



5 ways

to give thanks for 'first fruits'

Upon settling in a new land blessed by God, the Israelites are reminded to make an offering of thanksgiving. Think of a 'new' area in your life which, when you stop to think about it, is filled with divine blessing. What deliberate gesture of yours could acknowledge that blessing? Five ideas follow:

1. New home.

Share the joy! Offer a gesture of warm hospitality; e.g., a dinner invitation to someone who would really appreciate being included in your domestic space.

2. First job.

Your first job (or a new job). Congratulations! What can you offer the Lord who sustains you? E.g., donate a portion of your first pay packet to a charity.

3. New baby.

What gift of thanksgiving can you offer the Creator for this miracle of life? A gift of prayer? An offering up of

sleepless nights? A love letter to your spouse?

4. First signs of recovery.

Are you recovering from illness? From financial setback? Turning a corner after a turbulent period? How might you honor the Lord for this blessing?

5. New beginnings.

It took courage and trust to step out into that new relationship (or: new course, project, family decision), but you did! As the 'first fruits' emerge, how will you thank God?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with an irrevocable calling.

(John Paul II, Sydney, 26 Nov 1986.

Address to Jewish Community Leaders)

“Great fraternal love,” said John Paul II. He was a pope who recognized the deep bonds between Jews and Christians that reach back through a shared sacred history and in a certain sense make us ‘kin.’ In doing so, he was reiterating a ground-breaking corrective in Christian attitudes towards the Jewish people; namely, the Jews remain God’s beloved people. The coming of Jesus does not nullify their special relationship with God. God does not renege on covenantal promises.

In our times, Christians are entering into a renewed relationship with the Jewish people. But there is still much bridge-building required, and this is the reason for *Light of Torah*. Our leaflets encourage parishioners to reflect upon the Torah (the first five books of the bible), drawing on Jewish interpretative approaches to the biblical text.



Deuteronomy 26:1—29:8

Ki Tavo:
'when you enter'



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Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions.

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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 26:1—29:8

On the slopes of Moab in sight of the land of Canaan, Moses prepares his people for entry into the promised land. He gives them a ritual to be performed when they get there. After settling in the promised land, the Israelite is to engage in a ritual of thanksgiving. Taking some of the first-fruits of his agricultural produce he is to present it to the priest along with a verbal recitation that acknowledges the Lord who is the giver of all good things. This ancient symbolic action is packed with insights for our own lives today. Come with us as we explore Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

Tasting Torah

“When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you ... you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose” (Deut.26:1-2).

Read Deut. 26:1-11. Carefully note all the repetitions and points of interest. Can you imagine the action taking place? Ponder the meaning of this ritual. Describe what you ‘see’ in all its color. E.g.:

Touching Torah

(i) The action starts in the private sphere (the Israelite’s fields) and proceeds to a designated holy place. (ii) The ritual is limited but it expresses so much. There is no way we can reciprocate God’s bounty, but we can perform a simple action symbolizing an awareness that the earth belongs to God. (iii) It involves farmer and priest. (iv) Events in the story of the Israelite people are recounted in some detail (vv.5-10). (v) It concludes with a feast, enjoying *“all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house”* (26:11). (vi) What can you add to our observations?

The sages see this ritual as promoting humility before God, selflessness and service. It prevents one from becoming soft and complacent. It is a reminder that wealth is a gift to be used generously for the common good and the glory of God. This stance of gratitude to God and awareness of blessing is core to Judaism.

Depthing Torah

Examine the phrasing of the declaration in 26:3. *“I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us.”* In subsequent generations the Israelite farmer would repeat this ritual declaration. Note that he did not say: *“My ancestors came...”* but *“I have come...”*

For the Jews there is an intense relationship between past and present generations. Every Jew is to identify personally with his/her people, Israel’s history, and the great events by which God delivered Israel from slavery. What happened to ‘them’ (one’s ancestors long ago) happened to ‘me.’ Thus each Jew is obliged to remember with gratitude what God has done for him/her personally, and not to take for granted the blessings bestowed on their ancestors.

Doing Torah

Since Christianity emerged from Judaism, the Catholic approach to the sacraments involves a similar intensity. In remembering past events, sacraments celebrate salvation touching us in the present. The Mass is our central prayer of remembrance and thanksgiving. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist it is not simply a subjective recall of the deeds of Christ; we are present to the saving actions of Jesus; we are invited into an experience of transformation that is as real as it was for the original disciples.

Ponder your experience of remembrance and thanksgiving through religious ritual, in conversation with Deut.26:1-11.



Faith & Life

My colleague undergoes chemotherapy to treat advanced cancer. Even so, he counts every blessing along the way: an excellent doctor, an early medical appointment, a family member to drive him to hospital, a friend’s phone message... He looks forward to the Eucharist, saying, *“I have so much to thank God for...”* His aura of gratitude is real and captivating, a reminder of core truths. How beautifully God-like is a person who can bless and thank, encourage and affirm, offer prayers of praise and thanksgiving!

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.