

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : כי תשא

1. This week's Sidra begins with HaShem's command to Mosheh our Teacher concerning the counting of the Jewish People: if and when the need arises to know the number of the Jewish People, they are not themselves to be counted, for HaShem does not wish that human beings should be reduced to nothing more than a number. Instead, each person is to give a half-*Shekel* and these tokens are then to be counted. The first time this system was used, the half-*Shekollim* thus collected were used as the foundation-sockets of the Sanctuary of HaShem, thus symbolizing how the Mishkan of HaShem rests upon the Jewish People. In later times, these monies (collected annually) were paid to the Beis HaMikdash, and so everybody of the Jewish People had a part in the Divine Service of the Beis HaMikdash.
2. HaShem commands the making of the Copper Washstand. It was placed at the entrance of the Mishkan on the left-hand side, between the Mishkan and the great Copper Altar. The Kohanim are commanded to wash their hands and feet each time they come to officiate in the Sanctuary of HaShem, and to this day we too wash our hands prior to any Divine Service, just like the Kohanim of the Mikdash.
3. HaShem commands the laws concerning the preparation of the holy anointing oil for the Mishkan and its sacred furniture and appurtenances, and for Aharon and his sons, the Kohanim. There follow HaShem's instructions concerning the composition and making-up of the various spices into the incense which is to be burned upon the Golden Altar, with the warning that these spices, like the anointing oil, are to be used only as directed by HaShem.
4. HaShem tells Mosheh that He calls upon the young Betzallel ben Uri ben Chur of the Tribe of Yehuda to mastermind the making of the Mishkan and all its parts, with Oholi'ov ben Achisommoch of the Tribe of Don, to help him. These two geniuses, who were further blessed by HaShem with Divine Inspiration, supervised the whole wonderful project, co-ordinating the work of all the gifted craftsmen and craftswomen.
5. Notwithstanding the holy purpose of the Mishkan, however, HaShem commands that the work of the Mishkan may not be done on Shabbos. For the Shabbos is the special everlasting sign between HaShem and His People and is to be observed by us by our desisting from all creative activities such as were needed in the making of the Mishkan. [See SIDRA OF THE WEEK : תרומה] The Shabbos, as properly observed by us, the Jewish People, is our testimony to HaShem's creating the world in six days. As He desisted from creation on Shabbos, so too do we cease all manner of Melachah and weekday activities on Shabbos and thus keep it holy in the way that HaShem has commanded us. The Shabbos, HaShem's holy day of delight with which He has

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : כִּי תֵשָׂא

favoured us, shall always remain the special bond between HaShem and His faithful Jewish People. It will never be taken from us.

6. The Sidra continues with a “flashback” to the events at the time of the Giving of the Torah and is the description of the shameful episode of the Golden Calf. After hearing the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) Mosheh our Teacher was summoned by HaShem to ascend Mount Sinai to learn from HaShem Himself all the commandments of the Torah, to teach them to us later. When he went up the mountain, Mosheh told us that he would return after forty full days and that in the meantime we were in the charge of Aharon and the Elders. But then the people imagined that Mosheh was delayed (they thought that he was due to return on the fortieth day itself) and then they were misled into thinking that he would never return. Convinced that the man Mosheh was dead and that they were now left without anyone to act as an intermediary between themselves and HaShem, the people of the mixed multitude of non-Hebrews who had come up from Egypt with us clamoured round Aharon that he should act. Reverting back to the degenerate practices of Egypt, they demanded that Aharon make for them an idol to be between them and HaShem Who leads them. Aharon, seeing how they were driven by a murderous, diabolical panic, and seeing that he could not reason with them in their present mood, told them to bring the gold jewellery from their wives and children. Taking their gold that they eagerly gave him, he cast it into a crucible. The result was the Golden Calf. When Aharon saw what had so magically and quickly transpired, he understood that his duty now was to prevent their backsliding any further. He declared that he himself, ordained to be the High Priest in HaShem’s Mikdash, would build an altar. In a brave act of brinkmanship to delay them, he himself laboriously set about building the altar, knowing that Mosheh was due to return the very next morning and that he would restore the people to sanity before they actually worshipped their newly-made idol. But the people rose up early the next morning, determined to let themselves go in a wild orgy of depravity... Barely forty days had elapsed since the people had heard the Voice of HaShem and seen His Glory as no people had before or since, and now they had sunk so low in their treachery to Him...
7. When HaShem told Mosheh what was happening, Mosheh our Teacher immediately begged Him to spare the people. In the most direct appeal for HaShem’s mercy, Mosheh invokes the merits of our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, and he entreats HaShem not to destroy the people because of their waywardness. As soon as he is assured of a reprieve, Mosheh descends the mountain, carrying the Two Tablets engraved by HaShem with the Ten Commandments, in the hope that the situation can yet be saved. Coming down the mountain, he is joined by his faithful pupil Yehoshua, who, having waited alone at the foot of the mountain, did not know of the terrible events that had happened in the Camp. When Mosheh sees from afar the sinful rejoicing of the people with their Golden Calf, he can no longer hold the Two Tablets and he smashes them at the foot of the mountain. Striding into the Camp, Mosheh himself then topples the idol from its pedestal and breaks it into small pieces. He sets

