



5 Thoughts on blessings

Blessings are part and parcel of Jewish life. They are brief prayers, starting with the phrase *“Blessed are you, Lord our God, king (sovereign) of the universe...”* Blessings are prayed in just about every event of daily life: eating, drinking, waking up, putting on new clothes, lighting candles....

1. *“Blessed are you, Lord.”* How can a mere human being bless Almighty God? In Judaism blessings are an affirmation of God who is source of all gifts and blessings. A blessing is a prayer praising and thanking God.

2. *“Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer...”* prays the priest at a Catholic Mass. Ponder these words with an awareness of the Jewish tradition from which this blessing originates.

3. ‘Blessing’ (*berakha* in Hebrew) is derived from the same Hebrew

root as the word for ‘knee’ (*berekh*). A connection is sometimes made between the act of blessing and the inward disposition of kneeling in humility before the boundless generosity of God.

4. The Talmud says, *“If you enjoy something in this world without saying a blessing, it is as if you stole it.”* Our Jewish faith-heritage reminds us of the importance of blessing, as both an act and a spiritual disposition.

5. At home, look for many ‘blessing’ opportunities to praise and thank God: e.g., for the gifts of family, friends, for the gifts of time, conversation, food, shelter, clothing, technology and so on. May your week be truly blessed!

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

As a faithful Jew, Jesus’ life and teachings were grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures. As one Vatican commission has reminded us: *“Without the Old Testament the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither.”* Christianity is rooted in Judaism as a plant is rooted in the earth; it cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted.

This *Light of Torah* leaflet series encourages Christians to read the first five books of the bible (the Torah) with attention to Jewish interpretative voices. Even a tiny morsel of sacred Scripture can nourish our lives. In Jewish tradition we find Torah scholars mining the depths of God’s Word... a single verse, a word (at times even a single Hebrew letter) can reveal spiritual treasures.

In this spirit, let’s take just two verses from the Torah portion of the week, a portion which tells of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt across the sea and into the desert. Read as much as you can, then join us as we focus on Chapter 14, verses 15-16.



Exodus 13:17—17:16

Beshalach:
‘[he] let go’



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2010

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II’s call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 13:17—17:16

In Exodus 14:15-16 the Lord speaks to Moses in the midst of a terrifying scene: Having escaped from Egypt, the Hebrew refugees find themselves trapped on the shore of the Red Sea: an expanse of water on one side and, on the other, Egyptian chariots in pursuit with murderous intent. In their terror the people cry out to the Lord and even accuse Moses of leading them to their deaths (v.11). Now, in verses 15-16, God intervenes...

Tasting Torah

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your rod, and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground.” (14.15-16)

The sages of Israel, so attuned to the subtleties of the biblical text, noticed something odd about these two verses. Before reading on, see if you can spot it for yourself.

Touching Torah

Wouldn't you expect God to command Moses to split the sea *before* telling the Israelites to go forward into it? Yet, the text has the order of the two steps reversed. What can be made of this?

According to one creative interpretation some of the Israelites lacked faith at the edge of the sea. Yet God asks that they show their faith by marching into the sea even before the waters have parted. Some commentators suggest a back-and-forth discussion among the tribes of Israelites: “I'm not going first into the sea; you go.” “No way, I'm not going, you go first!” By contrast, another imaginative version has the tribes competing for the privilege of being the first to take the plunge: “I'll go first.” “No, I want to be first!”

How do you imagine the scene? Can you relate it to a moment in your own life when you were called to ‘take the plunge’ in an unknown and potentially perilous situation? How did you feel, react, behave? Did you ‘go first’?

Depthing Torah

Another *midrash* (interpretative story) takes an even stronger view, saying that the people were doubly rebellious at the sea. Why double? Psalm 106:7 contains a repetition [found in the Hebrew text]: “But [they] rebelled **at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds.**”

If the first moment of rebellion was the hesitation to go forward into the water, what was the second? The second, say some commentators, was to complain about the mud as they were walking through the parted waters!

This interpretation relies on the use of the Hebrew word for mud (*homer*) found in Habakkuk (3:15). The Jewish interpreters of old knew their bible intimately and maneuvered through the texts freely, creatively, insightfully and prayerfully. In this way they came to conclude: miracles in themselves don't bring people to faith. (Jesus himself shared this view, reluctant to be labeled as a wonder-worker.) Just as the Israelites' petty grumblings persisted even *after* the great miracle of the Red Sea parting, so can we be blind to the divine presence in our lives, held back by our fears or distracted by the ‘mud on our shoes.’

Doing Torah

Counting one's blessings, making gratitude lists and practising affirmation as a lifestyle behavior are all ways to attune ourselves to God's liberating presence. Review your life in this light. Are you quick to notice blessings or burdens? Are you more likely to praise or complain?



Table Topic

“You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.”

- Rabindranath Tagore

Describe a challenging ‘sea crossing’ you made at one point in your life. And what about now? Are you standing on a shore now, looking out at a new sea?

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996). Scripture: JPS.