



5 sayings

How does one grow in a sense of awe, reverence, fear of the Lord? The following gems of Jewish wisdom are thought-provoking on this topic. They are taken from a section of the Mishnah known as *Pirke Avot* ['Sayings of the Fathers'] which is traditionally studied in Jewish homes between the Jewish festivals of Passover and Sukkot.

1. "On three things the world stands; on the Torah, and on serving God, and on the bestowal of Kindnesses." (1:2)

2. "Beautiful is the study of Torah with the way of the world, for the toil of them both causes sin to be forgotten. Ultimately, all Torah study that is not accompanied with work is destined to cease and to cause sin." (2:2)

3. "Reflect upon three things and you will not come to the hands of transgression. Know from where you came, where you are going, and

before whom you are destined to give a judgement and accounting." (3:1)

4. "Who is wise? The one who learns from every person; for it is said, *From all my teachers I gained understanding* (Ps. 119: 99)." (4:1)

5. "Seek not greatness for yourself, and desire not honor. Practise more than you learn. And lust not for the table of kings, for your table is greater than their table..." (6:5)

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 7:12—11:25

Eikev: 'If you do'
(lit. 'on the heel of')

Why reflect on Torah?

At a meeting in Rome in 1982, Pope John Paul II urged bishops and other church leaders to study the relationship between the Church and Judaism, and to take special care with the way Judaism is presented in Catholic teaching:

'We should aim, in this field, that Catholic teaching at its different levels, in catechesis to children and young people, presents Jews and Judaism, not only in an honest and objective manner, free from prejudices and without any offences, but also with full awareness of the heritage common [to Jews and Christians].' (6.3.82)

The Pope's statement was both a warning against antisemitic attitudes and a positive embrace of the 'great spiritual patrimony' and 'spiritual bonds' linking Jews and Christians (see *Nostra Aetate*, 4), urging that these bonds permeate the teaching of the Christian faith.

This leaflet series *Light of Torah* takes up this call. By reflecting on the Torah (first five books of the bible) with Jewish commentators, Christian readers become more appreciative of these scriptures as the fruit of Jewish faith and the foundation of the Gospels.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 7:12—11:25

In this week's Torah portion Moses continues to prepare the Israelites for entry into the promised land.

After a lengthy recollection of the people's poor behavior during their desert trek (Deut.9; 10:1-11), Moses seems to turn a fresh page and look to the future, beginning with the words "So now, O Israel..." (10:12).

What follows (10:12-13) includes the words of the *Shema* which we have heard elsewhere in the Torah (6:5 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart...'). However a subtlety in the wording of our text has the sages bothered. Join them in trying to solve a biblical puzzle.

Tasting Torah

*"So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? **Only** to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees which I am commanding you today, for your own well-being"* (Deut. 10:12-13).

That Moses says "only" (to fear/reverence the Lord) posed a difficulty for the sages. Is Moses suggesting that God is asking for something minor? Yet holy awe or 'fear of the Lord' is a major matter indeed! Say some commentators, this passage sums up the essence of the whole Torah. Why would Moses appear to undervalue its weight? Enter the conversation with the rabbis...

Touching Torah

Perhaps you are thinking that for *Moses*, who is advanced in faith and virtue, fear of the Lord comes naturally and seems to be a simple matter. This is one rabbinic opinion. Yet others wonder why Moses would assume it to be a simple matter for *everyone else*.

Nahmanides¹ offers the explanation that "only" infers that what God asks of human beings is ultimately for their own happiness and wellbeing. The difficulties of reverencing God are a small price compared to the benefits. Like a parent offering guidance to a reluctant child, we can hear Moses saying "I'm *only* saying this for your own good!"

Depthing Torah

A different response comes from Joseph Albo, a Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages. Albo's insight is that this text refers to the way in which people grow into a life of holding God in awe. No one can reach the spiritual heights of being a truly God-fearing person easily or immediately. To even contemplate the 'requirement' of our quoted passage is daunting! But fortunately God shows us a way to succeed; God gives us a way to follow: small daily acts of love which, over time, allow our entire lives to become infused with holy awe. We might say that God doesn't ask for sudden saintliness; God asks "*only*" that we commit ourselves to the unspectacular daily steps of living the values and teachings of our faith community. In Albo's words:

*"The meaning of the passage is therefore this: Now, Israel, consider the wonderful kindness of God. What does he ask of you? God does not ask anything that is hard to acquire. He asks merely the performance of the commandments of the Torah, because the quality of fear [awe] through which one may obtain human perfection follows from the performance of the commandments of the Torah."*²

Doing Torah

Discuss the interpretations of the sages and your own thoughts on this text. Attend to the context, what goes before and after verses 12-13. Reflect on your experience of awe/reverence/ fear of the Lord.



Faith & Life

"Everything is in the hands of heaven, except fear of heaven" (Berachot 33b).

The sages derive this famous Talmudic saying from Deut. 10:12. Essentially it is a statement about freewill. God is the creator and author of our lives, however we can't be forced to respond. The fundamental choice left to each person is whether or not he/she will acknowledge ('fear') God's presence and follow God's ways.

Reflect on a time in your life when you consciously and deliberately made a choice for God.

1. Also known as Ramban. His full name: Rabbi Moshe Ben Nahman (1194-1270).

2. See Leibowitz, 101-102.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); Munk, *The Call of the Torah: Devarim* (NY, 1995). Scripture: *NRSV*.