



5 thoughts on discernment

In the Torah the story of Abraham and his descendents portrays a certain ambiguous relationship with the land of Egypt. On the one hand Egypt provides a place of refuge from famine and opportunity for growth and expansion. Yet, ultimately, it becomes a place of entrapment and slavery. The Torah leads us to consider the impact of our decisions; how today's choices affect not only our own future but those of generations to come. In the context of your life, reflect on a decision about whether or not to 'go to Egypt.'

Career. An attractive job offer may mean more money and prestige, but it may also lead to sacrifices in family time.

Funding. Obtaining funding from an external source may ensure the survival of an organisation, but it may also compromise its core values if they are not shared by the funding partner.

Marriage. Marrying 'for love alone' (and discounting the compatibility of a partner's religious values) may fulfil personal emotional needs, but it may also lead to a rupture in religious practice for generations to come.

Travel. The choice to 'travel the world' after leaving school may open up new horizons of experience, but it may also delay the progress of important relationships and employment tasks 'back home.'

Reflection. The examples above are not meant to imply a simplistic choice of 'Right v Wrong.' After all, in Genesis we read of God warning Isaac *against* travel to Egypt (26:2), while *supporting* Jacob's move to Egypt (46:3). We might conclude that the Torah teaches us to be attentive to the Lord's voice in all our decision-making, and to entrust our future to divine providence.



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 44:18—47:27

Vayigash:
'he approached'

Why reflect on Torah?

The *Light of Torah* series is a practical initiative for encouraging Christians to read the Torah (the first five books of the bible), with attention to the Jewish tradition from which these books arose and which continues to ponder these sacred texts.

During Advent and Christmas, Christians who are involved in this weekly Torah-reading program may be inclined to abandon it in favor of the readings which rightly claim our attention on the Christian liturgical calendar. Understandably, the limits of time mean we have to discern and order our priorities. We encourage you, however, to persist with your Torah reading as much as is practical throughout the seasons of Advent and Christmas. A deeper understanding of the Hebrew scriptures, and of God's irrevocable election of the Jewish people, draws us into the heart of Jesus, himself a Jew, born of a Jewish woman, and whose birth was interpreted by Jewish disciples. As *Nostra Aetate* (Vatican II) reminds us: "The Church cannot forget that it received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant."



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 44:18—47:27

Today's portion appears to bring the saga of Jacob's sons to a happy conclusion. In a tearful reunion, Joseph reveals himself as their brother and immediately arranges that Jacob be brought to Egypt along with his entire progeny. In this way, the family will find protection and survive the famine. Jacob is overjoyed to learn that Joseph is alive and eagerly makes his way to him. Read the story in chapters 45-46.

During the journey to Egypt God speaks to Jacob in a dream. God's message is one of reassurance... or is it? Read carefully 46:1-7, then join in conversation with the Jewish sages.

Tasting Torah

God addressed Israel in a night vision, saying, "Jacob! Jacob! ... I am God, the God of your father; do not be afraid to go down to Egypt" (Genesis 46:2-3).

Abravanel (15th C. Torah commentator) poses the question: Why would God say "Do not be afraid" when there is no suggestion that Jacob was fearful about going to Egypt? Indeed, the text mentions only his joyful eagerness to be reunited with Joseph. How might you respond to Abravanel's question?

Touching Torah

Says one Light of Torah reader: "After all the tragedy endured by Jacob, including the way Joseph has been 'toying' with his family, it is not surprising that Jacob might be fearful of their future in Egypt." We can wonder, too, why Joseph, for all his emotion and familial concern, doesn't make the trek to Canaan to greet his elderly father. But if these factors cause Jacob anxiety, why doesn't the text explicitly portray his fear? Are we being reminded that God knows what lies deep and unarticulated in the heart of the believer?

An alternative approach can be taken by exploring the reference to Jacob's father, Isaac (vv. 1, 3). It prompts us to recall a previous passage (Gen. 26:2) where God explicitly tells Isaac NOT to go to Egypt. In this view, Jacob is afraid of dishonoring the memory of his father's obedience to God. Is this interpretation convincing to you?

Depthing Torah

A further interpretation emerges in a 13th century Jewish commentary (*Hizkuni*) echoing a midrash:

*"Jacob was afraid and said: Now that I am about to go down to Egypt the days are at hand foretold by my forefathers regarding the decree of bondage and affliction on my seed in a land not their own."*¹

We know from Gen.15:13-14, as well as from the drama to follow in the Book of Exodus, that what began as a survival plan and family reunion in Egypt will amount, 400 years later, to the slavery of the Hebrews under Egyptian rule. It will take God's intervention through Moses to bring the descendants of Jacob back to Canaan, the promised land of their ancestors.

Perhaps, then, the Torah alludes to Jacob's 'greater vision.' He sees beyond the joy of family reunion and the comforts of Egypt, and is concerned for the destiny of his people, their fidelity to God, their ties with their God-given homeland. As Rashi (11th C.) puts it: *Jacob "was distressed because he had been obliged to leave the homeland."* Continue to discuss in the light of this interpretation.

Doing Torah

As I contemplate the future, what fears do I hold, for my children, grandchildren, my community, my church? Do I allow God to speak to these fears in my life of prayer?



Faith & Life

A parent reflects:

"I think that 'fear' is part of the experience of living, loving, believing. Certainly it is part of the experience of raising children. As a parent I carry deep hopes for my kids. Sometimes I look at the way society is going—secularism, the breakdown in family life, the threat of terrorism—I am fearful of the future that will be theirs... Will they be safe? Happy? Will they find love? Will they know God? I can only do my best as a parent in the present moment, and entrust them and their future to God."

1. See Leibowitz, p. 501.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY: Lambda). Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (URJ Press, 2005, 2006). Scripture: see Plaut.