



## 5 thoughts

The Torah is God's living Word and invites us to engage with the living God, bringing to it the experience of our human lives, with all its emotions, questions and struggles. Continue to reflect on our selected Torah passage about the three day journey of Abraham and Isaac, allowing it to speak to your life. Draw a friend into this exercise. Here are five additional thoughts to stimulate your discussion:

### 1. Busy

*"Abraham rose early, saddled his donkey..."* Note the detail, the busyness of verse 3. Have you ever used busyness as a means of burying your grief? Or as a form of procrastination?

### 2. Silence

The detail of preparation contrasts with the silent, empty tale of the journey that follows. Are there some things which are 'unspeakable'? Do they need to be voiced at all? Why do the sages insist on filling the gaps in the story?

### 3. Up

*"Abraham lifted his eyes..."* Until this point, where had Abraham's gaze been directed? Is the raising of his line of vision significant?

### 4. Vision

*"..and saw the place from afar."* What did he see? Yes, he saw the place. But did he 'see' something with his inner, spiritual vision?

### 5. Three

*On the third day...* In biblical symbolism, the number three often suggests the entrance of divine power into the story.

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

*Light of Torah* invites Christians to become better acquainted with the great stories, personalities and themes of the Torah, i.e., the first five books of the bible. Each weekly issue follows the Jewish cycle of readings, and draws on the interpretative insights of Judaism.

Traditional Jewish approaches to the bible are different from modern historical-critical methods. The latter, of course, makes an essential contribution to our biblical understanding. In traditional Jewish methods, however, the text is viewed as timeless; the meaning is not bound by the historical or cultural circumstances of its writing. Every bit of Torah—every word, every letter—has the capacity to offer our lives spiritual and theological meaning if we have the capacity for imaginative pondering and creative storytelling. Even omissions in the text can be creatively interpreted. Thus we find Jewish storytelling literature known as *midrash* which, although extraneous to Scripture, help to deepen and enlarge the meaning of the text. Join us this week as we read a well known Torah passage and enter into the enquiry of the sages.



Genesis 18:1—22:24

*Vayera:*  
[he] appeared'



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Genesis 18:1—22:24

Our focus this week is Genesis 22:1-19. The horror of the narrative grabs our attention and draws us into the text with understandable questions and objections: *Why would God ask a father to kill his own son?* In the Catholic lectionary this reading appears each year as part of the Easter Vigil. It is also part of the weekday morning service in many Jewish prayer books. What is so important about this passage to warrant its prominent placing in the liturgical traditions of both Jews and Christians? Read Gen.22:1-19, then join the sages in a close reading of verses 3-4.

## Tasting Torah

*“Abraham rose early, saddled his donkey, chopped wood for the burnt offering, took Isaac his son and his two lads, and set out for the place that God had spoken of to him. On the third day, Abraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar”* (Genesis 22:3-4).

Our Torah passage speaks of a three day journey from Abraham’s home to the point where he can see his God-given destination. Do you notice anything odd about this part of the text?

## Touching Torah

Perhaps you noticed that the Torah offers no detail about the journey. Details about his preparation are aplenty: saddling his donkey, chopping wood, etc. But from the moment he is on his way: the text suddenly falls silent. Like the fast forward button on a video player, the story skips to the end: *“On the third day...”*

Think about that. Abraham has just set out with a horrific task: the killing of his own son. He has three days, in the presence of his son, to consider what he is about to do. Surely, those days must have been filled with anguish! Surely he must have undergone feelings of bewilderment, anger, doubt, pain... surely! And yet the text records nothing about the journey. No dialogue, no thoughts or feelings, no events, no geographical or human point of note. Prayerfully ponder this. How do you interpret the Torah’s silence? [The back page of this leaflet may assist here.]

## Depthing Torah

This silence bothered the sages deeply. In fact, in the *midrash* we find imaginative stories filling up the silence of those three days.

According to one midrashic tradition—one that perhaps depicts the internal struggle of conscience—Abraham is visited during his journey by a satan, a tempter, who hurls at him one reason after another as to why he should abandon his journey. Abraham persists.

Another tells how Abraham comes to a river crossing. The waters are dangerously high and Abraham has every excuse to turn around and go home. Instead, he plunges in up to his neck, and the waters recede. We are drawn to reflect on the “legitimate” excuses that deter us from pursuing God’s call to its final conclusion.

Thus the *midrash* prevents us from treating the story of Abraham’s faith as blind, robotic obedience and leads us to a deeper, more sensitive contemplation of the human struggle involved in discerning and following God’s call. Far from being fanciful storytelling, the *midrash* voices the questions and insights of generations of believers as they relate to God’s living Word.

## Doing Torah

**Table topic:** Join in the conversation of the sages. How does the text’s silence stimulate your engagement with the Torah? If you were to tell your own midrashic story about what happened during those three days, what would you say?



## From the midrash

*In that instant, fear and dread terror fell upon Isaac, when he saw in Abraham’s hand nothing at all fit for an offering. So, suspecting what was intended, he asked, ‘Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’ Abraham replied, ‘The Holy One has chosen you.’ Isaac said, ‘If He has so chosen, my life is given to Him, but I grieve for my mother.’ Nevertheless, ‘they went both of them together’ (Gen. 22:8) - one to bind, the other to be bound; one to slaughter, the other to be slaughtered.*

(See Bialik and Ravnitzky,  
*The Book of Legends*, #45, p.41)

Bibliography: Bialik & Ravnitzky (eds.), *The Book of Legends* (NY: Schocken Books, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: *JPS, NRSV*.