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1. The speeches of Mosheh our Teacher that make up the first part of the Sefer Devorrim, that is, the first three Sidros, are in the main a historical review of events. They serve as an introduction to the laws and instructions for our national life in the Promised Land. With this fourth Sidra, however, the speeches of Mosheh our Teacher begin to focus more on the review of the actual laws of the Torah that are indispensable to our destiny as the People of G-d in the Holy Land. Throughout these speeches are the recurring themes of admonition and warning against our forsaking the Torah and the advice and exhortation to us to adhere to the Torah.

2. This Sidra begins with such an exhortation. “See,” says Mosheh our Teacher, “I place before you this day a choice: blessing and curse. The blessing — when you obey the commandments of HaShem. And the curse — if you do not obey the commandments of HaShem and you turn away from the path that He has commanded ...” Mosheh commands that when we come to Eretz Yisroel, one of the first things we are to do, as a nation, is to bring to our minds this contrast of blessing and curse in a real and tangible way. It is to be a national demonstration, a staged exhibition of this blessing and curse — but in a way that the very Land itself plays a part in this demonstration. We are to behold with our own eyes the symbols of blessing and curse in this Land and as a nation affirm that we choose the blessing and reject the curse.

3. In the south of Eretz Yisroel, not too far from where we were to enter the Land, there are two low mountains right next to each other and their closeness to each other makes the contrast between them even more striking. Mount Gerizzim is a gently-sloping verdant hill, with vegetation and greenery growing up till its summit. And right next to it is the stark Mount Ayval, barren, bare, bleak. Both mountains rise out of the same soil. Both are watered by the same rain and the same dew. The same breezes with the same pollens waft over them. Yet Mount Gerizzim is covered in vegetation and Mount Ayval is grey and empty. In other words: it’s not because of any differences in external circumstances that these two mountains are so different. Rather, their differences come about because of their inherent individual nature, by what they are in themselves. Similarly, blessing and curse do not come about so much by physical circumstances but, much more importantly, by our own national inner will and decision, by how we, the people, inside ourselves, choose to live our lives. For this national demonstration and public affirmation, Mosheh nominates six of the Tribes of Israel to be positioned on Mount Gerizzim, representing blessing, with the other six to stand on Mount Ayval. The Tribe of Levi, the Torah teachers of the People, are to stand in the valley below and proclaim the list of blessings and curses to each group loud and clear.

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4. This ceremony was the formal, open declaration of the Jewish Nation, by the Jewish Nation, in its entirety — there were no dissenters. The Torah commands that this ceremony is to be performed only then, only that once, just as we come into Eretz Yisroel. Standing together at that point in time when we were about to take our place and establish ourselves in our Holy Land as HaShem's Holy People, we declared that we will live our lives according to the Torah and thus bring upon ourselves the blessings of HaShem. This way, too, is impressed upon the collective conscience of the Nation, for all time, that our adherence to the Torah of HaShem is the only reason, the only purpose, of our being given this Land and only through our adherence to the Torah of HaShem is our blessing and prosperity in the Land assured.
5. This Land is to be the possession of the People of HaShem where they live their lives in His service — this is what makes it the Holy Land. Therefore, warns Mosheh our Teacher, no idol-worship is to be at all tolerated in this special Land. It is “the palace of the King.”
6. In contrast to the command to do away with all kinds of idol-worship, to root it out, to destroy it, we are commanded to take care not to desecrate anything that is holy to HaShem and to revere the place chosen by Him (not by ourselves) to be dedicated to the worship of HaShem. To that place are we to bring our Korbannos (the word “קרבן” — “Korban” denotes not “sacrifice” or “offering” but “a means of coming close” derived as it is from the word “קרב” — “near,” “close”) and to enjoy the blessings that HaShem bestows upon us and our families, and especially the spiritual joy that comes with being in the presence of HaShem. This is the place that is to be central to the Jewish People in its Holy Land. Once that central sanctuary has been established we are not any more to set up shrines elsewhere, even if they are to HaShem, for this will lead to fragmentation of the Jewish People and to idol-worship (as indeed happened later during the reign of Rechav’om ben Shlomo).
7. Mosheh our Teacher tells us that once we are in the Land, and no longer encamped around the Mishkan, we are permitted to eat meat without that meat being part of a Korbon. But the Shechita of our food animals must be done in the considerate way that HaShem commands. Those parts of the animal that would have been brought on the altar are forbidden to us as food as is even the slightest amount of blood. In this way the Torah trains us to remember the higher function of food, namely, that our lives shall be dedicated to the service of HaShem and our coming close to Him.
8. The instruction to “slaughter of your cattle and your sheep ... as I have commanded you” is a clear reference to the Oral Torah and, in this instance, to the laws of Shechita taught by HaShem to Mosheh our Teacher on Mount Sinai. For one searches in vain through the whole Written Torah for even a hint of how to do Shechita and yet the Torah itself speaks of “as I have commanded you.” Where? In the Oral Torah. It has come down to us today in the Talmud, in Tractate *Chullin* and the laws themselves are codified in all their details in the *Yoreh Day’oh* section of the *Shulchan Oruch*, in the *Rambam* and in various other Codes of Jewish Law. All G-d-fearing Jews follow them

