



5 Ways to grow in havrutah

Light of Torah encourages the *havrutah* method which has a time-honored place in Jewish Torah-study traditions. The term *havrutah* is related to the Hebrew word *haverim*, 'friends'. In *havrutah* we approach the scripture text with one or more study partners. "Iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17). Just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so two will sharpen each other's minds as the sacred text is pondered and discussed. Consider these points:

1. Consistency. Ideally *havrutah* involves a consistent partnership. Meeting regularly over time, you develop a deepening relationship with each other and the sacred text.

2. Focus. Develop the discipline of staying with the biblical text. You may have an interesting thought to share but is it arising from your pondering of the actual passage?

3. Resist the temptation to become sidetracked, chatting about peripheral issues. Certainly, the social spillover of *havrutah* is

part of the joy of the experience. Encourage that too! But remember your goal: to deepen your relationship with the Word of God.

4. Challenge. Don't be afraid to question and respectfully contradict your partner's view if you interpret a word or passage differently. *Havrutah* calls for robust discussion and debate, not polite murmurings.

5. Take heart. *Havrutah* takes time, effort, practice, perseverance... Hang in there, celebrate each step, and remember: even our 'trying' draws us closer to God.



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 18:1—22:24

Vayera:
[he] appeared'

Why reflect on Torah?

This *Light of Torah* series invites Catholic parishioners into an appreciation of traditional Jewish methods of biblical interpretation as they read the Torah (the five books of the bible).

One dimension of this approach is known as *midrash*, from the Hebrew 'drash' meaning 'search', 'enquire.' The term 'midrash' refers to a form of creative storytelling. Where the bible text hints at something or even remains silent, the midrash 'fills in the gap' with imaginative tellings of what might have happened, or what could have been said. While this may sound fanciful, in fact through rabbinic expertise it yields profound insights, illuminating and enlarging the spiritual meanings of the text.

A strength of midrash is its popular appeal. A good story speaks easily to grassroots audiences. It has power to create gateways into the text, through which we can enter and discover whole worlds of meaning which delight, surprise, teach and challenge us in our efforts to pursue the Lord's paths. Join us today in a midrashic experience of Genesis 18-19.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 18:1–22:24

Our Torah portion is loaded with intriguing stories all calling for our attention: the birth of Isaac, the binding/sacrifice of Isaac, the Sarah-Hagar conflict, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah... This week, let's hear more about the story of Sodom in Gen.18-19 from the perspective of the midrash.

Tasting Torah

"How great is the outcry against Sodom and how very grave their sin!" (Genesis 18:20).

Exactly what was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah that led to their destruction? In the popular imagination the sin is usually viewed as sexual sin. Indeed, 19:1-11 suggests lust and sexual abuse: Lot, in order to appease the aggression of the townsfolk outside his door demanding to have their way with his house-guests,¹ offers his daughters to them instead. Hardly a noble solution! Read the story for yourself and ponder the drama that precedes God's drastic action.

Touching Torah

Interestingly, the midrash, in response to the question, 'What was the great sin of Sodom that earned its destruction?' replies that it was social inequity, mistreatment of the poor. Now where does the text suggest that? Approaching the scriptures as a unity, the sages draw attention to the prophet Ezekiel:

"This was the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (Ezekiel 16:49).

Observe the way the sages maneuver their way through the bible, freely associating diverse passages. It is creative method, grounded in a vast knowledge of the whole of scripture and, as we shall see, in the linguistic details of the Hebrew text.

Depthing Torah

Through a play on Hebrew words, the sages say that the 'outcry' in 18:20 which the Torah describes as 'great' (*rabbah*) is the cry of a maiden (*ribah*). According to the midrash, the laws of Sodom issued the death penalty for anyone who assisted the poor. When a certain young woman fed a hungry person, her compassion was exposed as a crime and she was put to a horrible death by fire. It was *her* cry that God heard, the cry of a just person performing a deed of kindness, which brought down a whole system of state-sanctioned savagery.

*"Said Rabbi Levi, God said 'Even if I wished to keep silent, justice for a certain maiden [ribah] does not permit Me to keep silent.'"*²

Thus the midrash teaches that each individual is endowed with the power and responsibility to stand up and make a difference to society. Maimonides, the great 12th century scholar, puts it this way:

*If a person...performs one good deed, he has weighted the scales in his own favour and that of the world's and brought salvation.*³

Doing Torah

When Jewish storytelling imagines a woman whose action determines the fate of Sodom, it captures a truth embodied in the lives of real women, men and children who have shaped the course of history. Discuss with reference to people who inspire you, whether their stories are famous or little known. What challenge does this truth pose for your own life as a Christian?



Another insight

"Suppose there are fifty righteous in the city" (18:24).

When Abraham enters into negotiations with God in an attempt to save Sodom, the sages wonder why he adds the words 'in the city' when it is already obvious he is talking about the city of Sodom. The repetition, they conclude, implies that the righteous they seek are *public* in their witness. They are not good people keeping their heads down, safe in their homes, they are out there publicly challenging the unjust status quo.

1. 'that we may know them' (19:5), i.e., the knowledge of sexual intimacy.
2. Genesis Rabbah XLIX, 6-7.
3. See Leibowitz, p.174.

Bibliography: Bialik and Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: *NRSV*.