

5 Divine Blessings

Try this Torah exercise at a meal with family/friends: Divide up between table guests the Divine Blessings in Lev. 26:3-13. Have someone introduce this section of the Torah portion, then read it aloud. Next, invite each person to share a reflection, a question, or a prayer relating to 'their' blessing, especially in terms of the peoples and lands of our times. Finish by praying together the Lord's Prayer.



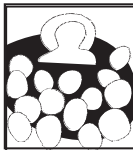
1. Fruitfulness of the Land (Lev. 26:3-5)

What does the gift of rain mean to you? Are you in touch with agricultural settings, or are you a city-dweller? Which lands are in drought, or flood, and need of our prayers?



2. Peace, shalom (Lev. 26:6)

Our deepest human longing! How is peace expressed, in the heart, the family, the neighborhood, the nation, the world...? For whom do I want the blessing of peace at this time?



3. Victory over enemies (Lev. 26:7-8)

What is this term 'enemy' to you? A person, a policy, an attitude, a behavioral issue? When Jesus taught us to 'Love your enemies,' how might he have interpreted this divine blessing from Torah?



4. Flourishing of the nation (Lev. 26:9-10)

What does it mean for a family, a community, a nation to 'flourish'? What might be its fruits: children, grandchildren, loving values, knowledge, life-skills, resilience? What of the gifts of the Spirit?



5. Assurance of the Divine Presence (Lev. 26:11-13)

How do you know that God is with you? Did you always know this? Do you know it now? What are the signs of the Divine Presence? Who taught you to recognize them?



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"Whoever does not know the Scriptures does not know the power of God nor his wisdom. Ignoring the Scriptures means ignoring Christ," said Pope Benedict XVI, citing St. Jerome, in his opening address to the 2008 Synod of Bishops (5 Oct 2008).

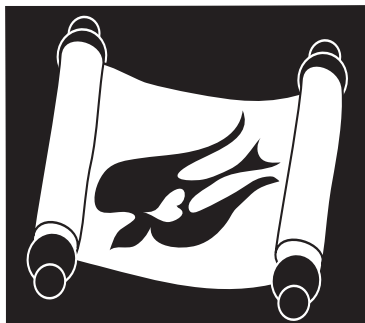
In today's climate of Jewish-Christian relations, we might extend this statement: *Whoever does not know the Scriptures as the gift of Jewish faith and theology, does not know the power of God nor his wisdom. Ignoring the Jewishness of the Scriptures means ignoring the Jewishness of Jesus and the people of the covenant who shaped his existence.*

Tragically, for most of its history, the Church community has done just that: ignored the Jewishness of Jesus and set itself in conflict with Judaism. What a welcome, Spirit-led transformation occurred last century through the Second Vatican Council! There, the Church, at its highest level of teaching authority, rejected anti-Semitism as the antithesis of the Gospel and positively embraced the special relationship that Christians share with the Jewish people: their common patrimony, their shared Scriptures, their close spiritual ties (see *Nostra Aetate*, 4).

This series *In the Light of Torah* seeks to continue this transformation among grassroots Christian audiences by sharing Jewish Torah insights. 'Torah' refers to the first five books of the Bible, those sacred texts held dear and foundational by both faiths.

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 25:1 - 27:34

Today's Torah readings bring us to the end of the Book of Leviticus. Our focus for discussion is the opening verses of a series of blessings found in Lev. 26:3-13. The blessings are sometimes categorized as follows: 1) fruitfulness of the land; 2) peace; 3) victory over enemies; 4) the flourishing of the nation; 5) assurance of the Divine Presence.

(1) Rashi: French Torah scholar (1040-1105); regarded as the 'prince' of Jewish bible commentators.

Today's "Light of Torah" is based on *Parashat Behukotai* commentary by Jack Driscoll, cfc, of Bat Kol Institute, Jerusalem. Other works consulted: *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 3* (NY: Mesorah, 1999).

Tasting Torah

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. (Lev. 26:3-4; NRSV)

Most versions translate the verb as 'follow.' However the Hebrew verb is 'walk.' What does this suggest: to walk in the Lord's ways? Is 'walking' in Torah's commandments a more active, alert, responsive set of choices than 'following'?

Touching Torah

Let's hear from Rashi (1) and his Torah sources: When we read "*If you follow my statutes,*" we might think that this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments. However, in the very next breath the Scripture says, "*and observe my commandments.*" Since the command to observe, or fulfil, the commandments is already stated, what could be the meaning of "*If you follow my statutes*"? Interprets Rashi: It means that one must *toil* (labour, work) in the study of Torah. For since the Hebrew word for 'follow' literally means 'walk,' then this is a strenuous activity. Further, you shall toil in the study of Torah *in order* to observe and fulfill the commandments.

The Sfat Emet, a great 19th century Chassidic rabbi, says this toiling goes beyond the simple acquisition of Torah wisdom. Walking in God's laws means to become so connected to the will of God that the presence of the Almighty becomes manifest on earth. *Thy Kingdom come.*

Deeper into Torah

The first divine gift of promise for this walking/toiling/laboring is rain at the proper time. Does this surprise you? Had you thought it might be some other reward? Why is rain the first benefit mentioned, even before peace in the land (26.6)? And why are rains promised 'in their season'?

The Sages note that rains are essential to the fruitfulness of the land, allowing for growth of crops, the replenishment of waterways, and contributing to the hygiene and health of human beings. In the view of Ramban (medieval Torah commentator), so fundamental is this blessing that it is worthy of first mention.

Further, the rains are promised, not just at any time, but at those times when they will bring their benefits without unduly interfering with the lifestyle of people (e.g., at harvest time). Rashi is very specific: The rain is promised at a time when people do not usually go outside, such as on the nights of the Sabbath!

Doing Torah

'Toiling, laboring, walking...' what meaning do these terms hold for me as I seek to follow the Lord's ways? What kind of effort (walk/toil/labor) am I making to grasp and live the ways of God?

Notice how the Gospels use 'work' images such as going into the vineyard to describe one's relationship to the Kingdom of God.

Does the work/effort of discipleship sometimes seem 'too much'? What words of encouragement can you give each other?



Walk with me

A hospital chaplain says:

"Standing at the nurses station, I noticed a doctor speaking on the telephone to a family whose father lay in the cardiac unit in a serious condition. What caught my attention was the intensity with which the doctor spoke. Deep compassion filled her voice and marked her body language. Anyone would think it was her own father whose life was at risk. I am often impressed by the hospital staff here. Not only are they professionally competent, they seem to have a gift for 'walking with' patients in their suffering."