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 a 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 of his visit to Egypt and tells 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. It was in the time of Ezra, too, that +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 by 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 and its study.

This series of "**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 or an article appended which has some bearing on something in the Sidra.

The overall purpose of these **SIDRA OF THE WEEK** Sheets 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.

SIDRA OF THE WEEK: בְּרֵאשִׁית

1. *This week's Sidra is the first Sidra of the First Book of the Five Books of the Torah. It takes its name, בְּרֵאשִׁית, from its first word and at the same time gives its name to the whole Sefer Berayshis as do the Sidros שְׁמוֹת, וַיִּקְרָא, בְּמִדְבַּר and דְּבָרִים give their names to the other four חומשים. These חמשה חומשי תורה are the first section of the Written Torah. But they are unlike the other nineteen Books of TeNaCH (תְּנַ"ךְ) which all together make up the twenty-four Books of כְּתְבֵי קוֹדֶשׁ (Holy Scripture) for whereas the Books of the Prophets (נְבִיאִים) and the Writings (כְּתוּבִים) are the Word of G-d as recorded by the Divinely-inspired writers using their own words and idioms, the Five Books of the Torah are the very words that HaShem Himself dictated to Mosheh our Teacher when he was with Him on Mount Sinai, and which he wrote down exactly as directed by HaShem. This is the reason for the greater sanctity of these Five Books. The safeguards of the Halochoh (Jewish Law) which regulate and precisely prescribe its copying and further transmission to succeeding generations, ensure that in every detail — down to the point of the smallest letter — the Torah that we have in our possession today is exactly the same as that given by HaShem to Mosheh our Teacher on Mount Sinai. Nowhere in the whole world is there a valid Sefer Torah which differs from all the others in even one pertinent detail (and they are all handwritten) and never will there be another version. The Torah will never change: it has always been the same and it will be the same forever, for the Torah of HaShem is timeless.*

2. *This Torah is the medium that HaShem has chosen to instruct us, His Own People (and through us the whole of humankind in general) in the life and ideals that He intends in His goodness for us all. Thus, the Torah is the vehicle, as it were, of the Wisdom of HaShem as it applies to us in this world. Mankind, and especially the Jewish People, ignores this Torah of HaShem at its own peril in much the same way that it would be folly to ignore any manufacturer's instructions manual, only infinitely more so. To disregard HaShem's Torah brings misery and misfortune upon the world, whether it be upon the individual, upon society, or indeed upon the entire eco-system that HaShem has created.*

3. *Because the Torah is addressed to us and we are human beings, therefore, even though the Wisdom of HaShem is infinite as He is infinite, nevertheless HaShem Himself communicates His Infinite Wisdom to us through His Torah using finite human terms, and indeed speaks of Himself in such terms. Even such 'information' as concerns HaShem Himself is communicated to us in the human idiom: 'HaShem saw,' 'HaShem spoke,' 'HaShem came down,' etc., but this is only so that we should easier understand what He intends and we must take care not to be blind to the real message.*

4. *Although the Torah is HaShem's Book of Instruction to us (the word 'Torah' means 'instruction') it is not only a list of do's and don'ts: besides the laws themselves, the Torah consists of considerable stretches of narrative. But no part of the Torah is without its profound meaning, for HaShem dictated every single part of the Torah to Mosheh our Teacher that it should all be instructive to us, His People. There is not a single letter or even a single dot that is not intended by HaShem to teach us something.*

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It was then, there on Mount Sinai, when HaShem dictated to Mosheh the Written Torah, that He also taught Mosheh the inner meanings of all the words of His Torah with the deep and sublime ideas and insights behind every command to His People. This all is the 'Oral Torah,' without which the 'Written Torah' is often quite incomprehensible and even meaningless to us, and this 'Oral Torah' is part and parcel of the Torah of HaShem given to Mosheh on Mount Sinai.