about grinding it into small particles and scatters these over the water, compelling the people to drink.

8. In answer to Mosheh's question, Aharon excuses the people as having acted as if they were possessed of the devil. But Mosheh realizes that the treachery of the few will always be held up by the opponents of the Jewish People as a blemish on the whole Nation, and he exhorts the Jewish People to redeem themselves by their own purging of the recaltrants. Of the whole People, the only Tribe that was loyal to HaShem in its entirety was the Tribe of Levi. Upon them fell the terrible task, and almost three thousand people were put to the sword, besides those that died by the Hand of HaShem.
9. The next day, Mosheh our Teacher rebukes the rest of the people for having tolerated such treachery in their midst. (Although less than three thousand out of the entire Nation were guilty — which is less than one half of one per cent of the six hundred thousand men that comprised the Nation — the whole Nation is blameworthy for tolerating such faithlessness to HaShem in their midst.) Mosheh then ascends the mountain once again to plead with HaShem for forgiveness, but HaShem tells him that because of the waywardness of the people, He does not wish to lead them Himself any more. Instead, He will send His Angel. When they hear of this, the people mourn their loss of closeness to HaShem. Mosheh our Teacher then moves his own tent to outside the Camp, for “as long as they are banished from HaShem the Master, they shall be banished from His pupil, too.” So Mosheh and his faithful servant Yehoshua bin Nune, in this self-imposed exile, together with the repentant Jewish People, wait to hear that HaShem has forgiven His erring People.
10. Mosheh our Teacher then entreats HaShem to accept us back again, and not to entrust us to any Angel, “for if not,” says Mosheh, “we would rather not go from here. Furthermore,” says Mosheh, “seeing that we are Your Chosen People, this special status is realized only if You Yourself walk with us — and I beg You to grant to us Your special Divine Presence again, like to no other nation on earth.” Mosheh our Teacher offers up many such prayers and supplications on our behalf, and, because we are sincerely repentant, HaShem grants Mosheh these requests. (Indeed, because our repentance is so acceptable to Him, HaShem tells Mosheh that this is how we are to achieve atonement in the future, too, and these prayers are preserved in our Penitential Prayers to this day.)
11. HaShem tells Mosheh to prepare another Two Tablets and upon these He will again inscribe the very same Ten Commandments as were on the original Tablets. Then, on the tenth day of Tishri (commanded later by HaShem to be observed as the Day of Atonement for all time) HaShem tells Mosheh, “I have indeed pardoned as you have asked,” and on that very Day of Atonement Mosheh descends the mountain with the second Two Tablets.