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meticulously to this day. By our taking care to observe the whole of the Torah — together with its oral explanation as taught by HaShem to Mosheh our Teacher — by doing that which is good and right in the eyes of HaShem — will we and our children be granted HaShem's blessing and good fortune for all time.

9. In his next speech, Mosheh our Teacher warns us not to be drawn towards the practices of the former inhabitants of the Land, even only out of curiosity or because some people may imagine that there might have been some good in those practices. Not so, says Mosheh. The customs and way of life of those peoples included the worst abominations and cruelties — there is nothing of any good that we can learn from them. In fact, we have no need to learn from anyone for all good is in the Torah and if it's not in the Torah then *ipso facto* it's not good! Do not add to the Torah and do not detract anything from it.
10. Indeed, if we are less than sure of the Divine origin of the Torah that we think that maybe we should learn from others what is good, that we think that perhaps we *do* need to add something to the Torah or detract something from it, then there is also the danger that we might be easier persuaded by a false prophet that might rise up. Mosheh our Teacher warns us to ignore any such prophet or his message of treachery to the Torah, despite any wonders or miracles he might perform to try to convince us of his vision. Says Mosheh: such a one is sent only to test our loyalty to HaShem and His Torah. It makes no difference whether the false prophet is someone previously unknown to us who comes with signs and wonders or whether he is someone indeed known to us before whose credentials are proven but whose message is now strange and new. Sometimes the false prophet is a person; sometimes it is an ideal. Sometimes it is blatantly secular; sometimes it is disguised as a religious movement. But whatever form it takes we must stand firm and remain loyal to HaShem and His Torah.
11. Similarly, we must be firm not to listen even to our kith and kin who might try to influence us to turn against the Torah and to worship idols. Such a one must be brought before the Court to be judged and punished. We may not cover up for him nor allow our natural feelings of pity to protect him. Indeed, such misplaced pity will only allow greater harm to come upon the whole Nation and this is hinted at by the next law taught in this week's Sidra, namely, the law of the idolatrous city.
12. Although our Chachommim, of blessed memory, tell us that there never was an actual case of an idolatrous city (that all the conditions necessary for this law to be applied to a real case is well-nigh impossible) the Torah teaches this law so that this hypothetical case should serve as a warning. At the same time — and this is quite consistent with the method the Torah usually uses to teach law — the Torah uses this case to teach a number of fundamental rules of evidence and testimony which are to be applied generally in Torah Law, too. All together, these rules ensure that if the laws of the Torah are followed, there cannot be miscarriages of justice.

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13. Throughout the speeches of Mosheh our Teacher which he delivered to us in the last weeks of his life and which make up the fifth of the Five Books of the Torah, there can be discerned his anxiety for the future Jewish People when they will be settled on their Land. For no longer will the Nation be concentrated within one small area — the Camp of the Jewish People in the Wilderness was approximately nine miles across — safely encamped around the Sanctuary of HaShem and under the careful control and close supervision of its Torah leader. Once they come into the Land, things will be very different. The worry is that they will spread out and lose contact with the Sanctuary of HaShem and with the Torah leadership that is part of that Sanctuary. Mosheh expresses this anxiety by warning that our loyalty must always be solely to HaShem and His Torah; that we revere HaShem's Sanctuary because it is chosen by Him, not because we ourselves imagine it deserves reverence. To revere a place or an object merely because humans perceive it to be worthy of reverence or because they feel intimidated by the place — this was the practice of the former inhabitants of the Land and indeed is still the practice of people all over the world. This is why even today we find all kinds of shrines and religious symbols on mountaintops and under high trees on hilltops, and we find mountains and high trees are held to be sacred by overawed humans. With us, it is not so: we revere only those places and things which are holy to HaShem. (That is one reason that wherever in the Torah there is any reference to the Mikdash, it is always referred to as “the place which HaShem your G-d will choose to rest His Name there ...” It is not chosen by us, nor indeed is its design the product of human invention.)
14. Mosheh warns us to be careful not to be persuaded by close family or friends to desert HaShem and His Torah, not to allow our Nation to fragmentize into different factions or groups. We must take care, too, not to allow our feelings of attachment to personalities and even to kith and kin be so excessive that we become inconsolable when they are taken from us and we forget that we have HaShem, our Father in Heaven. We are always to remember this, our relationship with HaShem and that it brings with it certain obligations. He expects more from us. Being HaShem's Holy People means that even in our very physicality we are unusual. We may not eat those things that HaShem tells us are disgusting and we are to restrict our diet to those animals, fish and creatures of the air which are certified by the Torah as kosher. (The word “kosher” means “correct.”) The visible signs of such kosher animals are that they have cloven hooves and that they chew the cud. Fish and other creatures of the seas must have both fins and scales to be kosher and only certain birds, too, are kosher. HaShem is our Creator and the Creator of the world and everything in it. He knows what will harm us spiritually, that is, what will be detrimental to our state of holiness, in much the same way that a doctor knows that certain foods, while being quite harmless and even beneficial to the majority of people, nevertheless will affect an allergic patient of his, sometimes quite spectacularly — and even fatally.
15. The Torah commands us to grant a kind of “favoured nation” status to those righteous people who choose to live amongst us to learn the way of G-d. Therefore, at the same

