



5 tips for table rituals

The celebration of table rituals with our children and grandchildren is one way in which religious faith is preserved and passed on through the generations. Jewish families offer a powerful example of this. The weekly Shabbat meal and also the *seder* meal at the centre of the Passover festival have been key factors in the endurance of Judaism over the centuries. As a Christian, what table rituals are part of your faith experience in the home? Let's pause to consider them, inspired by these aspects of the Jewish Passover meal, the *seder*:

1. Unhurried. The *seder* is not a rushed meal. It takes priority, time and requires careful preparation. How often are our meals 'eat and run' events? How can we slow ourselves down to a wholesome pace?

2. Blessing. Blessings and prayers weave their way through the Jewish *seder*. What blessings and prayers are part of our own Christian table rituals? Who leads them? Who calls our family to prayer?

3. Story. The *seder* meal celebrates a powerful memory in

Jewish consciousness: the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. In what way is storytelling and the sharing of memories part of our table experience?

4. Question. "Why is this night different from all other nights?" asks a Jewish child as part of the *seder*. What are the thought-provoking questions and sacred statements that bring meaning to our table gatherings?

5. Symbol. The *seder* meal includes symbolic foods: e.g., unleavened bread, bitter herbs. What signs and symbols are part of our meal experiences and table rituals as Christians?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

"The writings of the New Testament acknowledge that the Jewish Scriptures have a permanent value as divine revelation. They have a positive outlook towards them and regard them as the foundation on which they themselves rest. Consequently, the Church has always held that the Jewish Scriptures form an integral part of the Christian Bible."

"The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible"
(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001)

Light of Torah exists to awaken Christians to the importance and beauty of the Jewish Scriptures, those scriptures which have become part of our bible and which we usually refer to as 'the Old Testament.' Specifically, *Light of Torah* focuses on the first five books, the Torah ('Pentateuch' in Greek). *Torah* is a Hebrew word meaning 'instruction,' 'teaching.' As a faithful Jew, Jesus learned, loved and taught Torah. How fitting that we who seek to draw close to the mind and heart of Jesus should immerse ourselves in Torah, learning not only from Christian commentators but also from the vast corpus of Jewish reflection and scholarship.

Exodus 10:1—13:16

Bo: 'Go'



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 10:1–13:16

Our Torah portion this week contains the story of a momentous event that shapes Israel as a people and is told and retold through the generations to this very day. What event? The Passover; the ritual meal which the Israelites shared on the night of their exodus from Egypt. With this story comes the first comprehensive list of religious precepts that we find in the Torah. Many more will follow in other books of the Torah, especially in Leviticus. But here, at the critical turning point of the Passover, we find the first. Read this passage in Exodus 12:1-28.

Tasting Torah

“This day shall be to you one of remembrance: you shall celebrate it as a festival to the LORD throughout the ages; you shall celebrate it as an institution for all time” (Exodus 12:14).

Note all the instructions detailing how this festival is to be remembered. Read them in Exodus 12:1-28. Why does the sacred text interrupt the exodus story with a list of seemingly tedious domestic duties and laborious legalities? Doesn't this contradict the essence of the narrative which is all about liberation, freedom? With the sages of Israel, ponder this question.

Touching Torah

An insight is found in the *Sefer Ha-hinukh*:¹

“Consider well therefore your occupations and pursuits; for you will be influenced by them and not vice versa. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security as if to say: ‘seeing that my heart is perfect and unimpaired by its belief in God, what harm is there if I occasionally indulge in worldly pleasures, in idling in the streets...engaging in vain and boastful talk with the scorners...Why should they influence me?’”

The text goes on to say that *“actions shape character.”* How fitting, say the sages, that Israel should commemorate its central salvific event by not only telling the story but performing an elaborate set of ritual *actions*. *“Now that you know this, do not be puzzled by the large number of precepts connected with the commemoration of the miracles of Egypt.”*

Depthing Torah

As we ponder this as Christians, perhaps we can appreciate how Jewish customs have inspired the development of the Church's liturgical traditions, especially (for Catholics) the Eucharist. We don't just *tell* the salvific story of Christ's death and resurrection, Catholics also perform the ritual of eucharistic celebration.

But wait! Didn't Jesus have strong words for people who become so ritually obsessed that their worship is mere lipservice? Indeed, yes. And from where might Jesus have gleaned such ideas, growing up as a Jew? Again, from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the Jewish prophetic tradition such as we hear in Isaiah: *“[Their] worship of Me has been a commandment of men, learnt by rote”* (29:13).

The prophets of Israel warned against distortions of ritual *excess*. They also warned against *lack* of practice (e.g., Jeremiah 7:27-28). Convictions of the heart are expressed in action, while our actions confirm and strengthen the convictions of the heart. As Christians we are familiar with the idea that faith and good works, what we *believe* and what we *do*, go hand in hand. This delicate interplay is core to our faith experience, and we find its roots in the scriptures and traditions of Judaism.

Doing Torah

Talk about your experience of liturgical ritual such as the Mass. Do you experience it as an “action that shapes character”? What details of the Mass especially impact upon you, and why?



Faith & life

Because we pray grace before meals we had a delightful time when our grandson started in school with Sr Jacinta. The whole family at table had to wait until he had one hand on his chest and one open hand extended to the right in readiness to make the sign of the cross. It was quite humorous waiting for the little chap to decide right hand from left, but we dare not crack a smile because he was so deadly earnest. Of course we adults had to adopt this same pose. It was all so deliberate, in slow motion, so we'd all get it right!

Discussion: What ritual actions at home help to shape a child's values and spirituality?

1. A famous book of Jewish religious instruction of the Middle Ages.

Bibliography: Nehama Leibowitz, *New studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996).
Scripture:JPS.