



## 5 biblical 'greats'

who each made a poor decision

Never give up. Never throw in the towel. No matter how catastrophic your mistake, God's grace is stronger still. Like our ancestors in faith, each of us is on a journey of a lifetime of learning. We won't always get things 'right,' yet we have faith that God's designs lovingly work their way through our lives.

**1. Sarah** insisted that Hagar, Abraham's concubine, be sent away, along with her son Ishmael. In the scorching desert heat this would have meant a death sentence had not Hagar received divine assistance. (Gen.21)

**2. Judah** ignored his promise to give Tamar to his son in marriage. Tamar called him to account via a sexual encounter and a bold confrontation. A child of Tamar and Judah became a forefather of King David, and Jesus. (Gen.38, Mt 1)

**3. David.** Israel's great king made a terrible choice resulting in adultery and murder. When confronted by the prophet Nathan, David was filled

with remorse. Tradition attributes a beautiful penitential psalm to David. (2 Samuel 11-12)

**4. Peter.** Despite his declaration of unflinching loyalty, Peter denied Jesus three times. Yet he was able to accept his failings and still believe in his own goodness and loveability. (Luke 22)

### 5. Jesus?

Our reflections lead us to think about Jesus himself. His choice of Judas as one of the Twelve had tragic consequences. Yet that same choice was part of a chain of events leading to the decisive turning point in the story of salvation. (Luke 6)

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

In 1980 Pope John Paul II made a statement in Mainz, Germany, where he acknowledged that the Jewish people are the people "*of the Old Covenant, never revoked by God.*" Then again, in 2000, at Mount Sinai, he said: "*But now on the heights of Sinai, this same God seals His love by making the covenant that He will never renounce.*"

Many Catholics are surprised to learn of these statements, so ingrained and widespread has been the harmful belief that Christianity supplanted Judaism and rendered void the Jews' covenant with God. How important it is that we recognise the special and enduring relationship the Jewish people have with God, as well as the deep historical and biblical links between Jews and Christians.

Since Vatican II, the Church has repeatedly called us to foster an appreciation of the Jewish people, conscious that Christianity is planted in the rich soil of Judaism. But how does the average Catholic parishioner do this?

*Light of Torah* series offers one practical response. It invites the reader to explore the Torah, the first five books of the bible, over the course of a year, drawing on Jewish insights harvested over the centuries.



Genesis 28:10—32:3

Vayetze:  
'he went out'



Light of Torah  
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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 28:10–32:3

“Then Jacob kissed Rachel, and broke into tears” (29:11). Thus begins the passionate and troubled love affair between Jacob and Rachel. This week’s Torah portion covers four chapters of engaging narrative. It recounts Jacob’s flight to the land of Haran (punctuated by a fascinating dream episode), his dealings with his relative Laban and how he comes to marry both of Laban’s daughters: Leah the elder, and Rachel the younger. Birth stories, of both humans and animals, feature large in this portion.

In our discussion we will give particular attention to Jacob’s marriages to Leah and Rachel in Genesis 29:1-29.

## Tasting Torah

“In the morning, look—it was Leah!” (29:25).

Jacob wakes after his wedding night to find himself deceived. He believed he was sleeping with Rachel but instead her older sister Leah has been substituted. Jacob confronts his father-in-law, Laban, and we are sympathetic to his distressed cry: “*Why did you deceive me?*” (29:25). Yet the Jewish sages have long detected a certain divine retribution in this event. After all, wasn’t it Jacob who once caused deception and havoc in family life (Gen.27)? Let’s examine our text through the eyes of a 16th century rabbi, Eliezer Ashkenazi.

## Touching Torah

Ashkenazi is particularly interested in Laban’s curt response to Jacob’s distress. “*This is not done in our region, to give the younger before the firstborn* (29:26).”

Ashkenazi notes two subtleties. First, Laban is an aggressive person, so why doesn’t he use a stronger argument, i.e., “It is *never* done” rather than the milder “This is not done *in our region*”?

Also, Leah and Rachel have been previously described as ‘the elder’ and ‘the younger’ (v.16). Why does Laban describe them as ‘the younger’ and ‘the *firstborn*’? Why is a different Hebrew word inserted here to refer to Leah? [Note: not all English translations show this difference, translating as ‘elder’ in both cases. In fact, 29:26 uses the same Hebrew word as found in Gen 27:19 “I am Esau, your *firstborn*.”]

## Depthing Torah

So what is Laban *really* saying to Jacob?

Ashkenazi paraphrases his response this way:

‘It is true in *your place* perhaps such things are done, that the younger is given precedence over the firstborn, and that his portion is taken away and given to another, and the younger is given the name of “firstborn.” But such things are not done “in our country to give the younger before the firstborn.”’<sup>1</sup>

In other words, Laban is confronting Jacob with the matter of Jacob’s deception of his elder brother Esau who was robbed of his paternal blessing and inheritance. Whether or not he is aware of it, Laban is dealing out divine justice.

The sages are not afraid to acknowledge the weaknesses of even the most chosen and blessed of God’s children. They see in the Torah a potent lesson: our actions have consequences. Our flawed decisions do not prevent God’s designs from being realized, but neither are we excused from dealing with their aftermath. In Jacob’s case, while he caused deception he also became a victim of deception.

## Doing Torah

*A topic for journaling, prayer or sharing:*

Think of a poor decision of yours in the past which has had consequences in the present. How have you dealt with this event? What healing has occurred, or still needs to occur? Can you appreciate the hand of God in and through this part of your life’s story?



## Faith & life

‘Grandma! Here’s a lovely plate! Grandma...oops.’ CRASH. SHRIEK. WAIL. Four year old granddaughter, full of curiosity and ‘trying to help’ had just dropped grandma’s treasured heirloom. The fact that it had been in the family for 100 years and now lay in pieces was enough to send tears streaming down grandma’s face. Yet in that same moment, she was cuddling the equally distraught four year old. “It’s OK darling, I know you didn’t mean to drop it. Here, you can help me to tidy things up...”

In this crazy mix of love and tears, petulance and patience, I saw an image of God’s love for our flawed but faithful people.

1. See Leibowitz, p.324.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006); Sarna, ed., *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989). Scripture: Plaut.