



## 5 ways to hear a biblical teaching

As we pay attention to traditional Jewish approaches to the bible we can hear our Christian scriptures with fresh ears. In particular we can better appreciate how the teaching of Jesus and his followers about love and compassion does not appear out of the blue, but emerges from a great tradition of Jewish faith and ethics, a tradition to which they belonged and which shaped their lives. Consider these five quotations from the Hebrew scriptures, from the midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions) and from the New Testament.

1. "Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble" (Proverbs 24:17).
2. "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink" (Proverbs 25:21).
3. "Rabbi Hama ben Hanina said: Even though your enemy has risen up early to kill you, and comes hungry and thirsty to your house, give him food and drink" (Midrash Proverbs xxv, 21).
4. "Beloved, never avenge yourselves... No, if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink... Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:19-21).
5. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Matthew 25:35).



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 21:1—24:18  
*Mishpatim: 'rules'*

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor (cf: Dt. 6:5; Lv. 19:18; Mt. 22:34-40)."*

(Vatican Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, 1974)

A regrettable tendency in the history of Christian catechesis (and still present today in some quarters) has been to contrast the so-called legalism of Judaism with the love of Jesus. In fact, Jews have been no more guilty of legalism than we Christians! Every religion is open to legalistic distortions, even as it seeks to be an instrument of divine love.

Fortunately, much work has been done by scholars and educators in recent decades to bring an awareness to Christians that their faith finds its very roots in the beliefs, ethics and rituals of the Jewish people. Jesus was a Jew who lived and breathed the Jewish Scriptures (Torah). In today's *Light of Torah* leaflet, we listen to the Jewish sages as they reflect on how one relates to an 'enemy.'



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 21:1—24:18

The chapters that fill our Torah portion today contain a body of ancient legislation that is known as the 'Book of the Covenant.' It covers a range of topics. Our focus today will be limited to nine verses (23:1-9), in particular two verses which deal with two acts of assistance to an 'enemy.'

## Tasting Torah

*"When you come upon your enemy's ox or donkey going astray, you shall bring it back. When you see the donkey of one who hates you lying under its burden and you would hold back from setting it free, you must help to set it free" (Exodus 23:4-5).*

These verses find resonance with the teaching of Jesus to 'love your enemies.' Examine them carefully. Read them aloud. Ponder the detail of the text. Note its setting: amidst rules against slander and the perversion of justice (23:1-3, 6-8) and concluding with a verse about protection of the stranger (23:9). Discuss your observations with a friend.

## Touching Torah

Why would these verses appear here? Perhaps because personal animosity has a tendency to lead to slander and false witness. Likewise, the stranger, the 'outsider,' is vulnerable to being treated as an enemy.

Note how this teaching is phrased as a case study. It is not a general prohibition against mistreatment of another; it calls for an actively positive response of returning good for evil and offers two concrete examples. The second example is especially pointed. Returning a stray beast (v.4) could be done via a third party while avoiding any contact with its owner. Raising the felled beast (v.5), however, requires direct contact with its owner as both parties engage in a common task for good.

## Depthing Torah

Rabbinic commentators compare "When you come upon..." (v.4) with "When you see..." (v.5). Even if your enemy's plight is seen from a distance you must leave your path and make your way to him to give assistance.

The phrase "and you would hold back" (v.5) also comes under the sages' microscope. To overcome within oneself the instinct for evil is the moral task of every person. A just society is built on lifegiving deeds, enacted even when one's feelings dictate otherwise. In Jewish legal tradition we find this case:

If a friend requires help unloading his donkey, and an enemy requires help loading his—our first duty is to attend to our enemy in order to discipline our instincts.<sup>1</sup>

Compassion for enemies is by no means unique to Christian teaching; it is embedded in Judaism. For example, in the story of the crossing of the Red Sea the Torah celebrates victory over the Egyptians, the oppressors of Israel. But an oft-quoted rabbinic commentary on this text describes the scene thus:

"The ministering angels wanted to sing a hymn at the destruction of the Egyptians, but God said, 'My creatures are drowning and you are busy with song?'"<sup>2</sup>

## Doing Torah

In the light of today's Torah discussion reflect on your understanding of the teaching of Jesus to 'love your enemies' (Mt. 5:44).



## A note on the Gospel

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.'" (5:43).

In actual fact, the saying that Jesus quotes is not to be found in the Jewish bible. It does, however, appear in texts which form part of the Dead Sea Scrolls (ancient manuscripts discovered last century at Qumran, near the Dead Sea).

1. Bava Mezia 32b.
2. Megillah 10b.

Bibliography: Larsson, *Bound for Freedom* (Mass., 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996); Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY, 1974). Scripture: NRSV.