



5 ways

to review your Torah journey

Having made our way through the ‘five books of Moses,’ it is a good time to take stock of our *Light of Torah* journey. You may like to plan a review for the festival day of *Simhat Torah*. This review is ideally done with your havrutah partner/s. Gather over a meal, or a celebratory drink, and together *remember* your journey from Genesis to Deuteronomy, its ups and downs, progress and setbacks... how you set out, what you knew then, what you know now... how your attitudes (to scripture, tradition, life, faith, Judaism, Christianity) have been shaped in the company of the sacred text, Israel’s sages, and your Torah companions.

1. Favorite character

Which biblical character especially came ‘alive’ for you? What is it about their personality and story that captured your heart, thoughts, imagination?

2. Deepest insight

Name a treasured insight which the Torah revealed to you during this past year of reflection. *How* was it revealed; i.e., what story, verse, commentator, aspect of method helped to clarify it?

3. Burning question

The Torah presents us with more

questions than answers; questions that draw us into God’s Word. What is one question that continues to intrigue you?

4. Greatest difficulty

Torah study is challenging for many reasons. What was one difficulty or obstacle you encountered?

5. Happiest moment

The tradition speaks of ‘rejoicing in the Torah’ and the Jewish lectionary has a festival day (*Simhat Torah*) that celebrates this happiness. Share one of the joys of your Torah journey.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

As we draw near to the end of Deuteronomy we find a striking example of biblical poetry traditionally referred to as ‘the Song of Moses’ (32:1-43). It is Moses’ final instructions to the Israelites.

There is an opinion among the sages that here the term ‘song’ refers to the whole of the Torah, the whole of God’s instruction to Israel. But why should we think of the Torah as a song? Yes, the Torah contains songs and poetic verse, but clearly not all of it can be described in terms of poetic form.

A famous 19th century rabbi in Lithuania, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (known as the *Netziv*), draws a comparison between the nature of poetry and that of Torah. Poetry is an allusive form. It has a symbolic quality requiring that it be pondered, read and re-read many times in order to savor its meaning. Its profundity is not always immediately apparent, but reveals itself in prosaic details hidden within the folds of the text. And so it is with Torah, says the *Netziv*. “Its story is not elaborated on and plainly explained, but it requires additional explanations in order to appreciate its allusions.” With this in mind, we turn to our Torah portion.



Deuteronomy 32:1-52

Ha’azinu:
‘give ear’



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 32:1-52

At the conclusion of the previous Torah portion (31:19-30) God instructed Moses to teach the Israelites a poem. The poem (known as 'the song of Moses') takes up most of this week's Torah portion. It is to serve as a confronting 'witness' that will remind Israel of its covenantal obligations after settling in the promised land.

Read the poem. Observe the grandeur of its imagery, emotion and lofty thoughts. Then let us focus on the concluding verses of this Torah portion, from v.44.¹

Tasting Torah

"Moses came and recited *all* the words of this song in the hearing of the people... (Deut.32:44) When Moses had finished reciting *all* these words to all Israel... (32:45)

"Take to heart *all* the words that I am giving... diligently observe *all* the words of this law. This is no trifling matter for you but rather your very life" (32:46-47).

The repetition is clear, indicated by our italics. But what is the significance of the emphasis on '*all*' the words? Ponder this in havrutah.

Touching Torah

If we recall the *Netziv's* observation (see front page) that the Torah is like poetry, its meaning hidden in the details, then we can appreciate Moses' insistence that the Israelites attend to '*all*' the words. If the people are to grasp the true depths of God's Word, they must make the time and effort to study its intricacies. The Torah does not reveal its riches in a casual glance or a quick 'cram' session, but requires a life long process of dedicated patient learning, including its application to life.

A reader may object: but some parts of the Torah can seem rather tedious and nonsensical! The sages are strong in their opinion that if we don't find meaning there, then it is our own fault! Why? Answers one Talmudic source: "*Because you do not labour in the Torah*" (Yerushalmi, Pe'ah 1.1). Do you agree with the sages? What is your reaction to their challenge?

Depthing Torah

In the Talmud we find the opinion that it is a form of vanity to suggest that Torah is a waste of time. The sages cite the poor conduct of the king of Judah, Menasseh, who would poke fun at words of Torah saying:

"*Had Moses nothing better to do but record in the Torah that: 'And Lotan's sister was Timna'; 'and Timna was concubine to Eliphaz' (Gen.36:22;12)!*"

The sages are unimpressed by such mockery. In their reply they demonstrate how a great lesson flows from this brief reference to Timna. According to one tradition, Timna, a noblewoman and sister to one of Esau's chiefs, seeks to become part of Israel. But she is rejected by the Patriarchs, and so relinquishes her noble status to become the concubine of Eliphaz, saying, "*Better for me to be a handmaiden to this nation [Israel], than a noblewoman of that nation [the chiefs of Esau].*"²

Timna bears a son, Amalek, who later causes suffering for Israel, which the sages view as divine retribution. Says Rashi, "*They should not have repelled her, but should have accepted her, since she came to shelter under the wings of the divine presence.*"

Doing Torah

Timna: a marginal detail, or a compelling moral lesson? Can you think of another example of an insight based on a 'minor' detail in the text? Can you appreciate Moses' insistence that we take to heart '*all the words*'? In this light discuss the relationship between Scripture and Tradition?



Deuteronomy 33-34

We have come to the end of this series of weekly Torah portions. However there are still two final chapters of Deuteronomy to be read (33:1—34:12). In the Jewish lectionary these are designated for the festival of *Simhat Torah* ('rejoicing in the Torah').

Simhat Torah marks the very last day of the annual Torah reading cycle. The next day, the cycle of Torah readings begins all over again with Genesis 1:1.

1. This leaflet is based on the teaching of Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda), 351-356.

2. Midrash Tannaim on Deut.32:47. Compare with the midrash as told in TB Sanhedrin 99b. Scripture: *NRSV*.