

SIDRA OF THE WEEK : דברים

1. This is the first Sidra of the last of the Five Books of the Torah and, as with each of the **דברים**, this Sidra, too, gives its name to its whole **דברים**. Almost the entire Sefer Devorrim is made up of the speeches that Mosheh our Teacher delivered to the Jewish People in the last thirty-six days of his life on earth. In these speeches, Mosheh reviews the events of our Deliverance from Egypt and our travels through the Wilderness to the borders of Eretz Yisroel. In addition, he repeats all the Mitzvos of the Torah (with one notable exception — see **SIDRA OF THE WEEK : בְּהַר סִינַי**) sometimes explaining at greater length some details of some of the Mitzvos as they were taught to him by HaShem when they were originally commanded at Sinai. For this reason, the Sefer Devorrim is known also as “Mishneh Torah,” that is, “the repeating of the Torah.”

2. In the Plains of Mo'av, on the east of the River Jordan, facing the city of Yericho, within sight of the Promised Land, Mosheh our Teacher speaks to the entire assembled Jewish People. With the full knowledge that he himself will not be permitted to come with us into Eretz Yisroel, he bids us to take courage and be strong, for HaShem is with us always and, under our new leader Yehoshua bin Noone, we will pass over the River Jordan and take possession of the Land promised by HaShem to our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov. Faithful and compassionate leader that he is, Mosheh our Teacher is fully aware of our deep anxieties about the new era that is about to open when we will pass over into Eretz Yisroel and he bids us to keep our faith in HaShem always. Making oblique reference to those occasions when we rebelled against HaShem or questioned His word, Mosheh rebukes us for our lack of trust and for testing HaShem in the past and he warns us to be loyal to HaShem so that everything will be well with us in the future.

3. Mosheh reminds us how after we received the Torah from HaShem at Mount Sinai, there occurred — so soon afterwards — the shameful episode caused by our having too much gold. As a result, we had been obliged to stay at Mount Sinai a while longer till we had made the Mishkan and its sacred furniture. Then, with this Sanctuary of HaShem in our midst demonstrating how HaShem had taken us back again, we were given the order to make for Eretz Yisroel. Preparatory to our making ready to take possession of the Land, after receiving approval from HaShem for the idea originally put forward by Yisro (Mosheh's father-in-law) Mosheh had called for wise and understanding men to share with him the burdens of office, the better to facilitate the smooth and fair function of the government of the People in their new Land. Mosheh, while wryly reminding us how we only too readily agreed to this proposal (almost as if we had hoped to exert some influence

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over these new delegates) reviews the basic laws and conditions, as well as the qualities and character, necessary in those who would govern the People: the responsibility is great, for, says Mosheh, judgement belongs to HaShem. A human judge must always see himself as a partner with the omnipresent Supreme Judge Himself, and He will exact severe retribution for negligence in his duties. These administrative arrangements of the Nation thus completed, we had then set out on our travels from Mount Sinai, guided by HaShem's Pillar of Cloud. In three days we had covered almost 150 miles through the great and fearsome desert — a journey that ordinarily would take at least eleven days — for HaShem wished us to take possession of Eretz Yisroel soon. We came to Kodesh Barne'a, to the south of Eretz Yisroel, ready to enter the Land and repossess it from the Kenaanites.

4. Mosheh reminds the people that it was at Kodesh Barne'a that they had clamoured for him to send men to ascertain that the Land that HaShem had promised was in fact a good land, suited to the special character and needs of each of the Tribes, and to advise how to take it. This lack of trust in HaShem had shown once again that that generation was not worthy of HaShem's goodness, and this was finally proved when the spies had returned with their report and the people had moaned bitterly about their imagined fate. As a result of this treachery, HaShem had decreed that they would indeed not take possession of the Land. It would be their children — the people whom Mosheh was now addressing — who would enter Eretz Yisroel after the men of that first generation had died out. Thus it was that the Jewish People had had to remain in the Wilderness for altogether forty years.
5. Mosheh reminds the people how when they had heard of HaShem's anger they had acknowledged their sin — but did not accept their punishment (in itself a sign of their insubordination and showing how they had not repented from their rebelliousness). Then, in defiance of HaShem's decree and despite Mosheh's warnings to them, some of them had made a determined effort to make for Eretz Yisroel through the Emorite highlands. But HaShem was not with them, and the Emorites had come down and pursued them and struck them down.
6. They had stayed at Kodesh Barne'a for altogether nineteen years. Then, at the direction of HaShem, the people had turned southeast, away from Eretz Yisroel, towards the Reed Sea (today's Gulf of Aqaba) and skirted round the Land of Se'ir, from the west to the east, along its southern border, and then gone northwards until they had come to the Land of Mo'av, far to the east of Eretz Yisroel. They had had to go round the Lands of Se'ir (that is, Edom, which is Aysov) and Mo'av for these peoples had refused us permission to go through their lands and HaShem had commanded that they were not to be provoked to war for their lands had been given to them by Him and we were not to take anything from them: They were exercising their sovereign rights in refusing us permission to pass

