness follows and He blesses us with healthy children and material prosperity and we will have no need to fear any illnesses or afflictions. If we are the faithful message-bearers of HaShem's Sovereignty on earth, He will increase our people so that His message to all Mankind can be better spread among all the nations of the world and we will be blessed by Him and acknowledged by them to be His People, to dwell in happiness and security in the Land that HaShem promised to our forefathers to give to us.
  
4. In this connexion, Mosheh warns us that we must take care not to make any treaties with the depraved peoples that we will encounter in Eretz Yisroel. However much it is out of character of the Jewish People, whose basic nature is to be merciful, nevertheless we are not to show any pity for those whose perverted culture and idol-worship are so abhorrent to HaShem. Such misplaced pity for them will be a stumbling-block to us in our mission

## SIDRA OF THE WEEK : עקב

as HaShem's People. We need not fear the inhabitants, however numerous they be, nor need we wonder how it will be possible to overcome them, says Mosheh, for we have seen how HaShem helped us to overcome the mighty Egyptian people and their king and so will HaShem help us to overcome these peoples, too.

5. But, warns Mosheh, we must take care that even after these nations are gone, we must be sure to be rid of their idols and the symbols of their depravity and culture, too. Nothing of these abominations may be allowed to survive, whether of gold or of silver nor of any kind. We may not bring them into our houses nor may they be only as exhibits in our museums, for they are detested by HaShem and if such hateful things are tolerated by us then we are in danger of coming under HaShem's ban, too.
6. Mosheh tells us that we should know that the trials and difficulties that HaShem sends are brought by Him so as to educate us to be firm and resolute in our loyalty to HaShem and His Torah in much the same way as a father sets challenges for his son to make him strong. Always, says Mosheh, we are to remember the good that HaShem bestows upon us as His People in general and upon each of us individually.
7. Mosheh recalls for us how HaShem gave us the Manna to eat; he tells us to remember always the lesson taught by the Manna, that "man lives not by bread alone but he lives by anything that HaShem decrees" and in this week's Sidra is the Mitzvah of *Birkas HaMozzon* (Grace after Meals) that we are to say after any meal containing bread, to thank HaShem for the food that we have eaten.
8. *The first of the four Brochos that comprise Birkas HaMozzon was composed by Mosheh our Teacher when the Manna, that miraculous "bread from Heaven," was first given to us in the Wilderness. After we had taken possession of Eretz Yisroel, Yehoshua bin Noone, the successor of Mosheh our Teacher, composed the second Brochah, in which we specially thank HaShem for the bountiful Land that He gave us, for nourishment in general and for the special bond there is between HaShem and us, His People, as symbolized by the Bris Mi'lah and the Torah. The third Brochah was composed by Dovid HaMelech (King David) and his son Shlomoh who reigned after him, to express our thanks to HaShem for the Divine Presence which rests in our midst in the holy Mikdash. (Nowadays, this Brochah is modified to beseech HaShem to restore this privilege to us again.) The fourth Brochah was added by the Beis Din of Rabban Gamliel the Elder, the Chachommim of Yavneh, after the Destruction of the second Beis HaMikdash to give thanks to HaShem, Who, despite His anger with us (resulting in the Destruction) nevertheless preserves the dignity of His People, even in their Exile. Despite the changes made in these Brochos to reflect the changing circumstances over the ages, these central themes are preserved in the Birkas HaMozzon down to this day.*
9. The holy Land to which HaShem brings us, says Mosheh, is a bountiful land. It is a land of brooks and wellsprings, it produces wheat and barley, vines and figs and pomegranates,

## SIDRA OF THE WEEK : עקב

it is a land that gives forth olives rich in oil and dates sweet as honey. We need lack nothing there: from its stones we can mine iron and from its mountains we can dig out copper. But we must not be lulled into a sense of self-sufficiency. Mosheh warns us to take care that we do not forget HaShem and then neglect His Mitzvos, we must be careful that when we eat and are satisfied, when we build fine houses, when our possessions increase and we prosper — we must ensure that we do not then become proud and think that we have achieved all this ourselves. We are to remember always that it is HaShem Who gives us the ability to achieve anything. If we forget HaShem, warns Mosheh, and choose to follow strange gods, we will soon come to ruin. Indeed, in the same way as HaShem drives out the pagan peoples from our Land, so will He let us go to ruin if we should neglect to follow HaShem and His Torah.

