



## 5 Rabbinic Sayings

The Letter of St. James says “Be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves” (1:22). Then again: “Faith without works is dead” (2:14). Similarly, the sages of Israel taught that study of God’s Law without the practice of humility and loving deeds is absurd.

1. Rabbi Hiyya said: If a man learns the Law without the intention of fulfilling that Law, it were better for him had he never been born. [Lev.R., Behukotai, XXXV, 7]

2. The elders sat as a group debating whether it was greater to *study* the Law or *do* the Law. One said this, another said that. Then they all said: study is greater, for it leads to doing. [see Kid. 40b]

3. Rabbi Hanina said: Much Torah have I learnt from my teachers, more from my colleagues, but from my students most of all. As a little wood can set light to a great tree, so young pupils sharpen the wits of great scholars. [Ta’an. 7 a]

4. Rabbi Hoshaiiah said: He who possesses knowledge, but has not the fear of sin, possesses nothing. Every craftsman who has no tools is no craftsman. The key which unlocks the Law is the fear of sin. [Exod.R., Ki Tissa, XL, 1.]

5. Rabbi Elisha b. Abuyah said that a person who has learnt much Torah and has good deeds is like a horse which has reins. The person who has the first, but not the second, is like a horse without reins: it soon throws the rider over its head. [Ab.R.N. (vers.I), XXIV, 39a]

Source: Montefiore & Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY: Schocken Books, 1974).



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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Exodus 30:11—34:35

*Ki Tisa:*  
‘when you add’

## Why reflect on Torah?

“Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham.” (Nostra Aetate, 4)

The Second Vatican Council marked a dramatic turning point in Jewish-Christian relations. Not only did the Council decisively reject anti-Semitism, it positively affirmed the historical and spiritual bond between Christianity and Judaism. It recognized that the Church came to exist through the story of the Jewish people with whom the ancient covenant with God was established and of whom Jesus was a son. With this recognition, we can turn with even greater joy and expectation to the study of Torah. Torah, in its specific definition, refers to the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These scriptures are precious to both Jews and Christians. They are the foundations upon which the Gospels stand. This *Light of Torah* series offers a way for Christians to reflect on Torah, inspired by Jewish insights into the sacred text.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 30:11—34:35

Today's portion includes the story of the rebellion at the foot of Mt Sinai where the Israelites erect a golden calf. Up until this point the Israelites had witnessed miracle after miracle at the hand of God who had delivered them from Egypt. Having been lifted so high, how could they fall from grace so suddenly, embracing pagan idolatry in the blink of an eye? This question intrigued Israel's sages and commentators through the ages. Let's join their discussions...

## Tasting Torah

*When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron, and said to him, "Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him." (Exodus 32:1, NRSV)*

Was the Israelites' sin really idolatry? Read 32:1 carefully. Are the people trying to replace God or simply looking for a visual symbol to sustain their faith in God at a time of insecurity? Moses, after all, has been gone a long time. Yes, he is up the mountain communing with God, but if he is any kind of responsible leader shouldn't he be back by now? The Hebrew word *boshesh*, 'delayed,' can be translated as 'shamefully-late'.

## Touching Torah

Drawing on rabbinic opinion in the tradition, some commentators say that the people were seeking not another god but another leader like Moses. Others hold that the real sin of the people was their attempt to devise their own prescriptions for worship rather than wait for Moses to come back with a list of God's explicit wishes.

But this view is unsupported by other sources: Psalm 106:20 ("They exchanged their glory for the image of a bull that feeds on grass") plainly describes idolatry. So too does the Talmud: "By worshipping the calf the Israelites indicated that they accepted idolatry."<sup>1</sup> Rashi<sup>2</sup> seems to agree: "They desired many gods."

## Depthing Torah

But if their sin *was* idolatry, we are back to our original question: *how could a people raised so high, fall so far?*

Perhaps the answer is not so hard to find when we reflect on the fact that any kind of lasting transformation of character takes time. A dramatic conversion or miracle may begin the process, but lasting transformation only comes through persistent application of beliefs and principles in the crucible of daily living.

It involves the "inevitability of gradualness" says Maimonides.<sup>3</sup> Having been reared in slavery the Israelites were hardly capable of rising up with the strength to fight giants. "God in his wisdom contrived that they wander in the wilderness till they had become schooled in courage, since it is well known that physical hardships toughen and the converse produce faintheartedness."<sup>4</sup>

## Doing Torah

**Table topic:** Discuss other biblical stories where a person or community of apparently invincible faith was suddenly shown to be morally weak? E.g., King David; Peter the Apostle; the Galatians. Why are these stories important to us?

**Journal topic:** Draw a timeline tracing your own journey to maturity; e.g., as a man/woman, as a spouse/parent, as a committed Christian... Highlight the 'character building' events of progress and setback, success and failure. Is there a "golden calf" moment marked on your timeline?



## Further ponderings

As Moses returns to camp and sees for himself the idolatry of the people, he smashes the Decalogue tablets (see 32:19). What are we to make of his action, given the fact that God has already relented in response to Moses' prayer (verse 13) and agreed that divine mercy will be shown the people?

1. Avodah Zarah 53b.
2. Rashi: revered medieval Jewish biblical commentator.
3. Maimonides: 12th c., great post-Talmudic authority on Judaism.
4. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, cited by Leibowitz, 555.

Bibliography: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (NY, 1996).  
Scripture: NRSV.