



## 5 ways

to hear the Christmas story afresh

Rather than thinking of Christmas as a feast that separates us from Judaism, we can think of it as one which plunges us into the Jewish roots of our Christian faith. By now our weekly Torah reading will be sensitizing our ears to the references to the Hebrew scriptures permeating the Christmas story. Read, for example, the genealogy of Jesus that opens Matthew's Gospel (1:1-17). Is that tedious list of names starting to sound wonderfully familiar? For instance:

### David, Abraham

*"The genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham"* (Mt 1:1).

The Gospel immediately connects Jesus to the great Israelite king (David) and the one (Abraham) by whom *'all families of the earth shall be blessed'* (Gen. 12:3).

### Abraham, Isaac, Jacob

Matthew 1:2 names the three great patriarchs. Through our Torah reading we are coming to know their stories, and those of the matriarchs: Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah.

### Judah and his brothers

Of Jacob's sons, only Judah finds explicit mention in this genealogy.

### Perez and Zerah

The twin brothers are the fruit of Judah and Tamar's union—a story told in this week's Torah portion (Gen.38).

### Five surprising women

Of special interest in view of Mary's place in the genealogy (Mt 1:16) is mention of four other mothers: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba—all critically important to God's plan, yet each a surprising choice due to the suspicion of illicit sexual relations or their status as an 'outsider'. (See Gen.38; Josh.2; Ruth 3; 2 Sam.11-12.)



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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 41:1—44:17

*Mikeitz:*  
'at the end of'

## Why reflect on Torah?

*A story is told about the 20th century Jewish scholar Martin Buber who was speaking at a gathering of Christians and Jews. As part of his speech he said, "When the Messiah comes, someone, no doubt, will ask him, 'Have you been here before?'" Buber added, "I hope to be standing right next to him so I can whisper in his ear, 'Don't answer.'"*

Within the humor lies a statement about convergence and divergence of belief. Jews and Christians part ways when it comes to belief in the Incarnation: God revealed in the humanity of Jesus. That 'the Word became flesh,' is central to the message of Christmas.

Even so, Jews and Christians can stand shoulder to shoulder in a future hope, in the expectation of an ultimate messianic coming—even if for Christians it is a profession that *'Christ will come again'*.

While respecting our differences, may our Torah reading lead us to deep gratitude for the Jewish people, of whom Jesus was a son. Without the Jewish people and their Scriptures we simply would not know the one, true, living God.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 41:1–44:17

By the time we reach this week's Torah portion we can't help but be impressed by the dramatic reversal of Joseph's fortunes. From being the victimized younger brother, a slave and a prisoner in an Egyptian jail, he has now risen to the heights of power, second only to Pharaoh. Further, he marries into Egyptian royal circles and fathers two sons. He has discovered his own father, Jacob, to be alive, and he has the upper hand over his brothers. A happy ending for Joseph? Or is there something a little unnerving about it all? Read as much as you can of this Torah portion, and join the discussion.

## Tasting Torah

Pharaoh further said to Joseph, "See, I put you in charge of all the land of Egypt" (Gen. 41:41). Pharaoh's commissioning is just the start of Joseph's fortunes. Read about the rest of his reward in 41:37-45. What do you think... is this the ultimate success story, or are there warning signs, like dark clouds gathering on the horizon? Talk it over with your havrutah partner. How does God's word speak to you about the sudden fortunes of Joseph?

## Touching Torah

One disturbance in the apparent idyllic transformation of Joseph in this Torah portion is the 'cat and mouse' game he plays with his brothers, and how hurtful it is to his father.

We might also reflect on his naming of his sons, Manasseh and Ephraim in 41:51-52. What might these names suggest: that Joseph is still acutely aware of his Hebrew origins, or that he is doing his best to forget?

Perhaps you have the impression that Joseph is well assimilated into Egyptian society. By marrying a woman of Egypt, a polytheistic society, could Joseph be risking his faith in the God of his ancestors? This latter thought so alarmed the sages that a whole midrashic story was woven around the identity of Joseph's wife, according to which she was not an Egyptian but rather his niece, the daughter of his sister Dinah, secretly adopted by an Egyptian family! Thus was Joseph married into his own people.<sup>1</sup>

## Depthing Torah

Moving to contemporary commentary, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observes that despite the success and towering influence of Joseph, it is not by his name that God's chosen people came to be identified in history. They are named after Jacob's new identity: 'Israel'. And later the ancient Israelites came to be known as *Yehudim* ('Jews'), after the tribe of Judah. Further, it is from Judah's lineage, not Joseph's, that King David (and the Messiah) descends.

Judah never equals the social status of Joseph. Nor is he called *HaTzaddik* ('the righteous one') as the tradition refers to Joseph. What, then, is Judah's outstanding quality upon the Jewish nation is built? It is his willingness to repent, to return to the right path after sin. This is evident in Tamar's story (Gen.38) and becomes clear as the Joseph saga proceeds.

Looking ahead, we see that the Torah reveals Joseph's rise to power to be a mixed blessing, for the day will come when Egypt will no longer be a safe haven for the Israelites. Despite Joseph's revered status, the sages are wary of embracing Joseph's fortunes unquestioningly. And perhaps you are too... Continue to ponder in havrutah.

## Doing Torah

Discuss both the blessings and entrapments of riches, fame and sudden success. Have you a story to share along these lines?



## Faith & Life

The memory of Joseph's children is today expressed through a tender moment in Jewish family life by which Jewish parents bless their sons each Shabbat, asking God that they '*may be like Ephraim and Manasseh*'. [There is also a blessing for daughters.]

Ephraim and Manasseh are unique among Jacob's grandchildren in that they become independent tribes of Israel, on par with the sons of Jacob. Thus says the tradition: while raised in an Egyptian society, they remained faithful to the God of Israel.

*With what words, gestures, hopes do you bless your children?*

1. Several midrashic sources carry this story. See Munk, pp.550-551.

Bibliography: Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1994); Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem, 2009). Scripture: NJPS.