5. *Our Chachommim, of blessed memory, the faithful Torah-teachers of the Jewish People, who embody within their teachings and within their very selves the spirit of the Torah as taught by Mosheh our Teacher, later revealed to us in greater detail how to understand the Torah so as to be more fully aware of its teachings, for the Torah is not always readily understood by those who are not sensitive to its message. For this reason, it is necessary to be guided by our Chachommim, of blessed memory, to understand the word of HaShem in the spirit that He intended. For without the explanations of our Chachommim, not only can one miss the lesson that the Torah teaches, but one can be gravely mistaken about what HaShem wants and indeed come to act in a way that is contrary to His wishes. It is because they are so sensitive and attuned to what the Torah intends to teach us that our Chachommim, of blessed memory, are able to discover so many things from each and every nuance of the language of the Torah. When our Chachommim 'darshen' a Possuk, they do not read **INTO** the Torah but rather they read **OUT** of the Torah what is already there. They rediscover, as it were, from the words and the very letters that HaShem dictated to Mosheh to write in His Torah what it was that He intended when He chose each particular word and each particular letter. (The words 'דָּרַשׁ' and 'דָּרָשָׁה' really mean 'to investigate what is' or 'to draw out from,' not 'to interpret' or 'read into.')*

6. *There are very few Mitzvos in the whole of the Sefer Berayshis, for the whole of Berayshis is narrative. The few Mitzvos that are given could have been commanded by HaShem in the course of any of the other four Chumoshim. Yet HaShem dictated the Chumash Berayshis to Mosheh for He desired to reveal to all how He created the world, so that all of mankind should be aware of Him and learn to live their lives according to His wishes, in happiness and true fulfilment. For this is the foundation of the whole of Creation: HaShem desires to bestow kindness and good upon His creatures.*

   By telling us clearly that He created the world, HaShem obviates the human reaction to the unknown, namely, speculation and conjecture — and the mistakes that result from such guesswork and imagination.

7. *Although the description of the beginning of the world and the events that occurred afterwards are for the instruction of all Mankind in general, the Torah itself is intended by HaShem to be addressed to His People in particular, and as the events are recounted (not always in chronological order) those which pertain to the People of HaShem are given more prominence and those which do not are allowed to 'fade out,' as it were. This is the pattern that the Torah follows till the emergence of that unique family whose ancestors chose to follow HaShem and who elected to be His People. He, in turn, chose them to be His message-bearers to all of Mankind and to be His witnesses, as HaShem says of them: 'Yisroel, in you I take pride!'*

8. Thus, the Torah starts out with the sweeping, grand statement that in the beginning, HaShem created — in one instant and *ex nihilo* — the heavens and the earth; in a word: everything. But the heavens, and their myriads of galaxies and all the celestial creations

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which are all created by HaShem, do not really concern us, and so no more is said about the creation of the heavens, and the Torah goes on to describe in greater detail how HaShem ordered the earth into existence to be the dwelling place of Mankind.

9. HaShem said: "Let there be light!" — and there was light. HaShem saw that the light was good and He then separated the light and the darkness and thus ordered that there shall be day and night. "And it was evening and it was morning: Day One."

10. HaShem then made the sky to be a separation between the waters above and the waters below. "And it was evening and it was morning: the second day."

11. HaShem then ordered that all the waters under the sky be gathered into oceans, so that the dry land became visible, and HaShem saw that it was good. Then He commanded the earth to bring forth all manner of plants and trees, each according to its kind, and HaShem saw that it was good. "And it was evening and it was morning: the third day."

12. HaShem then positioned in the sky the great luminaries, the sun and the moon together with the stars, to serve the earth and those that dwell on it: the sun to serve during the day and the moon and stars at night, and HaShem saw that it was good. "And it was evening and it was morning: the fourth day."

13. HaShem then commanded that the waters shall swarm with all the sea creatures, big and small, and He ordered that birds shall fly in the sky over the earth. And after He had thus created them all, in all their various kinds, HaShem saw that it was good. And He blessed them: the creatures of the sea shall multiply and fill the seas, and the birds shall increase over the face of the earth. "And it was evening and it was morning: the fifth day."

14. HaShem then commanded the earth to bring forth all kinds of living creatures: all animals, each according to its kind; and all insects, each according to its kind; and all wild animals, each according to its own kind. And so HaShem created all the various kinds of animals, stipulating that all the living creatures shall be according to their own kinds, and their own species, as with the plant life that He created, which also is all according to the separate and distinct kinds that He stipulated. And HaShem saw that it was good.

The creation by HaShem of all living creatures and plants, each strictly 'according to its kind,' would seem of not very great concern to human beings. Yet, since the Torah does tell of this special command, which is repeated emphatically each time, it is clear that there is a message to us, too. HaShem wishes that those to whom the Torah is addressed shall respect and maintain this Divine order. Indeed, these stipulations of keeping each kind separate do reappear in the Laws which forbid the mixing of plants, the crossing of animals and the wearing of Shaatnez, etc. — all typically חוקים.

Then HaShem created man and woman to be master of all the creatures that He had made, and HaShem blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the earth and be master over all the creatures that HaShem made. And HaShem saw all that He had made and it was very good. "And it was evening and it was morning: the sixth day."

