



5 ways healing has begun

After a long history of anti-Jewish stances, the Second Vatican Council set a dramatically new course for the church's relationship with the Jewish people. Much remains to be done in healing the wounds of the centuries, yet we can be encouraged by the positive steps that have begun in our lifetime and look for ways to further them in our own locality and sphere of influence.

1. Education

Today, changes are being made to school curriculums and preaching resources to better reflect the vision of *Nostra Aetate*, correcting the anti-Jewish 'teaching of contempt' that was previously rife in Christian catechesis.

2. Sorry

In an exemplary gesture during the year 2000, Pope John Paul II prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and asked forgiveness for the history of sinful behavior towards the Jews by members of the church.

3. Interfaith

Today, interfaith gatherings are an increasingly familiar part of the church landscape.

4. Bible

Among Christians today there is a growing interest in the Hebrew scriptures, in Torah study and Jewish scholarship.

5. Theology

Through engagement with Judaism, Christian theologians are being led to refreshingly new questions and insights into Christian beliefs and practices.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"Indeed the church reproves every form of persecution against whomsoever it may be directed... It deplores all hatreds, persecutions, displays of antisemitism directed against the Jews at any time or from any source." (Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, 4)

Author's note: Preparation of this week's Torah leaflet was confronting for me as a Christian. As I read how the Jewish sages through the centuries had reflected on the question of how to distinguish between true and false prophets, commentary after commentary reflected the Jewish experience of persecution by Christians. For instance, what were the rabbis of the Middle Ages to make of the wonder-worker/prophet who was the founder of Christianity, when the Jewish people were undergoing humiliation and brutality at the hands of Christianity's adherents? This dark history is not well known in Christian parishes, but painfully known in Jewish communities.

Vatican II represents a critical step on the road to Jewish-Christian reconciliation. May *Light of Torah*, as a tool of biblical awareness, do its part in drawing Christian parishioners to a deeper appreciation of the Jewish people, their faith, scriptures and traditions.



Deuteronomy 11:26—16:17

R'eih: 'see'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 11:26—16:17

This week's Torah portion covers numerous laws concerning worship, festivals, moral behavior and civil norms. They are all part of Moses' concern to prepare the people for entry into the promised land. Many of the texts sound familiar... we have heard them in other parts of the Torah. Of particular interest today is a text not found elsewhere: how to discern authentic prophecy.

Tasting Torah

"If prophets or those who divine by dreams appear among you and promise you omens or portents, and the omens or the portents declared by them take place, and they say 'let us follow other gods' (whom you have not known) 'and let us serve them,' you must not heed the words of those prophets..." (Deut. 13:1-2).

How do you distinguish a true prophet from a false one? This is the subject dealt with in Deut. 13:1-5.¹ The sages, and the Torah itself, acknowledge that there is no simple test. Discernment can be difficult. On occasions false prophets can make correct predictions and true prophets can be wide of the mark; and both can be associated with miraculous signs and wonders. How would you enter this conversation? Read Deut. 13:1-5 and discuss with a friend.

Touching Torah

The text offers an essential guideline: listen to the foundational truths of your religious tradition! Do you recognize the God to whom the prophet is drawing you? Is it *"the Lord your God—who brought you out from the land of Egypt and redeemed you from the house of slavery"* (v.5)? Or is the so-called prophet leading you away, to entrapment in the empty promises of 'other gods'? Our text takes us to the heart of the Torah: a call to choose the one, true living God over the worship of idols.

Depthing Torah

The sages also discuss the finer points of the matter. For instance, how is it that a false prophet can perform signs and wonders in the first place? The Talmud contains a discussion of this. Says Rabbi Yose, the Lord grants some powers to false prophets but these are meant to test one's adherence to the Lord, *"to know whether you indeed love the Lord your God with your whole heart and soul"* (v.3). Rabbi Akiva disagrees: the Lord would never grant wonder-worker gifts to an idol worshipper, therefore the prophet in question must have once been authentic but later gone astray.

Speaking centuries later, Maimonides (12th c.) concurs with Rabbi Yose: the false prophet has special powers (but through sorcery) that 'test' Israel's faithfulness, and this fidelity offers a vital witness to the nations. The test does not prove anything to God (who knows all), but it does prove to outsiders that even spectacular spiritual powers cannot attract the Jewish people to foreign gods. From age to age, through every challenge and suffering, they 'hold fast' (v.4) to the God of their ancestors.

Doing Torah

The sages are united in the view that material success and popularity are inadequate criteria for judging the authenticity of a prophet. Do you agree? Name some of the 'other gods' of your own culture, noting their appeal and their falsity. Who are their 'prophets'? How do you stay focused on what is right and true?



Faith and Life

"I am my own work of art," said the pop star of international fame to the TV journalist.

The very next morning was a Sunday. I was at Mass and a line from scripture caught my attention: *"We are God's work of art"* (Ephesians 2:10, NJB).

1. Or 13:2-6 depending on bible version.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); Munk, *The Call of the Torah*, vol. 5 (NY, 1995); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006). Scripture: NRSV.