



## 5 thoughts on Hanukkah

At this time of year Jewish communities prepare to celebrate Hanukkah. Are you familiar with this Jewish festival? Have you ever stopped to ask your Jewish friends about it? As a starting point, here are five thoughts on Hanukkah:

### History. Tradition.

Hanukkah recalls the re-dedication of the Temple after the Maccabean uprising (2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE). 1&2 Maccabees tells how a powerful Greek Hellenistic culture tried to suppress Judaism. It tells of the Maccabean resistance and of heroic martyrs: Jews who accepted death rather than renounce their faith.

**Miracle.** According to tradition, when the Maccabeans reclaimed the Temple and lit the menorah (candelabrum), a miracle occurred: the menorah stayed alight for eight days even though there was only enough oil for one.

**Renewal.** Hanukkah means 'dedication.' Just as the Temple was re-dedicated in ancient

times, contemporary Judaism views Hanukkah as a time for spiritual re-dedication and renewal of lives.

**Hope.** In the miracle of the cruse of oil, Jewish commentators note the courage of the Maccabees to attempt to light the menorah in the first place, as it seemed that the oil would not last beyond the first day.

**Witness.** As Christians we might ponder the idea that were it not for the reality of what Hanukkah represents, had not the Jews prevailed as they have time and again in history in the face of forces bent on their destruction, there would be no Jewish communities to carry on the traditions of their faith; there would be no child Jesus born and raised in the teachings of the Torah. There would be no Christmas.



Light of Torah  
[www.lightoftorah.net](http://www.lightoftorah.net)

Text: Teresa Pirola  
Design: Sarann Ryan  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 37:1—40:23

Vayeshev:  
'he settled'

## Why reflect on Torah?

Today's Torah discussion is a good example of how traditional Jewish approaches teach us to plumb the depths of scripture. We begin with a subtle 'irritation' in the text: just two verses, a brief, seemingly irrelevant episode where Joseph encounters 'a man' in a field (Genesis 37:15-17).

Interpretation of a text is often shaped by what precedes and follows. To this point, Joseph is the favored, gifted son, but also perceived as lording his gift over others and quick to tell tales about his brothers (37:2-9). They hate him for it, and even his doting father is concerned (37:10-11).

What happens *after* our selected episode? Joseph is betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and imprisoned in Egypt. While tragic, it is also a decisive turning point in the story of God's chosen people. As Genesis proceeds we will see that Joseph's path saves his family from death during a famine. It will also lead to the enslavement of future generations until the day that Moses leads them out of Egypt.

In this context, before such dramatic events, how does God's Word speak to us through these two verses? Read on...



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 37:1–40:23

This week's Torah portion begins the saga of seventeen year old Joseph and his brothers, a saga which will continue to the end of the book of Genesis.

Our focus today is a connecting episode in Genesis 37:15-17. Jacob has sent Joseph to check on his brothers at Shechem, and on his way Joseph meets an unnamed man who asks him a question and points him in the direction of his brothers. Read the whole of chapter 37, then return to verses 12-17 for closer inspection.

## Tasting Torah

*A man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' 'I am seeking my brothers,' he said. (37:15-16).*

Who is this unnamed man who appears out of nowhere and disappears from the narrative just as elusively? Why does the Torah record this conversation? Would it change anything if it were omitted? Remember that the Jewish sages teach us to ponder every detail of the sacred text. With your *havrutah*/discussion partner, how do you interpret this scene?

## Touching Torah

Perhaps you were reminded of last week's reflection, where a mysterious man wrestles with Jacob. Is the mystery man who questions Joseph also a divine figure? Is there more to his question "*What are you seeking?*" than is immediately apparent? Is this a question to be answered at a deep level by the reader?

The text tells us that Jacob sends Joseph "*from the valley of Hebron*" (37:14). But isn't Hebron on a mountain, queries Rashi.<sup>1</sup> Why would the Torah describe it as a valley? In keeping with the midrash, Rashi answers that here the text signifies that from this moment the *depths* of God's designs for the patriarch Abraham are being realized. In fact, the Hebrew word for 'valley' (*e'mek*) shares the same root as the words for 'deep' (*o'mek*) and 'profound' (*a'mok*). Why might this moment be profoundly significant? Continue to ponder and discuss in *havrutah*.

## Depthing Torah

Humanly speaking, this day is significant for Joseph. From the status of a spoilt teenager found 'wandering' [another translation: 'blundering'] in the fields, he begins the painful journey to maturity, even rising to power in Pharaoh's household.<sup>2</sup> Will he find what he is *truly* seeking?

On another level, this moment is highly significant for the history of Israel. As the sages repeatedly observe: *On this day, the exile of Egypt began.*<sup>3</sup> The day Jacob unknowingly sends Joseph to near-death at the hands of his brothers, events are set in motion that will lead to the Israelites' exile in Egypt and their consequent liberation which remains central to Jewish faith, and to Christian faith too. Through what appears as chance human encounters or accidents of history, God's designs are perfected. Indeed, Rashi—with reference to Daniel 9:21—views the man in the 'valley' as the angel Gabriel who appears to Joseph at the appointed time.

## Doing Torah

By now we can see that Joseph's encounter with a divine emissary signifies a dramatic 'pause' in the sacred storytelling. The Torah affords us a moment to 'catch our breath' and reflect on the hand of God guiding human events. Are we awake to the sacred 'pauses' in our own lives? What does this Torah passage teach you?



## Faith & Life

Sometimes people appear in our lives for a short time, they awaken us to important truths, they open doors, they point the way...Then they are gone, leaving us with a sense of being in an altogether 'new' place and on a divinely ordained journey.

Have you ever had an experience like this?

1. Rashi: 11th century Torah scholar, with reference to Gen. R. 84:13.  
2. Commentators also allow for a more positive view of Joseph: e.g., he is dedicated to searching for his brothers for his father's sake, persisting despite the dangers of being out in the fields alone. See Munk, p.504.  
3. E.g., Targum Yonasan, quoted in Munk, p.501.  
Bibliography: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi's Commentary* (NY, 1995, 1999); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1994). Scripture: NRSV.