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through their lands, and thus we had to pass by our brothers, the people of Aysov who dwelled in the Highlands of Se'ir. We had then headed north, along the Arava Valley, starting out from Aylas and Etzyon Gever in the south and journeyed up through the desert lands on the east of the Land of Mo'av. (Originally, these lands had been inhabited by mighty peoples and gigantic, fearsome tribes, but the Mo'avites had driven them out, as had the descendants of Aysov driven out the Chorites from Se'ir and lived there after them, as indeed we were to do to those who, in our absence, had settled unlawfully in the Land given to us by HaShem.)

7. Thirty-eight years had now passed since leaving Kodesh Barne'a. All the men of the generation that had provoked HaShem and tested Him had died out. We had travelled through the wilderness and round the lands of Aysov and Mo'av. After that, HaShem had directed that we cross the Brook of Zerred (today's Wadi el-Hesa) and continue northwards, with the reminder that we were not to attack the Mo'avites nor to provoke the Ammonites whose territories were to the north of the Brook of Zerred (the land of Ammon was to the north of the land of Mo'av) for these were their lands given to them by HaShem. (Here, too, a fearsome race of giants had settled and HaShem had driven these out so that the Ammonites, of the descendants of Lot, should take possession of this territory, much the same, in fact, as had occurred with the peoples of Mo'av and Aysov.) After we had crossed the Brook of Zerred and gone round the east of the land of Ammon, HaShem had directed that we continue northwards and cross the River Arnon and its valley (today's River Mujib, on the east side of the Dead Sea, opposite to Ayn Gedi). We had now come within a few miles of the territories previously taken from Mo'av and, more recently, those lands taken from Ammon, by Si'chon, the king of the Emorites, and now held by him.
8. Mosheh recounts how he had made overtures of peace and sent messengers to Si'chon, at Chesbon (today's Hesban, approximately twenty-five miles north of the River Arnon) asking for his permission that we pass through the eastern territory near the River Jordan now held by him, and thus into Eretz Yisroel. Si'chon had refused, and instead had come out to do battle with us at Yahatz (today's Jalul of Khirbet el-Teim, approximately seven miles south of Cheshbon and some fifteen miles east of the Dead Sea's northern end). But whereas Mo'av and our brother Aysov were within their rights to refuse us permission to pass through their lands (even if it was spiteful of them) Si'chon, the king of the Emorites had no such G-d-given rights over the lands he had taken from the descendants of Shem (the Emorites were a Chommitite people) and HaShem gave him into our hands and we vanquished him and all his fighting men and we took all the lands that he held. (This included also some territory that he had taken previously from Mo'av and from Ammon and which was now allowed to us as we had taken it from Si'chon.) Thus all the territory on the east of the Jordan (today's Kingdom of Jordan) then became ours: from

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the River Arnon (which had once marked the strong southern border of the country of Ammon: Si'chon had therefore not been able to take this part of the country of Ammon when he had conquered Mo'av) and the regions and towns surrounding Cheshbon northwards and past the region of the River Yabbok (a tributary of the River Jordan) but excluding the highlands and towns to the east which still belonged to the people of Ammon, as HaShem had commanded.

9. We had then continued further north towards the Boshon region, for this too had been designated by HaShem as part of our Land. Then Og, the king of Boshon came out with all his fighting men to do battle with us at Edre'i (today's Der'a). Mosheh recounts for us how once again HaShem gave us victory over this ogre, too, and we took all the lands that were under him, including many fortified cities and numerous open towns. Thus, all the lands on the east bank of the River Jordan became ours, from the River Arnon in the south, till Mount Chermon in the north.
10. Mosheh reminds us how these lands had been requested by the Tribes of Gad and Re'uven and had been given to them, and to some of the Tribe of Menasheh, as their portion, on the condition that they do not actually settle there properly until all the other Tribes will have re-possessed their territory on the west of the River Jordan, too. As for the miraculous way in which we had conquered the mighty Si'chon and Og and all their fighting men and taken their territories, Mosheh tells Yehoshua that this should be an encouragement to him, and to the Jewish People as a whole. For in the same way that HaShem had helped them overcome these two fearsome kings, so will he help them to overcome the inhabitants of the Land and their kings. There is no need to fear them, says Mosheh, for HaShem fights for us.

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