

5 Memorable Places

The Jewish sages saw the recording of the marches of the Israelites as evidence of God's care for his people in the wilderness. Sketch a time-line listing the important places where you have dwelt or visited in your life. Can you see God's hand at work as you retrace these journeys and 'stopovers'?



A place of life. Recall a place where you loved and labored to bring life into the world. Perhaps physically. Perhaps spiritually. Perhaps artistically.



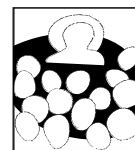
A place of struggle. Recall a place where you struggled with a challenging task. A building site. A place of study. A place where you faced conflict, illness, setback, disappointment.



A place of healing. Recall a place where you 'paused' in your life to seek healing, rest, comfort, hope, refueling, refreshment. A hospital. A retreat house. A holiday house. The home of a friend.



A place of joy. Recall a place where you laughed, partied, sang, celebrated and enjoyed special times. At this place did you praise God? Make new friends? Organize community functions?



A place of learning. Recall a place where you were taught something that shaped your life's direction. A place of formation. A classroom. A sporting field. A family home. A place where values were instilled, ideas formed, decisions were influenced.



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Torah, in its specific sense, refers to the first five books of the Bible. These ancient books, the fruit of the religious experience of the Jewish people, are sacred and foundational texts for Jews and Christians alike.

Christianity is rooted in Judaism as a plant is rooted in the earth; it cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted. This weekly leaflet series, *In the Light of Torah*, offers a means for so called 'ordinary' Christians to read the Torah in such a way as to better appreciate the Jewish roots of their faith. Each leaflet offers brief insights drawing on Jewish sources, plus suggestions for how these insights can enrich Christian faith and practice, especially in the home and everyday life. One of the joys of this approach is that it vivifies Old Testament passages previously dismissed by Christians as too convoluted, repetitious or tedious to bother with! The Torah reflection in today's leaflet is a good example.

Since the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has publicly embraced the value of Jewish insights for Christian scripture study. "Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion." (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1995.) May this **Light of Torah** series bring pearls of wisdom closer to the heart of Christians.

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:

Numbers 30:2 - 36:13

This week's Torah portion closes the Book of Numbers. Our focus here is Num.33 which reviews the travels of the Israelites from their departure from Egypt to the steppes of Moab where they stand poised to enter the Promised Land. Commentators have long been fascinated by the detailed itinerary and apparent tedium of this text. What wells of refreshment and delights for the soul are to be found hidden in the apparent 'dryness' of such a passage?

(1) *Midrash Tanchuma*, 3. Quoted in Rashi's commentary.

(2) *Midrash Rabbah*, xxiii, 4.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (NY, 2008); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers Vol.2* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1993); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001).

Tasting Torah

"These were the marches of the Israelites..." Thus begins Numbers 33. With the Sages of old, be patient as you read this long, repetitious passage. Relax. Read aloud, perhaps sharing the reading with a friend. Listen to the rhythm. Allow it 'inside' you, drawing you into the march. Observe how the text speaks to you through the litany of place names.

Touching Torah

Said one parishioner who read this text:

"As I read along I found myself entering into the rhythm of the 'march' ... a kind of contemplative experience, like saying the rosary. This was an epic journey—to the Promised Land, no less—yet comprised of lots of little journeys. Isn't so much of life like that? I have noble goals—to raise a family, to accomplish important things at work—yet living those goals involves lots of small, ordinary, tedious steps: *I woke up at 6 o'clock, and changed the baby's diaper. After I changed the baby's diaper I organized the kids for school. When the kids left for school, I drove to the shopping centre. There were no parking spaces left at the shopping centre. After leaving the shopping centre, I drove on to work...* Tedious? Perhaps. But all very real in the fabric of life, and there is no greater project than life itself!"

And you? What reflections surfaced in your reading of the text? Did the rhythm of the Israelites' march resonate with the rhythms of your life?

Deeper into Torah

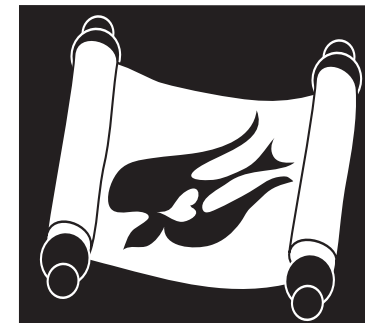
Torah commentators who ponder this portion often note the value of reviewing our lives. In order to go forward we must have a clear idea of where we have come from and how life's events have shaped us. Our future depends on a well-understood past.

In the *midrash* (Jewish storytelling traditions) there is a poignant story about a king with an ill son who takes him to a distant place to be cured. On the return journey, the father recounts for his son each stage of their first journey. "Here we slept. Here we felt cold. Here you had a headache, etc."⁽¹⁾ Sometimes we only appreciate a stage of life with the help of someone who loves us and who has journeyed with us.

In another *midrash* ⁽²⁾ the desert places are seen to be holy because they welcomed the Israelites, and would one day be rewarded by God by becoming fertile and inhabited. Perhaps this story serves to remind us of places that have been blessed by our presence. Can we see this? Can we name such places and even identify some of the fruits already visible?

Doing Torah

- Why do you think the Torah mentions that at each destination the Israelites both 'journeyed' and 'encamped' there. What is the significance of 'arrivals' and 'departures'?
- Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? What was special for you about that journey?



Faith & Life

"I had taken the bus into town every week for twelve years; yet the day my six year old niece rode with me I saw the entire route for the first time. From start to finish she treated me to a steady stream of observations: 'What's that sign say?' 'Look at that big building over there...' 'Hey let's count the all the people on the bus with red hair...' 'I think God's getting the clouds ready to rain...' and so on."

Try it: *trace a familiar journey (a walk, a bus ride) and take in the sights and sounds with new eyes, ears and an open heart. What do you 'see' that previously escaped your attention and appreciation?*