

INTRODUCTION TO THE SIDRA OF THE WEEK

“SIDRA OF THE WEEK”

A REPORT AND SUMMARY OF THE WEEKLY PUBLIC TORAH READING.

The public Torah Reading of the synagogue was originally instituted by Mosheh our Teacher. He stipulated that the main reading shall be on Shabbos (when the people would be free from the responsibility of earning their livelihood) with shorter readings on Mondays and on Thursdays. This way, no three days would pass without at least some public study of Torah. The overall purpose of these Torah Readings was that the Jewish People shall learn Torah and shall be knowledgeable and aware of their duties as taught in the Torah. (The word “Torah” means “instruction.”) For the same reason, for special occasions like Festivals there was an additional public Torah reading which would instruct the people in some of the laws of the festival.

It is not known with any certainty today how many people were originally called up to read at this Shabbos morning Reading. Nor, indeed, is it known how long, that is, how many verses, comprised the Shabbos morning Reading, or “Sidra.” We do know, however, that in Eretz Yisroel, for many centuries, the Shabbos morning reading was quite short (about a third of today’s Sidra) while in Babylon the Shabbos morning Torah reading has always been very much as we have it today. The people in Eretz Yisroel therefore finished reading the whole Torah after three years while the communities in Babylon completed the cycle of Sidras every year, with the last reading — and the new cycle of Sidras starting immediately — on the second day of Sheminni Atserres, called, for that reason, Simchas Torah (the festival of “Rejoicing with the Torah”). The famous 12th Century traveller, Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela (in Navarre, northern Spain) writes that in Cairo there were two synagogues. One followed the custom of Eretz Yisroel and completed the reading of the Torah every three years, while the other followed the custom of Babylon and completed the reading every year. He writes that nevertheless the two communities united and celebrated Simchas Torah together each year.

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It is generally accepted that Ezra the Scribe (“Ezra HaSofer”) who was the Torah leader of the Jewish People during the Babylonian / Persian Exile (which followed the Destruction of the First Beis HaMikdash and which exile ended with the building of the Second Beis HaMikdash) introduced the Shabbos afternoon reading, mainly for the benefit of those who might have missed the Shabbos morning public Torah Reading. In the time of Ezra, too, the number of people called up to each Reading was established, and various other rules and regulations of the public Torah Reading were set down.

Originally, everyone was pretty well capable of reading the Torah when called up to read, without having to prepare much beforehand. But then, as people became less proficient in their knowledge of Hebrew, it became necessary to have an official Torah Reader standing by in case a particular honouree was not able to read by himself. Gradually, this Reader read for everyone who was called up, “so as not to embarrass those who are not able” to read aloud for themselves.

As time went on and especially as the Diaspora became a long-term reality, fewer people understood the Torah read in Hebrew. If the public Torah Reading was to achieve its purpose, that is, to instruct the people in the Torah and Mitzvos, it would be necessary to translate the Reading into the vernacular. At that time this was Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew (but different nevertheless) and so there was an appointed Meturgemon (Translator) who used an official, set translation, which often incorporated very brief explanations. There also grew up various rules and regulations about this Translation and how it was to be delivered together with the Torah Reading. (Some of these rules and regulations are in the Shulchan Oruch.) In any case, the purpose of the institution of the public Reading was accomplished because through this arrangement, the Jewish People preserved their connexion with the Torah.

This “**SIDRA OF THE WEEK**” is intended to maintain this connexion. Generally, these Sidra sheets will present and explain most if not all the topics of the weekly Sidra. Sometimes, there is also a story appended which has some bearing on something in the Sidra.

The overall purpose of this **SIDRA OF THE WEEK** is the same as the original intention of Mosheh our Teacher, that is, that the Jewish People should be knowledgeable about Torah and the hope is that these Sidra sheets help to achieve this aim.