15. And so were completed the heavens and the earth and everything in them. With the coming of the Seventh Day, all of HaShem's creation was finished. On the Seventh Day, HaShem rested from creating anything more, and He made this day to be holy, to be observed as the Shabbos. Indeed, it is by observing the Shabbos Day as HaShem's Day of

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Holiness as He has commanded us, that we acknowledge HaShem as the Creator of everything.

16. The Sidra then leaves off the account of the rest of Creation, for again this concerns us very little directly, and the Torah elaborates upon how HaShem made Man, the crown of Creation. Whereas all the other living things had been brought forth from the seas or the earth when HaShem so commanded, it is only Man who is made by HaShem Himself in His Image, with the faculties of intelligence and freedom of will. The Torah reports how then from the first man, called Oddom, after the earth ('adomoh') from which he is taken (and to which he returns) HaShem formed Chavvoh (meaning 'the mother of all living' — 'chai') the wife of Oddom. When HaShem called forth all the species of living creatures, each was originally made as two separate beings, male and female. Only in the case of Man, who has within him a Divine soul, did HaShem make the female out of a part of the male. For through this, there is built-in into the human couple a degree of harmony and togetherness that would not be possible in the coming together of two separate creations and HaShem wishes the human family unit to be founded on the unique closeness and bonds of harmony that can be experienced only by one 'divided' human, being brought together again.

17. These two human beings, the creation of HaShem's Own Hands, as it were, were the most perfect in every aspect, and their intellect, too, was vast. At the time of their creation they were as young people of twenty years of age, in their prime, with a unique perception of the whole world and everything in it. HaShem bestowed upon them the gifts of language and writing, and He communicated with them through prophecy. One thing, however, they lacked: that bank of knowledge that is the sum total of human experience. To fill this gap, HaShem allowed the first generations of Man to live exceedingly long lives so that they could experience more and achieve more.

18. These superlative humans HaShem placed in the Garden that He had prepared for them. There they were to strive to serve HaShem by living their lives and putting to use and guarding the world that HaShem had created that it should all be in accordance with His wishes and a fitting abode for the Divine Presence. So as to give them the opportunity to attain spiritual perfection by their own efforts and by the exercise of their own free will through obedience to the Will of HaShem, He commanded them the seven laws (later known as the Seven Noachide Laws) which were inherent in the command not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge. In this they failed when they succumbed to the temptations of the Serpent, and they were banished from the idyllic Garden of Eden. Henceforth, Man would have to work to sustain himself, and in the course of his now limited life-span he would have to contend with the trials and tribulations of life, that way to learn to subjugate his will to the Will of his Creator. Man had shown that he was not able to live a life of purely spiritual existence: the super-abundance of his material needs without any effort on his part had led him to think that he was not subject to the Will of his Creator. From now on, therefore, Man's goal of purely spiritual bliss will be attained not in this world but in a future world, after he has shown that he is deserving of it by living his life here on earth according to the Will of HaShem.

19. The account of the beginnings of Mankind continues with the birth of Kayyin and Hevel (and their twin sisters). As an expression of gratefulness to HaShem for everything, Hevel brought a *Korbon* of the best of his possessions to HaShem, intimating that He is to be served with everything that one has (Hevel's name signifies 'luxury and superfluity,'

'vanity') which HaShem accepted (as was evidenced by the fire which came down from heaven to consume it). Although Kayyin (his name means 'possession,' 'acquisition') had brought a *Korbon* before Hevel did, Kayyin's *Korbon* was inferior and was not well-intentioned, and so was not accepted by HaShem, for HaShem looks to the heart. Although HaShem explained this to Kayyin, he was jealous of his brother and incited him to an argument. In the ensuing fight, Kayyin killed his brother.

20. As punishment, HaShem condemned Kayyin to exile: the earth did not give of its produce even though he worked the soil, and he had to wander from place to place to seek his needs. However, because Kayyin recognized the gravity of his sin and said that he repented from his terrible crime, HaShem told him that no one was authorized to kill him in revenge for the death of the childless Hevel, and He bestowed upon him a sign that reminded all that Kayyin was not then to be killed.

    Kayyin had a son called Channoch, who, unlike his father, was not condemned to the life of a wanderer, and for him Kayyin built a town wherein he intended his son to be safe, and he called it Channoch.

