



## 5 ways to 'leave Egypt'

In the light of Ibn Ezra's observations (see overleaf), let us ask: What helps us to break free from the captivity of being a 'victim' to being a shaper of our own destiny as the Lord leads? Here are five tips that combine biblical wisdom, psychology and common sense.

**Listen.** Listen to God in prayer. Listen to wise people, to God's prophets, to the teachings of the Church, to the 'signs of the times' and to your own heart. Be attuned to a sign of liberation at hand as the opportunity presents itself.

**Remember.** Feelings of fear are a part of life. They do not denote failure or impossibility, nor do they define your life. Remember the 'bigger picture' of who you are in God's eyes. Remember and relive the empowering moments of your life.

**Go forward.** No one is asking you to go it alone. Like Moses, trust in the Lord's promises to act

on behalf of God's people. Don't be dazzled by shiny chariots. Place your faith in the Lord's power, not the might of 'Egypt.' Boldly reassert your confidence in the Lord's saving hand. Sometimes we have to march forward into the sea, even before it is split!

**Persevere.** Freedom can be painful as we adjust to a new way of relating to our world and to others. Resist the temptation to return to Egypt, to the security of destructive patterns and dead-end lifestyle habits.

**Give thanks.** Like the Israelites reaching the other side of the Red Sea, give thanks for every victory along the way, no matter how small.

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

*Our task is "to present the events of the Old Testament not as concerning only the Jews but also as touching us personally. Abraham is truly the father of our faith (cf. Rom 4:11-12). And, it is said (1 Cor 10:1): 'our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea.'*

(Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1985)

A religious brother once told me that when he entered the brothers in the 1940s he was given a list of items to bring. One item was a bible, but with the added note: 'a New Testament will suffice.' In other words, no need to bother with an Old Testament... you won't be needing it!

Our Church has certainly come a long way in its biblical appreciation. Even so, there remains a lingering tendency amongst many Catholics to pay attention to the Gospels, the 'Jesus' story, while ignoring the scriptures on which Jesus based his own life and mission.

This *Light of Torah* series invites Christians to reflect on the foundational sacred stories in the first five books of the bible, with the assistance of Jewish sources and interpretative methods.



Exodus 13:17—17:16

*Beshalach:*  
'and [he] let go'



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 13:17—17:16

Two biblical masterpieces conclude the account of the liberation from Egypt, and our Torah portion this week includes both. Chapter 14 tells of the crossing of the Red Sea. Chapter 15 is a song of victory. Our focus today will be Chapter 14.

1. 12th C Torah scholar, Spain.
2. Cited by Leibowitz, 240.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY: 1995); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1991). Scripture: JPS.

## Tasting Torah

Read Chapter 14 of Exodus. The battle imagery is blatant, isn't it? The whole chapter reads like a war scene: advancing armies, entrapped camps, chariots, leaders issuing strategic orders and battle-cries. Even God appears as a kind of warlord.

We needn't be surprised by this. The bible's historical context reflects the views of ancient cultures which understood their deities in war-like terms. Our interest here is in the analysis of the Jewish sages who dug deeply into the biblical story seeking spiritual meaning for their lives.

## Touching Torah

We might begin by asking: if it is a battle, why don't the 600,000 strong Hebrew slaves turn around and fight for their lives?

Here Ibn Ezra<sup>1</sup> leads us to consider the inner turmoil of the Israelites. Despite their 'defiance' (v.8), so traumatized were the Israelites by their years of captivity that they were psychologically incapable of mounting a fight. With this in mind, re-read 14:6-14. They "*caught sight of the Egyptians*" (v.10). What did they see? 600 chariots? Or something more? One can sense that Israel is mentally overpowered by the very sight of Egypt. Egypt! An empire of wealth, culture; the mightiest power on earth. Continue to ponder the text, staying close to its detail, and share your observations with a friend.

## Depthing Torah

A further suggestion along these lines is that the Israelites harbored ambiguous feelings towards Egypt. Yes, it was a place of bondage, but it was also a land where they were fed! Note the repetition of the name 'Egypt' in 14:11-12. Rabbinic commentary will often hear the repetition of a name (e.g., '*Abraham! Abraham!*' in Gen. 22:11) as a sign of deep affection. And the name 'Egypt' occurs no less than five times here, like the sound of babies crying for their mother's milk! Is this the warped affection of the victim for the oppressor? No wonder the Lord has to take matters into divine hands and perform miracles to pull this people through!

Still, let's not overlook the signs of hope: the Israelites *have* marched out of Egypt and begun to grasp, however tentatively, a new life of freedom. In Jewish tradition we find this comment:

*"R. Eliezer said: This reflects great credit on Israel. For when Moses said to them: 'Arise and go forth,' they did not say: How can we go forth into the wilderness when we have no sustenance for the way? But they had faith and went after Moses."*<sup>2</sup>

## Doing Torah

**Table-topic:** Sometimes we prefer the familiarity of captivity to the terrifying work of freedom. *Discuss.* Share an insight that you take from this week's Torah portion.



## Faith & Life

I live by the sea. It is beautiful and scenic. But it can also exhibit its terrifying powers. A freak wave, an unexpected turn in weather conditions and currents, and a fisherman is washed off the rocks, or a holiday-maker drowns.

Being close to the sea, being aware of its delights and its perils, helps me to appreciate the symbol of water—in scripture, in ritual, in my religious tradition—as a symbol of divine power, of life, of salvation.