



5 ways to pray

When we recall the reluctance of Moses to be called to his prophetic role (see the burning bush episode in Exodus 3) it is hard to believe it is the same Moses so forthright in defence of the Israelites on Mount Sinai! In this moment of crisis, Moses steps up to the plate and forges a new stage in his relationship with God and Israel. Let's take some prayer-tips from the Moses we have visited in today's Torah discussion (overleaf).

- 1.** The tense moment between God and Moses reminds us that God is not remote and unfeeling but deeply involved in the events of our lives. *Do I truly believe this?*
- 2.** Confronted by a dire situation, Moses stands firm. How easily he could have given up the cause as lost. Instead, he prays! *In desperate moments, do I find the courage to pray with hope?*
- 3.** Moses does not deny or avoid the emotional intensity of the moment, rather he enters into it. In this we are reminded of the voices of the psalmists and their powerful emotions expressed in prayer. *Are the psalms part of my prayer life?*
- 4.** Moses prays with integrity. He rejects a plan that would appeal to his ego by making him the basis of a new nation (32:10). His focus is purely on mending the relationship between God and the Israelites. *Is my prayer life other-centred? When I pray do I intercede for my faith community?*
- 5.** Moses is not consumed by the painful details of the present; he remembers the divine promise of old and its resilience through generations. *Do I pray with an awareness that my 'little' picture is part of a greater story of salvation?*



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2011

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.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 30:11—34:35

Ki Tisa:
'when you take'

Why reflect on Torah?

"If you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you" (Mt. 17:20, NRSV).

This confident voice in the Gospel of Matthew depicts a bold and forthright Jesus! One might say he is as bold as Moses, the prophet who willingly enters into direct, robust dialogue with God as we shall see in today's Torah portion.

Jesus, a first-century Jewish man, would have grown up with stories of Moses as part of his formation in Torah. How did these stories impact on him? Did they help to empower him in his own conversations with his Father, 'Abba', in heaven (cf. Mt 6:9)?

This *Light of Torah* series invites us into conversation with the Lord based upon the foundational stories of Torah, the first five books of the bible. We do so as Christians, refreshed by traditional Jewish approaches to the sacred text that have a very long history, pre-dating Jesus and Christianity. In this way, we gain a glimmer of precious insight into the way Jesus, as a faithful Jew, learned and lived Torah.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Exodus 30:11—34:35

The Golden Calf episode is a critical point in the God-Israel relationship. While Moses is up the mountain, his absence in the camp below (an absence perhaps far too long for a people desperate for firm leadership) creates a void that is unhappily filled. Read the account of the Israelites' actions in 32:1-6, then read the dialogue that ensues between God and Moses in 32:7-14. Note the repetition, the interesting inclusions and puzzling aspects about the text... What does a close reading reveal about the developing relationship between the characters? With whom do your empathies lie? What insights emerge?

Tasting Torah

*The Lord spoke to Moses, "Go down at once! **your** people, whom **you** brought up out of the land of Egypt, have acted perversely" (32:7).*

Do you hear in God's words the extent of the tragedy at hand? *Your* people? Wait a minute, isn't this *God's* own people whom *God* brought out of Egypt? Can the Almighty really be wiping his hands of the Israelites? Surely not! And yet verse 9 only feeds our concern: "*I have seen **this** people, how stiffnecked they are.*" Where we might have expected God to say 'my' people instead we find 'this' people. What we are hearing is not just disappointment, it is utter estrangement! Do you agree? What thoughts emerged from your own reading/discussion? Support your comments with close reference to the text.

Touching Torah

Perhaps you also noted the strong response of Moses. If he takes a punch, he certainly gives back a right hook! "*Oh Lord, why does your wrath burn hot against **your** people, whom **you** brought out of the land of Egypt" (32:11). Moses has the gall to remind God of God's own doings: *This is your people, Lord, to whose ancestors you swore a divine promise!* (see vv. 12-13). Can you sense the electricity of the moment. Like a married couple experiencing a major conflict, God and Israel (with Moses as mediator) find themselves at crossroads: will they find their way to a deeper union, or will this incident tear them apart?*

Depthing Torah

In the tradition we find some sages criticizing Moses' response. How dare he speak with such irreverence to Almighty God! Yet, within that same tradition, a deep sensitivity to the sacred text allows for a defence of Moses. "*Now, let me alone,*" says God (v.10) immediately before his stated intention to destroy his people. Say the sages, this unusual and seemingly unnecessary phrase ('let me be', 'leave me') offers a vital clue that God is stalling for time and in fact *wants* Moses to intervene! Says Rashi,¹ echoing midrashic interpretations:

"Moses had not even begun to pray for them, yet God said: 'Leave Me alone'? But here He gave Moses an opening and informed him that the matter depended on him."

In other words, amidst divine heartbreak God creates a space for more to happen, and Moses is astute and responsive enough to take the hint. He throws himself into active prayer. Indeed, the Jewish sages view Moses as a master of prayer, an intimate of God's, boldly confident in the divine-human relationship and prepared to 'give all' according to the urgency of the situation.

Doing Torah

Am I trusting enough to approach the Lord with directness and confidence, even boldness, in my prayer life? What can I learn from the example of Moses?



From the midrash

As Moses returns to camp and sees the idolatry of his people, he smashes the Decalogue tablets (see Ex. 32:19). We might think of his action as unbridled rage, yet a Jewish storytelling tradition suggests otherwise: even here Moses is protective of Israel, saying to God, "*They knew not what was written on the tablets.*" It was like a prince who had drawn up a marriage contract for his bride only to discover that she had been unfaithful. He tore up the contract saying to himself, "*Far better that she be judged as an unmarried woman than as one married.*" [See Exodus Rabbah 46, 1]

1. Rashi, 11th C. Torah commentator, cited by Leibowitz, 565.

Bibliography: Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Exodus* (NY: Soncino, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996). Scripture: NRSV.