



5 thoughts

on the holy city of Jerusalem

Have you ever been to (or aspired to visit) Jerusalem? Share your knowledge, impressions, questions, dreams or experiences of this Holy City. Five conversation-starters follow:

1. In the bible (2 Samuel 5:5) Jerusalem becomes significant when King David moves there from Hebron and makes it Israel's capital. In Jerusalem King Solomon builds the first Temple (1 Kings 5-7). Today the Western Wall—the remains of the base of the Jerusalem Temple—is Judaism's holiest site.
2. Jews speak of making *aliyah* when they move to Israel. *Aliyah* (Hebrew) literally means 'going up.' If you have ever journeyed into Jerusalem you will know that it involves a gradual ascent. The geographic rise mirrors the pilgrim's spiritual ascent to a holy place.
3. Deut 16:16 refers to a law which required Jewish males to go to Jerusalem three times a year to celebrate the festivals of Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot. These are known as the 'pilgrimage festivals.'
4. *The Word of the Lord goes out from Jerusalem* (see Isaiah 2:3). Jerusalem is central to the faith-narrative of both Jews and Christians, although in different ways, with different emphases.
5. A picture tells a thousand words... "Jerusalem the movie" (IMAX 3D) is due for release in 2014. View a 7min preview at: www.jerusalemthemovie.com



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

Here Pope Benedict was drawing on key ideas expressed in scripture and at Vatican II (*Nostra Aetate*, 4) concerning the Church's relationship with the Jewish people. To understand ourselves as a Christian people we need to appreciate the people from whom we came, whose fidelity over the centuries brought forth the Hebrew Scriptures, and from whom came Jesus, Mary, the early disciples, and the Christian church itself.

For all these reasons and more, we turn to the study of Torah, the first five books of the bible; that part of Scripture precious to Jews and Christians alike. At the Church's urging, we learn to appreciate Torah with the help of Jewish insights and methods of biblical appreciation. To this end, *Light of Torah* is a practical tool in homes and parishes.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 11:26—16:17

After a dramatic opening verse which is regarded as an important statement about freewill, our Torah portion turns to a number of laws that give practical expression to relationship with God: dietary laws; tithing; release of debts; charity.

Our focus for discussion is the tithing law in 14:22-26. Taking a tenth of the year's agricultural produce plus the firstlings of his herds, the Israelite is to present an offering to the Lord in Jerusalem. Read this passage for yourself, then let's join the Jewish sages in their Torah conversation.

Tasting Torah

"Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always." (Deut. 14:22-23)

Two things here caught the sages' attention. First, the tithe, while presented to God, is used for the tither's benefit; i.e., he feasts on his own produce in Jerusalem ("the place"). Secondly, the whole point of the tithe is "so that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always" (14:23). Which raises the question: how does this act of feasting instill awe and reverence for God? How do you respond?

Touching Torah

The sages approach this issue in a variety of ways, but they all agree that the location—Jerusalem—is significant. Note that the tithing rules allow for the produce to be exchanged for money so as to make the pilgrimage easier for farmers living far from the holy city. Upon arrival in Jerusalem they can then buy the items required for the offering and the feasting.

The sages also focus on the reference to "learn". Were these details part of your reflections? If not, what further observations arose from your reflection?

Depthing Torah

Perhaps you are asking, 'Precisely how does the act of offering/eating in Jerusalem teach the Israelite to revere the Lord?'

Several commentators focus on the intellectual environment of Jerusalem. Says the Sefer Hahinukh:¹

"When each person would offer up the tithe of his cattle, year by year, in the place devoted to Torah observance and study—Jerusalem, the seat of the Sanhedrin and the religious and intellectual authorities—then the owner of that wealth will go there to study Torah or send one of his sons to study there..."

Says the Ha'amek Davar,² since it is impossible to consume his tithe all at once, pilgrims delay their stay in Jerusalem and "there is nothing else to do there but study Torah...or leave one's surplus money to the upkeep of Torah students."

Rashi and Rambam,³ on the other hand, take the view that it is the Temple of Jerusalem that inspires and has an ennobling influence.

One might object that our text says nothing of Torah study or Temple services; if anything its emphasis is on eating! Which leads Alshikh⁴ to prefer the explanation that the tithing practice calls attention to the true source of one's bounty. By going to the holy city to consume it, it is as if they are feasting "from the table of the Most High." This what teaches reverence for the Lord.

Doing Torah

Continue to ponder this text and converse with the interpretations of the sages.



Another view

Abravanel⁵ offers a straightforward explanation of what the Israelite "learns" from this particular offering in Jerusalem. Just the act of being faithful to the precept is what instills reverence. Says Abravanel, it's good practice for a lifetime of fidelity! "Habituation will implant in the soul humble acknowledgment of the overlordship of God."

Reflect on the role and impact of religious habits in your own life.

1. 13th c education work.
2. 19th c. Torah commentary.
3. Rashi: 11th c.; Rambam: 12th c.
4. Alshikh: 16th c. commentator.
5. Abravanel: 15th c. commentator.

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