



5 blessings

Try this Torah exercise at a meal with family/friends: Between table guests divide up the Divine Blessings of Lev. 26:3-13. Have someone introduce this section of the Torah portion, then read it aloud. Next, invite each person to share a reflection, a question, or a prayer relating to ‘their’ blessing, especially in terms of the peoples and lands of our times. Finish by praying together the Lord’s Prayer.

Fruitfulness of the Land

(Lev. 26:3-5) What does the gift of rain mean to you? Are you in touch with agricultural settings, or are you a city-dweller? Which lands are in drought, or flood, and need our prayers?

Peace, Shalom (Lev. 26:6)

Peace: our deepest human longing! How is peace expressed, in the heart, the family, the neighborhood, the nation, the world...? For whom do I want the blessing of peace at this time?

Victory over enemies.

(Lev. 26:7-8) What is this term ‘enemy’ to you? A person, a nation, a policy, an attitude, a behavioral issue? When

Jesus taught us to ‘Love your enemies,’ how might he have interpreted this divine blessing from Torah?

Flourishing of the nation

(Lev. 26:9-10) What does it mean for a family, a community, a nation to ‘flourish’? What might be its fruits: children, grandchildren, loving values, knowledge, life-skills, resilience? What of the gifts of the Spirit?

Divine presence. (Lev. 26:11-13) How do you know that God is with you? Did you always know this? Do you know it now? What are the signs of the Divine Presence? Who taught you to recognize them?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

“Whoever does not know the Scriptures does not know the power of God nor his wisdom. Ignoring the Scriptures means ignoring Christ,” said Pope Benedict XVI, citing St. Jerome, in his opening address to the 2008 Synod of Bishops (5 Oct ‘08).

In today’s climate of Jewish-Christian relations, we might extend this statement: *Whoever does not know the Scriptures as the expression of Jewish faith, does not know the power of God nor his wisdom.*

Tragically, for much of the Church’s history Christians have ignored the Jewishness of Jesus, and have adopted a conflictual or at least superior stance towards the people of the covenant who shaped his story and through whom the Church received its own scriptures.

What a welcome, Spirit-led transformation occurred last century at Vatican II. There the Church, at its highest level of teaching authority, embraced the unique relationship between Jews and Christians: their shared history, sacred texts, and close spiritual ties.

This *Light of Torah* series seeks to continue this transformation among parish audiences by listening to Jewish insights into Scripture.



Leviticus 26:3—27:34

Behukotai
‘my laws’



Light of Torah
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 26:3—27:34

This week brings us to the end of the Book of Leviticus. Our focus is the opening verses of a series of blessings found in Leviticus 26:3-13. The blessings are sometimes categorized as follows: 1) fruitfulness of the land; 2) peace; 3) victory over enemies; 4) the flourishing of the nation; 5) assurance of the Divine Presence.

1. Rashi: French Torah scholar (1040-1105).
2. Babylonian Talmud: *Sotah* 14a.
Bibliography: *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 3* (NY: Mesorah, 1999). The input of R. Dr Pesach Schindler and notes of Br Jack Driscoll etc are gratefully acknowledged.

Tasting Torah

If you follow my statutes and keep my commandments and observe them faithfully, I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit (Lev. 26:3-4; NRSV).

Most versions translate: ‘If you **follow** my statutes...’ However the Hebrew verb is literally ‘walk.’ What does this suggest: to walk in the Lord’s ways? Is ‘walking’ in Torah’s commandments a more active, alert, responsive set of choices than ‘following’?

Touching Torah

Let’s draw on the thinking of Rashi¹ and his sources. When we read ‘*If you follow my statutes,*’ we may think this refers to the fulfillment of the commandments. However in the next breath the Scripture says, ‘*and observe my commandments.*’ Since the command to observe, or fulfil, the commandments is already stated, what is the meaning of ‘*If you follow my statutes*’? Interprets Rashi: It means that one must *toil* (labour, work) in the study of Torah. For since the Hebrew word for ‘follow’ literally means ‘walk,’ then this is a strenuous activity. Further, you shall toil in the study of Torah *in order to* observe and fulfill the commandments.

The *Sefat Emet*, a great 19th century Chassidic rabbi, says this toiling goes beyond the simple acquisition of Torah wisdom. Walking in God’s laws means to become so connected to the will of God that the presence of the Almighty becomes manifest on earth. *Thy Kingdom come.*

Depthing Torah

From Rabbi Hama, living in Galilee around 230 CE, we glean another insight when he asks:

How is it possible for a person to walk in the path of the Shechinah [God’s Presence]? Has it not been stated that ‘the Lord your God is a consuming fire’ [see Deut.4:24]? The meaning of walking in the Divine path is to walk in the path of the [ethical] character of the Holy One... As He clothes the needy [as for Adam & Eve, Gen. 3:21] so shall you clothe the needy.²

Rabbi Hama continues:

As He visits the sick [as with Abraham in Gen.18:1] so shall you visit the sick.

As he comforts the mourners [as with Isaac after his father’s death in Gen.25:11] so shall you comfort mourners.

Thus the concept of ‘walking in God’s ways’ underpins the human commitment to *imitate* the Divine by performing acts of loving kindness, also described as *Imitatio Dei* (‘Imitation of God’).

Doing Torah

‘Toiling, laboring, walking...’

- What kind of effort (walk/toil/labor) am I making to live according to God’s ways?
- Notice how the Gospels use ‘work’ images, such as going into the vineyard, to describe one’s relationship to the Kingdom of God.
- Does the ‘toil’ of discipleship seem ‘too much’? What encouragement can we give one another?



Walk with me

A hospital chaplain says:
“Standing at the nurses station, I noticed a doctor speaking on the telephone to a family whose father lay in the cardiac unit in a serious condition. What caught my attention was the intensity with which the doctor spoke. Deep compassion marked her voice and body language. Anyone would think it was her own father at risk. I am often impressed by the hospital staff here. They have a gift for ‘walking with’ patients in their suffering.”