



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

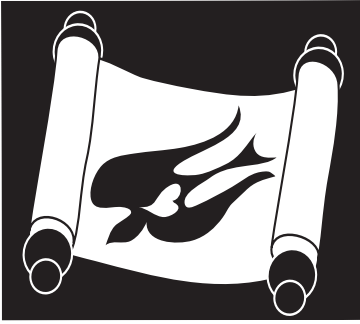
Why reflect on Torah?

“The church of Christ acknowledges that in God’s plan of salvation the beginnings of its faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets.” (NA, 4)

At the Second Vatican Council the Church gave powerful recognition to its origins, that is, the faith of ancient Israel: its scriptures, its traditions, its fidelity to the covenant. It affirmed the fact that the Jewish and Christian peoples are profoundly linked by a shared spiritual and biblical heritage.

How natural and beautiful, then, for us as Christians to turn to our Jewish brothers and sisters for insight and encouragement as we reflect together on the scriptures we share in common, especially those biblical texts which the Jews call (by its Hebrew name) ‘Torah’ and which we often call (by its Greek name) the ‘Pentateuch’: the first five books of the Bible. These texts were precious to Jesus who, as a faithful Jew, studied and quoted them. They are essential to the biblical foundations upon which the New Testament rests.

Since Vatican II, the Church has called Christians to a new appreciation of their Jewish ancestry-in-faith. This leaflet series, ***In the Light of Torah***, is one response to that call. It offers a means for Christians to reflect on Torah, enriched by the stories and interpretative insights of Judaism.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Exodus 35:1 - 40:38

Last week's Torah portion told the story of the Golden Calf. Now that this crisis has been resolved, the story returns to God's instructions for building the Tabernacle, i.e., the portable dwelling and site of worship which indicates the abiding presence of God amidst the Israelites.

Just before these instructions begin, two verses appear (35:2-3) where God reminds the people to keep holy the Sabbath. *What is the significance of the placing of these verses?* This question intrigued the Sages and commentators through the ages, right down to our own day. Let's listen to some of those voices now...

Tasting Torah

Six days shall work be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a holy Sabbath of solemn rest to the Lord; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. You shall kindle no fire in all your dwellings on the Sabbath day. (Ex. 35:2-3)

The command to keep holy the Sabbath has already been given (Ex. 20:10; 23:12; 31:15; 34:21). Why repeat it here? Remember that the people have sinned, repented and are ready to set themselves to a most sacred work: building the tabernacle. The tabernacle is the sign of God's enduring presence amidst the people. One could be forgiven for thinking that a work of such sacred importance would be more important than the inactivity of resting on the Sabbath. And this, say the rabbis and commentators, is exactly why the Sabbath commandment is repeated here: to insist that *even the work of building the tabernacle is not to interfere with the holiness of Sabbath rest.*

Touching Torah

Why is the Sabbath so important? Says Heschel:¹ One of the most distinguished words in the bible is the word *kadosh* ('holy'). What was the first holy object in the history of the world? A mountain? An altar? Rather, a *day*. "And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy" (Gen. 2:3). In the bible, holiness in *time* is what comes first. When we give this time to God, our priorities and lives find their proper order. Sabbath observance prevents us from becoming enslaved to the things of this world.

Deeper into Torah

In Jewish *midrash* (storytelling traditions) the people of Israel say to God: “The kings of the pagans have their palaces and altars, candlesticks and other royal trappings. Should not You, our King, possess the same royal trappings?” God answers: “Human beings require these trappings but I, who created and give light to the whole world, have no need. But, if *you* feel that you need them, by all means make them, but make them according to my designs.” Thus we read the instructions as given in scripture. ²

In other words, there is a distinction in the biblical text: at Israel’s insistence holiness was applied to a *place*; but the holiness of *time* was pronounced by God at the beginning of the world. It was Moses who sanctified the Tabernacle when it was completed (see Numbers 7:2), but it was God Almighty who sanctified the Sabbath.

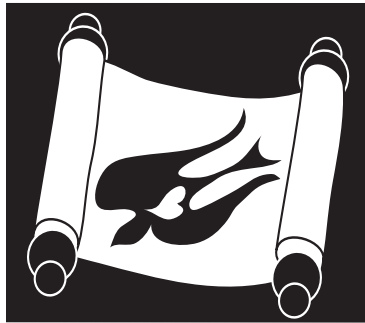
Doing Torah

Whoever does any work on [the Sabbath] shall be put to death. (Ex. 35:2).

What sounds harsh to our ears begins to make sense when we remember the ‘deathly’ effects of *not* heeding sabbath rest: burn-out, lack of energy, susceptibility to illness or accident, alienation from loved ones. We pass a death sentence on our own divinely-imagined identity when we fail to imitate God’s example of sanctifying rest.

* Discuss this statement and its implications.

* What else in this Torah portion captures your attention, your imagination?



Stories of Life & Love

A time for us

One couple, married over thirty years, has a regular ‘date’. Each Saturday night, bottle of wine in hand, they arrive at their local pizza-pasta restaurant where they are greeted warmly and ushered to ‘their’ table. There they review the week together...

This week: Show care for your marriage. Invite your spouse out on a date!

1. Abraham Heschel, 1907-1972: American rabbi and leading Jewish theologian of the 20th century.

2. A paraphrase of Midrash Aggada: Teruman. See Leibowitz, p.658.

Bibliography: Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (N.Y., 2007); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (N.Y., 1996).

Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.

5 Sabbatical Moments

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

For observant Jews, the Sabbath is a day set apart. At sundown on Friday work ceases, whether it's finished or not. A powerful message is communicated: nothing we can 'do' is more important than our relationship with God. In what ways can this witness influence our Christian lives?



Holy. In planning your year (or day), go through the diary and mark off sacred dates or relational moments (e.g. Ash Wed; 20th wedding anniversary) as conscientiously as you would important work commitments.



Loving. During mealtime conversation today, focus on praising each other, avoiding all negativity, even as a joke. If it helps, use a table-topic: 'One beautiful quality God has given you is your...'



Peaceful. Parents, ask the kids to warn you when you are becoming too tired and irritable to be any fun. They are great barometers of marital peace, or the lack of! Find an antidote to restore balance.



Together. At Mass, in the silence after communion, pray for the grace of unity ('That all may be one' Jn 17:21), conscious of the influence your love can have on the people around you.



Delightful. Life's not meant to be all hard work! Pray for the gift of 'holy fun': that your love (for family, friends...) will be rich in moments of spontaneity, delightful surprises, simple and wholesome pleasures.

In the Light of Torah is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Further reading: www.batkol.info. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.

