



5 ways

to draw close to God's Word

If you have been reading *Light of Torah* for a while, perhaps you have grown to appreciate the value of the traditional Jewish interpretative methods that inspire these leaflets. Let's review just a few of the ways that Jewish approaches to Scripture can nourish Christian bible study:

1. Slow down.

In a fast-paced world, how often do we 'skim' Scripture? The rabbis teach us to slow down, to read and re-read, taste and savor the sacred text.

2. Discover.

Reading scripture with the aid of Jewish commentators helps us to become acquainted with our own bible. At times we are led to passages we never even knew existed!

3. Voice.

Even if reading alone, read aloud. Remember that the Scriptures emerged from an oral-aural tradition. There is

something special about speaking and hearing them.

4. Share.

Havrutah (from the Hebrew: *haverim*, 'friends') is an ancient Jewish method of sharing biblical insights in pairs or small groups. Who is your *havrutah* partner?

5. New beginnings.

The tradition speaks of 'seventy faces' (i.e., many interpretations) of Torah. Don't settle for one 'obvious' explanation. Stay with the text, pondering its subtleties and marveling at the multiple layers of meaning.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe (Deuteronomy 30:11-12,14).

This passage could be a mission statement for our *Light of Torah* ministry. Our goal is to lead Christians into an intimate relationship with the Torah, to discover God's Word as 'near.' Our pedagogy is inspired by traditional methods of the Jewish people in their love for Torah. Here we find tools that are keenly attuned to our 'grassroots' audience, tools that allow people to engage with the text in ways that are lively, prayerful, imaginative, joyful.

In this way we respond to the call of the Church for Christians to rediscover their Jewish heritage-in-faith, and to learn from the interpretative insights of Jewish tradition, remembering that it was from the Jewish people that we first received the Scriptures. Indeed, it was through Judaism that we received Jesus, the Living Torah.



Deuteronomy 29:9—30:20

Nitzavim: 'stand'



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 29:9—30:20

In today's Torah portion Moses continues to prepare the Israelites for the journey ahead, the journey to be made upon entering the promised land; the journey that will be made without him.

Our focus today is on four lovely verses, 30:11-14. However, as we will see, we will need to read the previous ten verses as well (30:1-10), to get the most out of this discussion.

Tasting Torah

Surely, this commandment that I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" (Deut. 30:11-12).

Read Deut. 30:11-14 and note your reactions. To what exactly is the text referring when it says 'this commandment'? Which commandment? Is it the call to repentance issued in the foregoing verses? Or is it God's teachings as a whole? This is a question which has occupied Jewish commentators.¹ Read 30:1-14 and offer your view.

Touching Torah

If you and your Torah partner hold differing views, you are in good company; so do the sages! For instance, Nahmanides connects the commandment with *teshuva* (Hebrew: 'repentance'). Conscious of the dispersion of the Jews throughout the world, he hears these verses as saying that, whatever the geographic or cultural challenges, repentance is never inaccessible; it is freely embraced by one's resolve.

But most commentators, including Rashi, take a different approach; and in the writings of the Talmud we find sages who assume that these verses apply to the whole complex of Jewish observance. Does the question matter? What is to be gained by such a debate? How do you imagine the Jewish rabbi, Jesus, entering this discussion?

Depthing Torah

A further question arises in Jewish Torah discussions: What significance is added by verses 12 & 13? Wouldn't the meaning of the text remain intact if they were omitted? Test this for yourself by reading verses 11 & 14 only.

There are two interpretations that emerge on this question, says the *Be'er Yizhak*. We can hear the text as saying:

1. If the Torah were in heaven it would be inaccessible. But since it's not, we have no excuses to prevent us from reaching for it!
2. Even if the Torah were as far away as heaven, it is of such value that we would still be duty-bound to yearn for it, and we would be crying out 'Who will go up to get it?!' But since it is close, how much more duty-bound are we to embrace it!

And you? How do verses 12 & 13 speak to you? What subtle shades of meaning are illuminated by their presence in the text?

Doing Torah

- Describe a time when God's Word, God's teachings, seemed far away, inaccessible. Describe a time when God's Word was so near you could feel it, see, it, 'taste' it. What do you think made the difference in these two experiences?
- Is there a particular aspect of God's teaching that is especially dear to your heart?
- What can we do to help others to experience the Word of God as near, accessible?



From the midrash

A people close to Torah is a people close to God, as this midrashic text succinctly puts it:

"...the word is very near to you" (Deut.30:14). God said to Israel: 'My children, if the words of the Torah will be near to you, I too will call you 'near ones.'

For so Scripture says, 'The children of Israel, a people close to him. Halleluyah!' (Ps.148.14).

Deut.Rabbah 8.7

1. Named in this issue are the great medieval Torah scholars: Nahmanides (13th c. Spain) and Rashi (11th c. France). *Be'er Yizhak* is a 19th c. commentary on Rashi. See Leibowitz, 321-325.

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