10. Neither should we think, when HaShem helps us to overcome the inhabitants of the Land and we take possession of it, that it is because of our own righteousness coupled together with their wickedness that HaShem has done this. Not so, says Mosheh. While it is indeed because of those peoples' wickedness and also because of the promise that HaShem made to our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, to give this Land to us, their descendants, it is not at all due to our own merits that we are given the Land!
11. So that we do not become proud or self-righteous, says Mosheh, we should always remember how we angered HaShem on so many occasions. At Chorev (that is, Mount Sinai) there was the Golden Calf. At Tav'eroh, we had complained about the Manna. Earlier, at Massa, we had questioned whether HaShem was with us or not and whether He could provide water for us. At Kivros HaTaavoh, we had challenged HaShem and demanded meat. And at Kodesh Barne'a there was the episode of the spies. Yet for all these backslidings, says Mosheh, HaShem had forgiven His People because they were sincerely repentant.
12. Time had moved on. Aharon had died at Mount Hor, Elozzor his son succeeding him as Kohen Ga'dol. The Tribe of Levi was singled-out for their special duties to the Jewish Nation. For this reason, Mosheh reminds us, they are not to be given a portion in the Promised Land and thus can devote themselves to their sacred duties without the usual concerns of having to earn their livelihood as farmers or traders. They will live in the special Levite Cities throughout the Land and attend to the spiritual needs of the Nation. (In return, the Jewish People will support them with the various tithes and gifts as commanded by HaShem.)
13. In his next speech, Mosheh our Teacher asks us to consider how HaShem requests from us, His People, only that we fear Him and serve Him in sincerity and observe the Mitzvos. Of course, keeping the Torah and observing the Mitzvos are not easy but the Torah and its Mitzvos is all ultimately only for our own good. Mosheh tells us that because HaShem saw the goodness in our forefathers He therefore chose us, their descendants, to be His People, for their goodness is in us, too. But we must put away our stubbornness and

## SIDRA OF THE WEEK : עקב

remember our duties! We are to emulate HaShem in fighting the cause of the defenceless and to treat the stranger in our midst with kindness — for, says Mosheh, we know the feelings of the stranger as we too were strangers in the land of Egypt. We are to observe diligently and conscientiously all the Mitzvos of HaShem, the One Whom we praise and obey and indeed because of this, we ourselves are held in high regard by others.

14. Mosheh reminds us that all the wondrous acts of HaShem were witnessed by us ourselves. The way HaShem dealt with the Egyptians and their king; the miracles at the Reed Sea; the wonders in the Wilderness; the punishment of Korach and his crowd — all were seen and experienced by us. And so, too, will HaShem bring us to the Land that He has promised to our forefathers, “a Land flowing with milk and honey.”
15. This Land to which we are coming is not like the flat land of Egypt, whose sparse rains were supplemented by irrigation canals and which was laid out like a garden. The Land which HaShem gives to us is a land of hills and valleys and is therefore more dependant upon the rains which are sent by HaShem Himself rather than on our own efforts — and therein lies the blessing: because there is relatively little that we ourselves can do to provide the water needed for its growing produce, therefore our connexion with HaShem Who gives rain will be more constant and urgent. The very geography and climate of the Land ensures that we will not lose this connexion with HaShem our Provider for we will know that we rely on HaShem’s rains and therefore pray to Him for the future and thank Him continually for the past. And HaShem will respond to our sincere prayers and indeed according to the blessing that He bestows upon our Land so will all other lands be blessed.
16. In the speech that follows (which is in fact the second paragraph of the Sh’ma, recited by us morning and evening of each and every day) Mosheh tells us that it will thus come about that if we obediently listen to the commands of HaShem and faithfully serve Him with all our heart and all our soul, that HaShem will indeed give the rains in their proper time and the Land will produce plenty. But we must always be careful not to become complacent and nor allow our hearts to be turned away from HaShem, for then HaShem’s anger will be turned against us. He will not allow the heavens to give their rains, the Land will not give its produce and eventually we ourselves will be banished from the good Land that HaShem gives us. Consider these warnings carefully, says Mosheh: we are to write them in the Tefillin tied upon our arms and hands (the agents of action, thus to bring to mind that all our actions shall comply with HaShem’s will) and in the Tefillin placed upon our heads (to remind us that our thoughts, too, shall be directed to HaShem and His Mitzvos). We are to teach the words of the Torah to our children and also impart to them the Torah’s teachings by our conduct at home and when we venture out of our home, at all times, in all circumstances, when we lie down at night as well as when we rise up in the morning. This is the way that we can ensure that our children will follow us and, like us, will enjoy long and happy lives upon the Land that HaShem has promised to give to our forefathers and to us, their descendants, for as long as there will be heaven and earth.

## SIDRA OF THE WEEK : עקב

17. As just said, this paragraph is the second paragraph of Krias Sh'ma, the declaration of faith of the Jewish People. This declaration consists of three parts. The first part, which is from last week's Sidra, וְאֵתְחַנֵּן, with its famous opening statement, "Hear, o Israel, G-d Who is our L-rd, this G-d is One!" means that we accept upon ourselves the Sovereignty of HaShem and of no other. The rest of that paragraph is our declaration of love of HaShem, "with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our might." The second paragraph is from this week's Sidra and in it we accept upon ourselves to guard and do all the Mitzvos that HaShem commands and we declare and accept that HaShem rewards us for obeying Him and punishes disobedience. The third part of Krias Sh'ma, which is from Sidra שְׁלַח לַךְ, consists of the Mitzvah of Tzitzis, the special tassels to be tied on the four corners of our garments (commanded to us so that we "shall see the Tzitzis and remember the Mitzvos of HaShem and do them") and that paragraph ends with the Mitzvah to always remember how HaShem took us out from Egypt to be His People, for this is our purpose.
18. Only do this, says Mosheh: Guard the Torah and observe the Mitzvos of HaShem and He will drive out all the squatters that are at present in the Land and we will take possession of all of it. From the desert land in the south to the Lebanon region in the north and from the River Euphrates till the sea shore — all of it will pass into our possession. No man will remain standing against us, it will all be ours, just as HaShem has promised us.

**For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra עקב please go to HAFTORAHS.**