



5 ways

to learn the lessons of the manna

The manna is a miraculous gift, but it is not a cure for all distress. Rather, it contains a challenge, a 'test', a calling forth of virtue. There in the wilderness, the Israelites learn to depend on the Lord for their daily bread. The manna sustains, but it also teaches. Reflect on the God-given 'miracles' in your life... blessings which you treasure, but which also 'test' you, shape your character and call for transformation of life through deliberate effort.

1. Family

A single person may 'hunger' for a marriage partner. A childless couple may 'hunger' for the blessing of a child. Yet marriage and parenthood involve many difficult lessons in other-centred loving.

2. Work

An unemployed person 'hungers' for meaningful work. Yet work can be physically/emotionally draining. An income is a gift, but it can also 'test' our capacity to resist greed and to live within our means.

3. Healing

An ill person 'hungers' for the blessing of healing. Yet restored health brings responsibilities which were absent while unwell.

4. Life

Life itself is gift. And life involves the painful challenge of facing death.

5. Eucharist

For Catholic parishioners, Eucharist is the Bread of Life. It is not private spiritual sustenance but involves a communal responsibility to love, heal and 'feed' a broken world.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Torah, in its specific sense, refers to the first five books of the bible. These ancient books, the fruit of the religious experience of the Jewish people, are sacred and foundational texts for Jews and Christians alike.

Christianity, rooted in Judaism as a plant is rooted in the earth, cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted. Following the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has publicly embraced its historical, biblical and spiritual links with Judaism, including the value of Jewish insights for Christian scripture study. "Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion." (Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1995.)

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, offers a means for the 'rank and file' Catholic parishioner to read the Torah in such a way as to appreciate the Jewish roots of their faith. It offers brief insights drawing on Jewish sources, and suggestions for how these insights can enrich Christian faith and practice.



Deuteronomy 7:12—11:25

Eikev: 'If you do'
(lit. 'on the heel of')



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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 7:12—11:25

Our Torah portion this week abounds with insights as Moses urges his people to gird themselves with spiritual and moral strength to be worthy to enter the promised land. In particular this week we focus on the reference to the miracle of the manna (8:2-3), a story we first heard in Exodus 16. Let's begin our exploration with a careful reading of Deuteronomy 8:1-6.

Tasting Torah

"The LORD your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, in order to humble you, testing you to know what was in your heart... He humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna, with which neither you nor your ancestors were acquainted, in order to make you understand that one does not live by bread alone..." (Deut. 8:2-3).

Here, and also in Exodus 16:4, the manna is described as a 'test'. The sages puzzled over this. Surely a test implies undertaking something difficult. Yet the manna was God's miraculous gift of food, sustaining the Israelites when they hungered in the wilderness. Why call it a 'test'? After reading Deut. 8:1-6, and revisiting chapter 16 of Exodus, enter into the sages' discussion.

Touching Torah

Whatever theories may arise about natural causes of the manna, theologically-speaking the sages view it as divine gift. Unlike a short-lived miracle, this 'bread of angels' (Ps. 78:25) lasted forty years and continued to amaze people long afterwards. According to Sforno (15-16th c.), because the manna provided such comfort, the 'test' was to see whether the Israelites would be attentive to God even when not in a state of suffering. Are you convinced by this interpretation? Not all the rabbis are!

Depthing Torah

Sforno's view can be questioned on the grounds that the manna was hardly a luxury. It was a strange, unpopular food, 'unknown to their ancestors'. Perhaps you prefer Nahmanides' (13th c.) explanation:

"They were totally dependent on the daily portion of manna which rained down and melted in the heat of the sun."

Although miraculous and sustaining, the manna came in limited measures and could not be stored. Its collection and digestion represented an act of trust: that there would be enough for today, and that the Lord would provide enough for tomorrow. Day by day, for forty years, the manna taught the Israelites dependence on their Maker for their most basic of needs.

In this light we can make sense of the view of Rashi (11th c.): the real test of the manna lay in the instructions that accompanied it. Would the Israelites obey these instructions, not attempting to store it, not gathering on the Sabbath? In other words, would Israel demonstrate by concrete action its trust in the Lord, its willingness to follow the Torah?

Doing Torah

The manna was a gift, but not always appreciated (recall the complaint in Numbers 11:6: *'there is nothing at all but this manna to look at'*). **Reflect:** Even in the face of God's miracles, there is the temptation of negativity and ingratitude. What is my own response?



Further texts

The story of the manna is also found in Psalm 78:24-25 (*'he rained down on them manna to eat...the bread of angels'*), Psalm 105:40 (*'food from heaven'*) and Nehemiah 9:15.

In John's gospel (6:31), following the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus and his disciples refer to the manna. Think about how your reading of this gospel passage is enriched by having reflected with the Jewish sages on the miracle of the manna.

Bibliography: Beale and Carson, eds., *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: 2007); Heschel, *Heavenly Torah* (NY, 2007); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: NRSV.