

5 Ways to ponder God's Word

Bible reflection tips

God's Word is a living word. A stirring word. A word that speaks heart to heart. A love letter. A voice that comes to us through the People of God, and draws us ever more intimately into communion with God and one another. Both Christians and Jews share this lively engagement with Scripture.



Remember. Before you begin your Torah reflection, hold your bible lovingly in your hands, and remember the generations of believers who have preserved and passed down this sacred text.



Read. Above all, read the text! The Book of Leviticus may at first appear intimidating. We may be tempted to skip the text and go straight to the commentators. Always read the bible passage for yourself.



Persist. Every relationship requires effort and patience. It's the same with our relationship with the Divine Word. Be persistent in your bible reading. Even the 'trying' brings blessings.



Wrestle. Undertake a robust engagement with the sacred text. Like the Sages of old, probe it, question it, wrestle with puzzling or disturbing aspects. Think. Study. Fire up your reflections with prayer.



Pair up. Try the ancient method of *havrutah*, i.e., share scripture with one or two *friends* (*haverim* in Hebrew). 'Iron sharpens iron' (Prov. 27:17). Just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so two will sharpen each other's minds by discussion of a sacred text.



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

There are many good reasons for Christians to draw close to Jews in the study of Torah. (Torah, in its specific sense, refers to the first five books of the Bible.) Today the Church urges its members to treasure the Judaic roots of Christianity and to draw inspiration from Jewish approaches to Scripture.

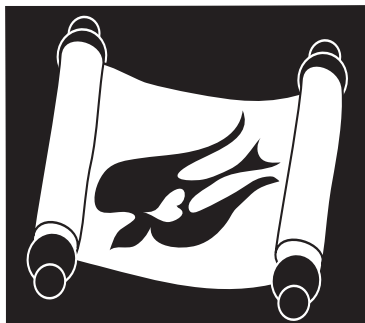
Such efforts are important in healing a centuries-old conflict between Christians and Jews; a history that has contributed to anti-Semitic climates in the world, at times with horrifying consequences. In recent weeks Jews celebrated *Yom Hashoah*, Holocaust Remembrance Day. Earlier this year, Benedict XVI urged that the memory of the Holocaust remain as a "warning to us for the future, and a summons to strive for reconciliation."

"To remember is to do everything in our power to prevent any recurrence of such a catastrophe within the human family by building bridges of lasting friendship," said the Pope. *"It is my fervent prayer that the memory of this appalling crime will strengthen our determination to heal the wounds that for too long have sullied relations between Christians and Jews. It is my heartfelt desire that the friendship we now enjoy will grow ever stronger..."* (12.2.09 Rome)

In some small way, may this series **Light of Torah**—which introduces Christian parishes to the riches of Jewish biblical insights and an appreciation of our shared Scriptures—contribute to a 'lasting friendship.'

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.





Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 16:1 - 20:27

What does it mean to be holy as God is holy; to live our earthly lives in partnership with the divine? Today's Torah portion shows Israel establishing a code of conduct that makes it 'different' in belief and custom to the surrounding cultures. Of particular interest to us in this discussion are the verses (18:1-5) that precede a long list of rules forbidding incest.

- (1) Rashi: revered medieval Torah scholar
(2) Be'er Yitzhak and Meshekh Hokhmah: 19th C. commentators, quoted in Leibowitz, 244.
(3) Leibowitz, 245.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra, Vol. 1* (Jerusalem, 1993); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 3* (NY: Mesorah, 1999); Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.

Tasting Torah

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the Land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. (Lev. 18:1-3)

These verses mark a change in style; not just rhythmically, but in this sense: Here Moses speaks very directly in the Lord's name, "I am the Lord," as distinct from the pattern in previous Leviticus chapters, "This is what the Lord has said."

Touching Torah

"I am the Lord your God." This phrase is repeated (18:2,4). Rashi (1) draws a connection between this and the verses that open the Ten Commandments where God also says, "I am the Lord your God." Says Rashi, the Lord is saying: *Know who is speaking to you! It is I the Lord your God! At Mt Sinai you accepted my sovereignty, now accept my rules of conduct.*

To Be'er Yitzhak, "I am the Lord your God" recalls the 'powerful king' whose closeness to His people calls for complete obedience. To Meshekh Hokhmah the address is meant for each individual for personal benefit. God who created us knows our bodies and desires, and therefore when we follow God's rules we live in harmony with the way we were designed; we find body-spirit harmony. These are two complementary views, one emphasizing God as Creator, the other ourselves as created. (2)

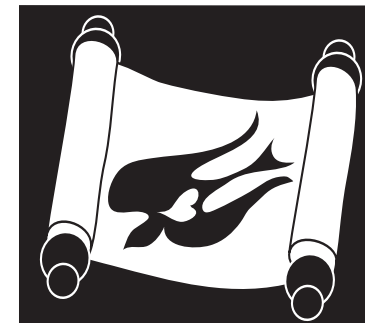
Deeper into Torah

Why does the text specifically warn against Egyptian and Canaanite customs? Surely their practices were no worse than other pagan nations. Why single them out?

Some traditional opinions are forthright in saying that in fact the conduct of these nations was exceptionally corrupt. Such a view is better understood if we recall that Egypt and Canaan are like 'bookends' to the Israelites' desert passage. When enslaved in Egypt, they had witnessed a sophisticated society. The people they would meet upon arriving at the land of Canaan were likewise used to 'fine cities,' 'houses filled with all sorts of goods,' 'vineyards and olive groves' (Deut. 6:10-11). After years of wandering, one can imagine the Israelites being attracted to this culture. Sums up Leibowitz: "As we know, material progress does not necessarily spell moral advancement. Hence the Torah warns us, at the beginning of the chapter on forbidden relations, not to be dazzled by the external glitter of technological progress and lose sight of moral standards."⁽³⁾ After all, notes Be'er Yitzhak, if you imitate the Egyptians what was the point of God liberating you from Egypt?

Doing Torah

Sometimes we find ourselves closer to God when we are crying out in our neediness and poverty than when we feel secure in our success and riches. *Discuss.* In your own life, have you ever experienced the dilemma of the Israelites as they left one form of slavery only to be tempted by another?



Faith & Life

"It was after getting over the shock of losing my job that I began to appreciate the hidden grace in my new situation. Being unemployed I was now in the house when the kids arrived home from school. And I was able to see them off in the morning. I began to re-evaluate my approach to parenting. I can see now that I had previously been caught in a cycle of professional duty that drew me away from my kids.

"My circumstances were forced upon me, but with the love and support of family and friends we turned a potentially devastating situation into a blessed opportunity to draw closer as a family.

"Now I am employed again. Thankfully! But I am aware of a lurking danger of falling back into old habits. I hope and pray that I will never again become enslaved to my job."