21. Although each person had many children in the course of his very long life, the fact that the Torah tells us the names of particular people in those first generations of humanity is indicative of the general trend of Mankind at that time. Actually, the names listed are not only the personal names of the outstanding individuals of those times. In fact, the Torah reports them so that they should serve us more as indicators of the type of society, and of the kind of behaviour, that those individuals set as a trend and which was followed by the rest of humanity. Thus, the generation of Channoch (meaning 'training, developing self-power') was followed by that of Irrad ('wild, rebelling, resisting') which was then followed by the generation of Mechuyo'el ('to extinguish, to do away with, godliness'). This downward trend continued with the generation of Mesusho'el (who sought their safety in 'masses of people' and who considered themselves no more under the authority of HaShem) and the generation led by Lemech ('becoming more spiritually impoverished'). The named children of Lemech, the descendants of Kayyin, and their generations, continued in their rebellion against HaShem's ideal: Yovvol ('producer') who sought to turn Kayyin's sentence of banishment from the soil and a life of wandering into something gainful, to minimize the punishment of exile, became a nomad shepherd and wealthy merchant. His brother Yuval ('benefits from the produce of others') was the one who first developed musical instruments and the arts (without actually producing anything tangible himself) and thus did his generation seek to satisfy man's spiritual striving for things noble and godly with a superficial, merely aesthetic satisfaction. Another brother, Tuval-Kayyin ('creates production') became the first manufacturer of all kinds of metal implements (the murderer's tools, too!) and, by joining Kayyin's name to their own, the people of that time showed that they even admired his murderous deed, and Tuval-Kayyin's sister's name was Naamoh ('physical beauty'). Thus the families who descended from Kayyin were determined to go along the path leading away from HaShem and spiritual betterment.

22. Another son was born to Oddom and Chavvoh. Realizing where Mankind was heading, she called him Shayss ('foundation') and so expressed the wish that this son 'given by HaShem' shall usher-in a better age. But the son of Shayss was called Enosh ('suffering Mankind') for by then HaShem's Name was becoming forgotten. The people no longer sought to make connexion with HaShem through worshipping Him and through the

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mistaken notion that it was not permitted to approach HaShem directly, idolatry began. This generation of Enosh was followed by that of Kaynon ('materialism'). This spiritually empty generation was followed by a generation which tried to bring back the ideals of godliness, the generation of Mahalal'el ('praises to G-d') but it was a generation of praises to G-d only and empty of any real godliness, and thus led to the next generation of Yerred ('downward'). This was followed by the generation of Channoch II who was a great inventor of mechanical aids and at first was a leader of men. But spiritually he was unstable. He attempted to 'train and develop' himself to walk with HaShem, and, although his efforts were not consistent, he died a righteous man, but a recluse.

23. The people of the next generation, that of Mesushelach ('divorced from the masses') was no better than those that went before it, for which reason this righteous son of Channoch II had to withdraw from them, as had his father from his generation, and the next generation of Lemech II continued down the path of overall decline bringing the further 'spiritual impoverishment' of Mankind.

24. Lemech recognized this trend and named his son No'ach ('movement come to rest') and thus expressed the wish that Mankind cease to blunder downward but find its way again and 'be comforted' from its unhappiness. But the people themselves were not of that mind. Instead of utilizing their extraordinary longevity for the good, their lives had become one long degeneration of moral decay, and this great longevity, decreed HaShem, shall therefore be taken away from man. These first generations of Mankind, endowed with such great potential, used their lives only to pursue pleasures — no thought was given to the main purpose of life: the spiritual side of man and his duties to HaShem. Sadly, the greater their potential, the greater was its misuse. Indeed, the race of giants that lived then (and for some time later, too) with their supernatural abilities, were of the worst offenders against HaShem and against Mankind.

25. When HaShem saw that the children of man had chosen to use their free will only to do evil one to the other, He was greatly saddened. Despite the warnings and punishments that HaShem sent, including local floods and famine, the children of man continued to corrupt the world that HaShem had created and which He had seen was "very good." HaShem saw then how, despite the occasional awakening of conscience and some repentance, the human race was not capable any more to lift itself out of its moral decline. Instead of this world being a place which Mankind would make into a fitting abode for the Divine Presence, as HaShem had intended, it had become steeped in immorality and, worst of all, in violence. The whole world, led by the human race, had sunk so low that it would be unfair to expect any real improvement any more. HaShem then decided that He would eradicate from the face of the earth the human beings that were there, together with all those living creatures which shared man's environment and which also had become polluted and had corrupted their way.

26. But No'ach was righteous and HaShem was pleased with him.

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