

5 torah reading tips

As Christians, our Torah reading during December takes place during Advent, a sacred season in which we prepare our hearts and minds and homes for the celebration of the Lord's Nativity. To be certain, scripture has a special place in this season. And how beautiful it is that we are reading scripture with an appreciation of our historical and biblical links with the Jewish people, of whom Jesus was a son. Here are five tips for the spiritual journey:

Visibility. Don't allow the secular trappings of the Christmas season to swamp your domestic environment. Place your bible in a visible and prominent position in your home. Touch it with gentle reverence as you pass by.

Priority. Life gets busier and busier as the calendar year comes to an end and Christmas draws near. Resist the tendency to skip your Torah reading. Rather, increase its priority as an Advent commitment.

Patience. Focus on slow, patient bible reading. Pause a little longer on this word, that phrase. Read

aloud and let the 'music' and rhythms of the text probe your consciousness. Recall the oral/aural traditions from which the Hebrew scriptures emerged.

Resonance. At the conclusion of your reading, choose a word or phrase from the text and 'chew on it' throughout your day. Allow God's word to 'percolate' within your mind, heart, deeds and intentions.

Sharing. Do you have Jewish friends, colleagues, neighbors, family members? Exchange some thoughts on a bible verse or a conviction which both faith traditions hold in common.



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
© Light of Torah, 2011

Light of Torah is a ministry arising from the Catholic community. In the spirit of Vatican II's call to Jewish-Christian reconciliation, Light of Torah encourages Torah reflection in homes and parishes, drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions.

Reproduction permitted for non-commercial pastoral use.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Genesis 41:1—44:17

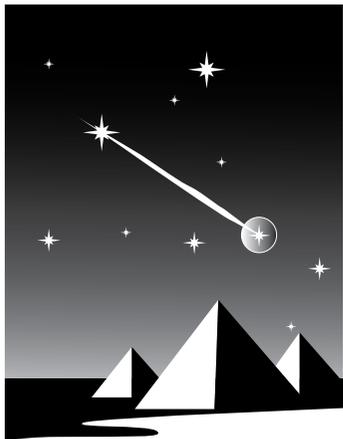
Miketz:
'at the end of'

Why reflect on Torah?

Light of Torah is a practical initiative for awakening us Christians to what we can learn from the Jewish tradition. Drawing on Jewish approaches and sources we explore the Torah (first five books of the bible) from fresh perspectives that nourish our relationship with God's word.

In 1980 at Mainz, Germany, Pope John Paul II explicitly acknowledged the Jewish people as the people of the covenant "*never revoked by God.*" He made a similar statement in 2000, at Mount Sinai, referring to the Mosaic covenant in which "God seals his love by making the covenant that he *will never renounce.*" These statements reflect the teaching of the Second Vatican Council when the Church entered a new era of reconciliation with the Jewish people. They correct a misconception held for centuries among Christians: the view that the Jews had forfeited their status as God's chosen people. Today the Church teaches that the Jewish people remain chosen and dear to the heart of God, for God does not take back divine promises (see *Nostra Aetate*, 4).

Their graced role in the history of salvation is unique, irreplaceable and ongoing.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 41:1—44:17

In this week's Torah portion Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy food while their own land is in the grip of famine. However he does not send Benjamin. Having already lost his son Joseph, Jacob is determined to protect Benjamin, his youngest. In Egypt the brothers meet Joseph (although they do not recognize him) who is now in a position of power. Joseph taunts them in a dangerous game, demanding that they fetch Benjamin in return for protection and food. Is Jacob's heart about to be broken all over again? Read the story in 42:1-43:14, with particular attention to the character of Jacob.

Tasting Torah

Having read the story in Gen. 42:1-43:14, share some initial reactions to the text. In particular, which verses reveal something of Jacob's inner anguish? E.g., read 42:4 in the light of the preceding verses. See, too, 42:36-38. The family is desperate for food, but still Jacob will not part with Benjamin. What does this suggest about the family dynamics?

Touching Torah

Attuned to the rabbinic sensitivity to detail, let us now undertake an even closer reading of the text. Compare 42:2 ("Go down that way and buy us provisions from there, that we may live and not die") with Jacob's instruction in 43:2 ("Go back and buy us a bit of food").

Did you notice the qualification "a bit"? There is nothing to suggest the famine has eased. On the contrary, "the famine bore heavily on the land" (43:1) and their supplies are depleted. Why would Jacob say, "a bit of food"?

In this tiny textual inclusion did you hear the deeper pathos of the scene? Jacob, say some Jewish Torah commentators, is clutching at straws. Perhaps if his family asks for little, the powerful man in Egypt will likewise lower his cruel expectations and spare Benjamin. Judah, however, confronts his father with the cold hard facts of the situation. Re-read Judah's reply in 43:3-5.

Depthing Torah

How does Jacob respond to Judah's reality-check? Reflect on his angry statement in 43:6-7. What point is there in apportioning blame? What good can a family row about past events possibly achieve? It changes nothing of their grim predicament and only postpones the one choice that has any hope of saving them all from death by starvation. Notice how a careful reading of the text reveals the Torah's emotional intensity.

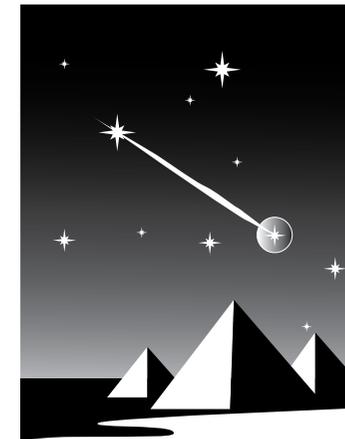
Did you note, too, how the text suddenly switches to using Jacob's 'other' name: Israel? (Recall Gen.32:29: "*No more shall you be called Jacob, but Israel...for you have wrestled with God and with human beings, and you have prevailed.*") Why might it do this?

After another intervention by Judah, Jacob (Israel) ends his procrastination and gives the order for Benjamin's departure to Egypt. He is decisive, and yet... can we still hear strains of desperation resounding in 43:11-14?

Doing Torah

Think about the complexities of families and the difficult, even heart-breaking decisions which must sometimes be made. In what way does this Torah portion speak to your life?

Discuss your experience of reading the finer detail of this text. Through this Torah reading program are you discovering the benefits (and challenges) of a slow, patient, sensitized reading of scripture?



Ponder the human complexities within the sacred story...

When Joseph eventually meets Benjamin, the Torah tells us: "He looked up and saw his [full] brother Benjamin, his mother's son" (43:29). We are reminded that the mother of both Benjamin and Joseph was Rachel. Rachel, who died in Gen.35:19, was Jacob's great love. (You can revisit their love story in chapter 29 of Genesis.) Perhaps this is part of the reason why Jacob's heart clung to Joseph and Benjamin. By contrast, little concern seems to be shown for Simeon who is being held in Egyptian captivity while Jacob procrastinates!

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda).