



## 5 ways to pray at mealtimes

Our Torah portion today includes a verse (Deut. 8:10) which is considered by the Jewish people to be the basis of their prayer of blessing after a meal. In view of today's Torah reflections, including the focus on the gift of the *land* (repeated seven times), how can we be more thoughtful in our own Christian tradition of praying 'grace' at mealtimes? Five suggestions follow.

**1. Read** from Deut. 8:10 "You shall eat your fill and bless the Lord your God for the good land that he has given you." Include this verse in your mealtime prayers from time to time.

**2. Pause** a little longer than usual to remember and wonder at the 'hidden' miracles of this ordinary day. Tell each other what you 'saw' and 'heard' that revealed the hand of God at work.

**3. Name.** Don't just thank God generally 'for our food;' name the specific joys of this meal: the bread,

the meat, the vegetables, the fruits, the wine, the table setting, the individual persons at table...

**4.Count** the extraordinary number of steps that led up to this meal on your table: the seed sown in the earth, the rains, the labor of farmers, the transport, the processing, the purchase, the cooking...

**5. Remember** the fruitfulness of the Holy Land, where the story of God's intense involvement in human history all began. Pray for the Holy Land and all who inhabit it and who partake of its fruits to this very day.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Deuteronomy 7:12—11:25

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

## Why reflect on Torah?

Our Torah reflection today directs our attention to themes such as God's bounty, the importance of thanksgiving and blessing, the holiness of the land, the significance of the meal table as a place of community and ritual... and also thematic warnings about being vigilant in one's awareness of God as Creator and not succumbing to complacency in the face of God's goodness and generosity.

These themes are all part of Christianity, and our appreciation of them is greatly enhanced by exploring them with the help of Jewish insights into chapter 8 of Deuteronomy. A fresh look at a scripture passage, through the lens of a people who has lived its depths over generations of faith and practical observance, can make us 'think again' about our own beliefs and observances as well as deepening our appreciation of the historical and spiritual roots of those beliefs and observances.

As Pope John Paul observed, "the faith and religious life of the Jewish people, as they are professed and practised still today, can greatly help us to understand better certain aspects of the life of the Church" (*John Paul II, March 6, 1982*).



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Deuteronomy 7:12—11:25

In the Torah we find repeated instances of the Israelites being warned to 'remember' and 'observe;' that is, to remember God's saving acts in history, and to observe the commandments so as to enjoy continued blessings. The Jewish sages taught that the Torah never repeats itself without good reason. Repetition calls for the reader's careful attention. Here we explore an example...

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY: Lambda); *The Artscroll Inter-linear Siddur* (NY, 2002); Scripture: NRSV.

## Tasting Torah

Read Deuteronomy 8:7-11 and 8:12-18. Here we find two passages which are quite similar. Each describes the blessings of living in the promised land, and each follows with a warning not to forget 'the Lord your God.' Though similar passages, there are differences. Can you pick them?

## Touching Torah

The first describes the prosperity of the Israelites in terms of the natural fertility of the land, a land of running waters and unlimited supplies of grains, fruits, vegetables and minerals. Seven times the word *eretz* ('land') appears in this passage. Note how the flow of the text conjures up a picture of lush countryside, abundance, profound satisfaction. But why the warning about forgetting the Lord and failing to keep his commandments? What might be the temptation facing the Israelites as they come upon this land flowing with milk and honey?

The second passage also describes the prosperity of the Israelites, but this time in terms of the works of their hands after some time of settlement: fine houses, numerous herds and flocks, riches of silver and gold. Yet, once again, the bright picture is suddenly clouded with a warning about 'forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt' (8:14). What might be the temptation contained in this second description of blessing as the Israelites 'settle in' to their long-awaited promised land? And how does it differ from the first?

## Depthing Torah

Say the Jewish sages, the first warning refers to the temptation of being intoxicated by natural goodness, of failing to enjoy blessings in moderation, of allowing instinct to override self-control. Worse still, it is allowing one's enthusiasm to lead to the wrong god, e.g., the pagan gods of fertility, rather than the true Creator God.

The warning in the second passage refers to the temptation of being overly confident in one's abilities, of thinking that '*my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth*' (8:17) and forgetting that all blessings ultimately depend on the hand of Almighty God.

Both temptations refer to complacency, taking for granted God's gifts, a blindness to God's miraculous hand at work. Nachmanides (13th c. Talmudic scholar) comments that in the desert the Israelites depended on God's miraculous gifts (e.g., manna) for their survival; recollection of these events should serve to remind us that it is the same God, with the same miraculous powers, who continues to provide for our needs, even if now the miracles in our lives seem 'ordinary' or hidden.

## Doing Torah

A blessing from God is no guarantee that fidelity to God will follow. In any given situation, fidelity involves a conscious, free choice.

Describe a time when (a) you were confronted by one of the two temptations mentioned above; and (b) you made a conscious choice for God.



## Faith & Life

Jewish tradition speaks of 'the seven species:' seven types of fruits and grains named in Deuteronomy 8:8 (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, honey). In ancient times these foods were staples of the Israelite diet. They were also part of Temple tithing practices.

Add a biblical touch to your next meal by creatively including some of these fruits and grains, and prayerfully reflecting on their significance as presented in the sacred text.