



5 ways to bear light

In December both Christians and Jews hold candlelighting rituals as part of their festivals, Advent and Hanukkah respectively. According to Jewish tradition, Hanukkah recalls the re-dedication of the temple after the Maccabean uprising (2nd C. BCE) and the miracle of a small cruse of oil that allowed the menorah (temple candelabrum) to stay lit for eight days despite there being only enough oil for one. As Christians we might ponder the idea that had not the Jews prevailed in the face of a powerful Greek Hellenistic force 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.

Read. In 1 & 2 Maccabees **read the stories** of the Jewish martyrs who chose death at the hands of the Greeks rather than renounce their faith and ancestral practices.

Pray. As you light candles on the Advent wreath, **remember with gratitude** the enduring faith of the Jewish people without whom our Christian story would not exist.

Reflect. Just as the temple was re-dedicated (Hanukkah means 'dedication') in ancient times, contemporary Judaism views Hanukkah as a time for spiritual

re-dedication and renewal of lives. As you seek spiritual renewal as a Christian during the Advent season, **be aware** of a Jewish renewal practice occurring around the same time.

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. **Draw inspiration** from this act of faith.

Act. God, who is Light, dwells within. Today, re-dedicate your life to the Lord. Resolve to **walk in the Light!**

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Light of Torah offers a way for Catholic parishes and other Christian communities to grow in appreciation of the 'Torah' (the first five books of their bible), drawing on insights from Jewish biblical interpretation.

At Vatican II the Council fathers acknowledged the deep historical and spiritual links between Christians and Jews. Indeed, our Scriptures come to us from and through the Jewish people who have never ceased to study their Scriptures. With the help of this wisdom we Christians can grow to a deeper understanding of the Scriptures that Jesus, as a faithful Jew, knew, loved and quoted. To be immersed in Torah is to draw close to Jesus.

Just as the Church has a schedule (lectionary) for reflecting on Scripture, so does Judaism have a liturgical calendar for studying a portion of the Torah each week, and for celebrating sacred seasons and festivals. At this time of year, both Christians and Jews prepare to celebrate festivals of light: Christmas and Hanukkah respectively. May the flame in our hearts, the divine spark that can never be extinguished, be rekindled anew as both religious communities hear God's call to be 'a light to the nations' (Isa.42:6).



Genesis 37:1—40:23

Vayeshev:
'he settled'



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 37:1—40:23

Today's portion begins the saga of Joseph, the favored son of Jacob and a victim of his brothers' hatred. The saga will continue for the rest of the book of Genesis, however it is interrupted in chapter 38 by a story concerning Jacob's fourth son, Judah. It is a colorful story indeed, containing all the themes of tabloid journalism! Death, deception, prostitution, incest, accusation and counter-accusation... what on earth were our faith-ancestors thinking when they included this tale in the sacred scriptures?! Read the whole of Genesis 38 for yourself, then let's join in conversation with the sages.

Tasting Torah

After reading the story of Judah and Tamar share your initial reactions to the text. What observations and questions arose for you about the narrative, the characters? Why do you think this story was preserved in the tradition? Would it help if you knew that the bible tells us that King David is the descendent of Perez, one of the twin sons of Tamar and Judah's union? And the lineage of David, of course, is that of the messiah. You can follow the family tree in the Book of Ruth (see 4:12,18-22) and also in the genealogy that opens the Gospel of Matthew.

Touching Torah

Yet again we see in the bible how the divine plan emerges amidst surprising, complex (some would say dysfunctional!) human relationships. Judah is guilty of breaking his promise to Tamar to provide her with a husband. While she is legally part of his household, he effectively disposes of her by telling her to "Remain a widow in your father's house" (38:11). Judah deceives, and is himself deceived. If we know the family story we might say: Just like his father, Jacob! Yet the sages note that, when confronted, Judah displays integrity in unhesitatingly owning up to his actions ("She is more in the right than I," v.26), vindicating Tamar and saving her from the death penalty.

Depthing Torah

The Jewish sages rally in support of Tamar too, noting that as a victim of Judah's broken promise Tamar displays a holy tenacity in cementing her relationship to the family of Abraham. Indeed, some commentators compare her character to that of Rebekah, Judah's grandmother and a matriarch of the chosen people. Both women endured sadness in their personal lives (Rebekah was barren and Tamar lost two husbands in death), yet neither resigned themselves to fate, even boldly taking matters into their own hands in order to forge a new chapter in the life of the divinely blessed family of the patriarchs.

Thus, while both Judah and Tamar are guilty of deception, in the eyes of the sages they also exhibit admirable qualities and play a decisive role in the divine plan. Because of Tamar's risk-taking and Judah's repentance, the roots of the messianic line take hold in salvation history. What an extraordinary story!

Doing Torah

How would you enter into the above Torah discussion? Do you agree with the views expressed? Support your opinion with reference to the text. What thoughts, insights, questions, dilemmas emerge from your own pondering of the Judah/Tamar story?

What stories of determination and tenacious undertaking are part of your own family tree? Share them over a meal. (See example at right)



Faith & Life

My grandmother loved music, lived for music, and was a devoted piano teacher all her adult life. But her musical vocation developed only through sheer determination. My grandmother grew up in poverty so musical instruments and lessons were well beyond her family's means. But that didn't stop her. She told me how as a child she would badger her classmates as they came out of piano lessons, sit them down on the curb where they waited for the bus, and insist that they explain to her everything they had been taught. Then she would 'play' the notes on a keyboard that she had drawn on a piece of cardboard.

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1994).
Scripture: NRSV.