



5 challenges

Our Torah reflection overleaf speaks of a just and humane system that protects both workers and landowners. The challenge of balancing diverse needs and interests is felt every day by families, businesses, nations, the global community. Discuss in light of your own personal and community experiences. Five examples follow.

1. Family

How do parents balance the needs of their children (physically, medically, emotionally, educationally) while attending to their own and the whole family's wellbeing?

2. Workplace

How does an organization design parental leave policies so as to support family life, the rights of both genders, and the productivity/goals of the organization?

3. Nation

How does a government balance the best insights of a welfare system with the best insights of a capitalist

system so that the vulnerable are protected while personal initiative is encouraged?

4. World

The global community desperately wants peace in the Middle East. Yet how to protect the civil and religious interests of all groups is a perplexing challenge.

5. Religion

How does a religious tradition move with the times while preserving core, timeless truths? How does it introduce change into traditions and customs that are centuries old?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussion."

— Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*, 4

The church teaching above may not sound earth-shattering to us today, however at the time (1965) it represented a radical reappraisal of what had been a conflicted relationship with the Jewish people for most of the history of Christianity. Further, it is a statement made at a General Ecumenical Council. Among the various levels of authority at which the church teaches, this is the highest level.

But even major teachings can take a long time to reach the 'nooks and crannies' of daily life. *Light of Torah* is a tool to take this teaching directly to the grassroots. It invites parishioners to read the Torah (the first five books of the bible) week by week, drawing on Jewish insights. In this way, parishioners grow in an appreciation of Judaism while being enriched in their Christian faith.



Deuteronomy 21:10—25:19

Ki Tetze:
'when you go out'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 21:10—25:19

Last week's Torah portion dealt with laws involving public officials. The laws in this week's portion are directed at ordinary people—families, employees, neighbors. Let's take one of these rulings (Deut. 23:25-26) and explore it through the mindset of the Jewish sages over the centuries.

1. Bava Mezia, Mishnah 7,3; 87b.

2. Malbim, 19th c.

3. Maimonides, 12th c.

4. Rashi, 11th c.

5. The Mishnah: an early compilation of rabbinic teachings (2nd c. onwards) which was later incorporated into the Talmud.

Tasting Torah

"When you enter a fellow [Israelite]'s vineyard, you may eat as many grapes as you want, until you are full, but you must not put any in your vessel. When you enter a fellow [Israelite]'s field of standing grain, you may pluck ears with your hand; but you must not put a sickle to your neighbor's grain" (Deut. 23:25-26).

Join the sages in pondering this passage. Who is the 'you'? Whose interests are being protected by the permission granted?

Touching Torah

According to the Talmud, 'you' refers to a hired worker, not a passerby. It supports this opinion with reference to the Hebrew word *bo* ('come,' 'enter'). Just as the sun 'comes' down at sunset (see 24:15), so does our text speak of the hired worker at the end of the day.¹ Is this far-fetched reasoning? Not at all, says Malbim,² with his clear grasp of the Hebrew language. *Bo* can have two connotations—a chance coming or a deliberate one. He goes on to show how the content and structure of the text suggests deliberation. Just as the sunset is a regular, expected event, the hired worker is expected and enters the field at a regular time.

Maimonides³ draws the same conclusion but uses a direct, legal approach: the 'you' must refer to hired workers or they would not have permission to 'come' and 'enter' the field in the first place.

What is your view? How did you arrive at it?

Depthing Torah

The sages discuss the fact that the permission to eat is restricted and conditional. Says Rashi,⁴ the text sets up an opposition: eat *as much as you desire* (lit: 'as your soul'), but *only* your fill. A hungry worker should not have to endure the sight of forbidden fruit, but nor should the land owner be exploited by a glutton. While detailed interpretations vary according to translation (and you may wish to consult more than one version), the sages generally agree that the Torah is protective of both labourer and land owner. The Talmud observes that permission to eat keeps the worker in good health and so increases productivity; but storage and removal of the produce is not in the owner's interests. The Mishnah⁵ notes that by urging self-control the text is protective of the labourer lest he ruin his own employment prospects. Meanwhile, other opinions in the tradition stress the Torah's humane quality: permission to eat is not a form of payment on top of existing wages, but simply a gesture of kindness. Strict justice in employment relations does not eliminate the need for goodwill and compassion.

Doing Torah

What current issues come to mind as you ponder this ancient text. E.g., note how the Torah teaches restraint (Rashi: 'eat your fill but *only* your fill'); compare this to the 2011 London riots where comfortably well-off youths reportedly joined in the looting of consumer goods.



Further observations

Although the ruling described here is part of a legal text, there is no punishment named for offenders and the tone is that of moral advice rather than enforcement.

While the rule about eating unharvested crops is discussed here in terms of hired workers, elsewhere the Torah applies it specifically to the poor. See:

- Leviticus 19:9-10
- Deut. 24:19-21

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Herczeg, trans., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY: Mesorah, 2011); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); Scripture: NJPS.