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time as reviewing the Laws of Kashrus, we are commanded to extend kindness and consideration to such people, for example, that the meat that is forbidden to us shall be given (or sold) to the stranger who lives amongst us, and similar such favourable treatment. Of our agricultural produce, too, we have to make sure that all tithes and all the entitlements due to the poor have been separated as commanded before this produce becomes fit for us to eat. The Torah repeatedly warns us not to neglect those less fortunate than ourselves and to remember to provide for them and thus make glad the disadvantaged and the dejected.

16. Interestingly, HaShem is not satisfied that we merely separate our tithes and give them away as He directs. That is not enough. One of the tithes that have to be separated is to be eaten by the owner himself, with his family, in the holy city of the Sanctuary. The reason? HaShem wishes us to spend time in the environment of His Holy Mikdash and to “soak up the atmosphere” of sanctity and fear of G-d that is unique to His Holy City.
17. Whenever the Torah tells us that we are to enjoy the blessings of material bounty that HaShem gives us, the Torah also invariably warns us of our responsibility towards those who have little with which to rejoice. Mosheh our Teacher follows that same pattern and here, in the part of this speech that speaks of enjoyment of material blessing, he reminds us of the laws of not taking interest on loans of money or consumables. Likewise, he also warns us that with the advent of the Shmittah Year, that is, the seventh year of each seven-year cycle, we must cancel money loans made to our fellow. (This way, the Torah ensures that even the poor man, perhaps saddled with debt and caught in the rut of poverty, “has a break” and is given the chance to pull himself out of the poverty trap.) The poor man will never cease to be in the world somewhere, Mosheh our Teacher tells us. (Poverty is, after all, relative.) The wheel of fortune is continually turning and the engine, in a manner of speaking, that turns it to a person’s benefit is the merit of sharing one’s material substance with others. Therefore, says Mosheh, even if the calls upon our generosity are many and frequent, we must take care of the poor and the disadvantaged for our merits of kindness protect us from ourselves becoming needy. Indeed, if circumstances bring it about that we acquire our fellow-Hebrew as our servitor (or maidservant) we are to see to it that the time he serves with us is pleasant (to the extent that he would even voluntarily extend his term of service with us!) and when the time comes for his release from service, to give him material goods so that he can from now on support himself with respect. Remember, exhorts Mosheh, one of the purposes for our being slaves in Egypt was so that we shall feel for the underprivileged and help him in the same way that HaShem helped us and redeemed us.
18. The characteristic, human feelings that are experienced at the various points of the yearly cycle are perfectly natural. Man is naturally happy with the increase of his sheep and cattle and the products obtained from his domesticated animals. He is rejuvenated when he sees how the world awakens in the springtime after the winter. He is happy at the gathering-in of the crop in summer and rejoices when the harvest is safely completed. These feelings are universal and implanted in all humankind. But, says

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Mosheh, let these feelings be utilized in serving HaShem. Let these feelings be utilized by us and directed into worship and gratefully serving HaShem, the Author of all these phenomena. There follows, then, the laws of celebration of the Yommim Tovim sanctified to be celebrated — not to any “Mother Nature” or such imaginary quiddity — but to HaShem, the real Lord and Controller of the world that He has created. HaShem, the Creator of the natural world, commands us to harness our natural feelings of rejoicing to commemorate the cycle of His world of nature but coupled with events in our national history through which we have become the People of HaShem. Three times each year, therefore, every able-bodied man with his family — the whole Nation — is commanded to come into the Presence of HaShem to celebrate the Yommim Tovim, each of us to the extent that he is able, each of us to the extent that HaShem has blessed us. For by using the blessings of HaShem as He wishes and directs, we show that we are worthy of being entrusted with more of His goodness.

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