



5 reflections

Our reading of Torah (overleaf) has led us to focus on the super-abundance of God's blessings. And yet, in the midst of the text which calls for feasting and celebration, our eye is drawn to a sobering verse commanding the Israelites to eat the 'bread of affliction' or 'bread of distress.' Ponder this reference in Deuteronomy 16:3. What is the relevance and power of this verse, placed as it is amidst the description of Israel's festivals? Five thoughts follow.

1. According to the great medieval Torah commentator Rashi, the unleavened bread eaten at Passover is called the 'bread of affliction' for it serves to remind the Israelites that they were once slaves in Egypt.
2. The unleavened bread eaten at Passover symbolizes key moments in the Exodus story: the night of the first Passover meal as well as the haste with which the Israelites departed Egypt the following morning.
3. In contemporary Jewish Passover celebrations, the 'bread of affliction' symbolizes a continuing challenge for the human predicament: to depart from patterns of slavery and to embrace the true freedom and justice which the Lord desires for his people.
4. Think about it: Unless we remember the taste of slavery, can we truly feast on our freedom? Unless we 'taste' suffering in the world, will we be moved to strive for justice?
5. In your own family/community, in what ways do your festivities retain an appropriate place for sober recollection of past and present struggles? What happens to our righteous ideals when we forget the realities of human suffering?



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 11:26—16:17

Re'eh: 'see'

Why reflect on Torah?

"Indeed, the Church draws its sustenance from the root of that good olive tree, the people of Israel, onto which have been grafted the wild olive branches of the Gentiles. From the earliest days of Christianity, our identity and every aspect of our life and worship have been intimately bound up with the ancient religion of our fathers in faith."

— Benedict XVI 12.2.09 Rome

In his statement Pope Benedict was drawing on key ideas expressed in scripture and in the Vatican II document *Nostra Aetate* concerning the Church's relationship with the Jewish people. How can we understand ourselves as a Christian people, without appreciating the people from whom we came, whose heroic fidelity over the centuries brought forth the Hebrew Scriptures, Mary, Jesus, the apostles and early disciples, indeed the Christian church itself, which was so very Jewish at the time of its birth.

For all these reasons and more, we turn as Christians to appreciate Torah with the help of traditional Jewish methods of biblical study. To this end, *Light of Torah* is a practical tool for parish audiences.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 11:26—16:17

At first glance today's Torah portion could appear to be a formidable list of laws and instructions, perhaps oppressive, even violent, in parts (e.g., the death penalty for idolatry in 13:1-19). This is Moses' last chance to impress upon the Israelites their responsibilities as the chosen people of God before entering the promised land. They have a choice: listen to God's teachings and be blessed, or turn away from God and be cursed (11:26).

Tasting Torah

"Together with your households, you shall feast there before the Lord your God, happy in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you" (12:7).

"And you shall feast there, in the presence of the Lord your God, and rejoice with your household" (14:26).

"You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God...for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy" (16:15).

Did you notice these verses in today's reading? What insights emerged as you pondered them?

Touching Torah

The verses quoted above are commands to gather the family for a joyous feast. How often do we think of loyalty to God in terms of feasting? Elsewhere, in the context of ritual prescriptions, the Israelites are commanded to "eat to your heart's content" (12:21), to "spend the money on anything you want—cattle, sheep, wine or other intoxicant, or anything you may desire" (14:26), and to hold annual festivals (16:1-17) while God provides secure dwellings (12:10), enlargement of their territory (12:20), and countless blessings.

Perhaps we are being reminded that being in a covenantal relationship with God is not all hard work! Yes, God is unafraid to make demands of his people. But God also provides, has the people's interests at heart, and some of the divine demands are actually delightful!

Depthing Torah

"For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; the Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people" (14:2).

God asks much of his people, but only because his people are treasured beyond belief, chosen with divine passion from among all peoples, and because such demands bring about a just world where the stranger, the orphan and the widow find safety (cf. 16:11).

Our Torah portion invites us to dwell on God's abundant blessings. Yes, the consequences of rejecting God are dire, but the blessings of cleaving to God are lifegiving beyond measure. We are tempted to disbelieve this, for life is difficult, sometimes brutal. Bad things happen to good people; evil can seem to prevail. Even religion can be experienced as a weapon of oppression, or reduced to loveless 'duty.' Yet another testimony prevails through generations of those who live by God's Word: God's blessings are real. They can be celebrated with smiles and laughter, music and dancing, feasting and lovemaking, prayer and passion. Thus Judaism speaks of 'Simchat Torah', 'the joy of Torah,' and Christianity speaks of the 'gospel,' 'good news.'

Doing Torah

Authentic religiosity includes joy. Discuss. *Happy the people the Lord has chosen to be his own* (Psalm 33:1). Ponder this verse throughout your day. What is it like to be 'chosen'?



From the midrash

In pondering chapter 16 of Deuteronomy the sages ask: why does the Torah twice command that we rejoice during the festival of Sukkot (16:11,14) but omits this command with regard to the festival of Passover?

An explanation offered in the midrashic collection *Yalkut Shimoni*: "On account of the fact that [during the exodus] the Egyptians died."

The midrash immediately cites the Book of Proverbs (24:17): "*If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice.*"

(See Leibowitz, 151-2)

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2003); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: *NJPS*.