12. *Our Chachommim, of blessed memory, point out for us that despite the tragic consequences of the sin of the Golden Calf at that time and indeed for the future, too (for whenever HaShem is angry with us and has reason to chastise us for the sin of idolatry in any form, there is always some punishment for the Golden Calf, too) the overriding lesson of the episode of the Golden Calf is to teach us the power of Teshuvah (Repentance). For although we had been raised to unprecedented spiritual heights when we were all witness to the revealed Glory of HaShem at Mount Sinai when He gave us His Torah, no human being can be so self-confident that he or she will remain on his or her high spiritual level without ever stumbling. And if and when he falls, dare a person hope that he will be granted atonement, that he can again rise to his previous greatness and purity, and even surpass that level? HaShem has commanded us to observe His Torah, but individually and as a People, if we should fail in our duty, can we be worthy of our sacred task ever again? And HaShem answers: "Yes! Let the sinner repent sincerely and I will forgive him, and he will live!" See! So soon after hearing, from HaShem Himself, the Commandments, "You shall not serve idols nor shall you revere any other powers," the people transgressed this most fundamental Torah Law in the most disgusting and sinful manner. Can there ever be forgiveness for such iniquity? Answer: Yes! Of course, the sin of the Golden Calf was great. Indeed, HaShem allowed the forces of evil even more power, He allowed things to happen that could not happen naturally, as if to deliberately encourage, as it were, this grave sin of the Golden Calf. And why? Just so as to teach this lesson of repentance. For the greater the sin, the more overwhelming can the power of Teshuvah be shown to be. Thus the episode of the Golden Calf and the sincere repentance of the people are an integral part of HaShem's Torah. For HaShem, the Giver of the Torah, is the Creator of the world: He created Man with both, all his capabilities to scale the heights of spiritual greatness and pure goodness, and with all his human fallibilities, too. And even if Man should fall, even ever so low, HaShem has given him the opportunity, through sincere repentance, to come back to Him, directly and without the need of any intermediary.*
13. *This is the other lesson that we are to learn from the episode of the Golden Calf: when the people called upon Aharon to make for them an idol, they demanded an intermediary, a mediator, to be between themselves and HaShem. "This man Mosheh," they said, ignoring the supernatural strengths that HaShem granted to His greatest prophet and now choosing to see him as an ordinary mortal like themselves, "this man Mosheh — we do not know what has become of him." And they felt that they themselves could not approach HaShem: they felt that they needed something or somebody to act as a mediator between themselves and G-d Almighty. (Incidentally, this false idea of the inapproachability of HaShem is the basis of all forms of idolatry.) But HaShem has commanded, "I am HaShem your G-d — there shall be no others beside Me." Everybody is able to come close to HaShem, if he but wants to sincerely. And if, through misplaced reverence for HaShem, one imagines that one needs an intermediary, then sooner or later HaShem Himself becomes remote from one and gradually one becomes estranged from HaShem and His Torah.*

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : כִּי תִשָּׂא

14. *In the account of the episode of the Golden Calf in this week's Sidra, we are taught the exact opposite of these false ideas. We see how Mosheh our Teacher, the greatest prophet that ever lived, the one who came as close to knowing the Essence of HaShem as any human being can and the one whom HaShem Himself calls "My faithful servant," in his entreaties on our behalf addresses HaShem in the most daringly simple and human way imaginable. Of all the many prayers and supplications that Mosheh our Teacher spoke to HaShem on our behalf, the Torah tells us of those in which Mosheh spoke so directly and so simply, for this is how HaShem wants us to know Him.*
15. The Sidra continues with HaShem's command to us that when we come to Eretz Yisroel we are not to make any covenant with the inhabitants of Eretz Yisroel which would allow them to continue their idol-worship. On the contrary, we are commanded to destroy all their temples, altars and groves of Ashayroh trees, and we are not to tolerate such abominations in our Land, for in time they would prove to be a stumbling-block to us as dangerous as the mixed multitude with their alien culture were when we were in the Wilderness.
16. The Sidra continues with the Mitzvah of redeeming our firstborns, and the Mitzvah of separating milk and meat. We are commanded to observe the Yommim Tovim of Pessach, Shovuos and Sukkos. In this connexion, the Torah promises that during these Pilgrimage Festivals, which every able-bodied land-owning man of the Jewish People is to spend in the holy city of Yerushala'im, no foreigners will even covet our country, let alone invade it, for HaShem Himself guards His People and their Holy Land.
17. All these things HaShem commanded Mosheh to tell us at the same time as He told him that He had again happily accepted us back as His People. HaShem renews His Covenant with us, but, says HaShem to Mosheh, our being HaShem's Chosen People depends not so much upon our obedience to the Written Torah as upon our obedience and faithfulness to His Oral Torah as revealed by HaShem at Mount Sinai and taught to us in each generation by our faithful Torah leaders.
18. Mosheh our Teacher, who had so valiantly and selflessly saved us from the wrath of HaShem, then descends the mountain to tell us that HaShem has gladly taken us back to Him again as His People and to teach us the laws that HaShem has taught him. But this most faithful servant of HaShem and defender of His People is unaware that now his face reflected the Glory of HaShem and shone with an astonishing radiance. It is only when the people are afraid to come near to him that Mosheh becomes aware of this special sign of HaShem's favour. From then on, Mosheh covers his face so that the people should not be afraid to approach him. Only when HaShem speaks with him, or when he teaches us the Word of HaShem, does Mosheh our Teacher remove the covering from his face.

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra כִּי תִשָּׂא please go to HAFTORAHS.