



## 5 features

of traditional Jewish approaches to scripture

Jewish study of Scripture has been going on much longer than Christianity, and there is much that we Christians can continue to learn from the processes and insights of Jewish Torah study. In general, traditional Jewish approaches to the study of scripture tend to display the following features:

- 1. Ahistorical:** the text is viewed as timeless; the meaning is not bound by the historical or cultural circumstances of its writing; it is valid for now.
- 2. Open:** the text is not constrained by any one interpretation, but is capable of many different interpretations. This does not mean that interpretation is totally free and without limits. Interpretation is controlled by the 'plain meaning' of the text and by the interpretations of the sages.
- 3. Associative:** any part of scripture can be used to throw light on any other part. The sages manoeuvre their way through the text, making insightful links between diverse passages.
- 4. Playful:** there is joy, freedom and creativity in the way the text is handled, and in the way the text is expanded through commentary and story.
- 5. Spiritual:** the text almost always has something to do with our relationship with God, and to how we are to live our lives.

See Kevin McDonnell, "Reading the Bible as Jesus Read It: Traditional Jewish Methods of Bible Study for Christians" in *Grace and Truth* 22:1 (2005): 44-53.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 26:3—27:34

*Behukotai:*  
'my laws'

## Why reflect on Torah?

*What ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament... Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years.*

*(The Jewish People & their Sacred Scriptures, 2001)*

Jewish interpretation of the bible is a rich source of insight and learning for Christians. This conviction resonates with the Church's embrace of its Jewish roots at Vatican II and has been affirmed in church statements since then.

Jewish approaches to the bible put us in touch with a tradition that was dear to the heart of Jesus, himself a Jew. These methods, honed over so many centuries via oral and written traditions, offer interpretative tools which are new to most Christians.

This *Light of Torah* series promotes a method of biblical reflection based on such approaches. We call it 'Archaeology of the Word'. Like an archaeologist patiently digging into layers of soil to uncover hidden treasures, we dig gradually and deeply into God's Word, sifting layer after layer of text, examining this piece and that, and rejoicing when we find precious gems of insight.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 26:3—27:34

We come to the final chapters of the Book of Leviticus. In the opening section of chapter 26 we are told of the blessings which will ensue if the people follow God's ways. Among these blessings are peace, prosperity, safety from wild animals, fertility of land and people, and victory over enemies. In today's reflection we explore a curious detail which caught the eye of the sages in this latter blessing. Read all the blessings in 26:1-13, then ponder the reference to victory over enemies in 26:7-8.

## Tasting Torah

*"You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword"* (Leviticus 26:7-8).

The sages we hear from today approach this verse in terms of the spiritual struggle of virtuous people amidst a multitude who could not care less for God or the ways of the Torah. They notice something odd about the Torah's mathematics in verse 8. If five chase 100, then wouldn't it be more consistent to maintain the same ratio and say 100 shall chase 2000? Why does the ratio change so dramatically: 100 shall chase 10,000?! How do you interpret the discrepancy?

## Touching Torah

Perhaps, like Rabbi Bahya,<sup>1</sup> you have tried to solve the math with more math: *"Five of you shall chase a hundred, and a hundred 'fives' of you shall chase ten thousand. Thus the account is seen to match."*

But other commentators are not so impressed by this ingenious solution. If the numbers tally, what does the second phrase add to the first? Rashi<sup>2</sup> finds interpretative energy in the very fact that the numbers *don't* match. He says, *"You cannot compare a few [i.e., 5] who perform the commandments of the Torah to many [i.e., 100] who perform the commandments of the Torah."* What do you think Rashi is getting at here?

## Depthing Torah

Rashi's path of enquiry leads to the observation that something surprising happens when virtuous people band together against wickedness. Their impact and chance of success increase in a manner disproportionate to their increase in numbers.

Gersonides (Ralbag)<sup>3</sup> explains it this way: In a military situation one soldier against two will not win; but 100 against 200 have a far better chance. An increased minority can even find an advantage over a larger army. With focused resources and clever strategy, a small team can outwit a larger force.

Thus the moral lesson emerging from this verse of blessing is to highlight the individual's responsibility to contribute to forces for good. Let no one say, "What difference can I, just one person, make to an already outnumbered group of Torah-observers?" In fact, teach the sages, when one faithful person joins forces with a small committed group he/she strengthens that group by far more than simply one person's individual efforts.

## Doing Torah

Continue to ponder this blessing of 'victory over enemies.' E.g., it is interesting that the blessing is not simply 'you will have no enemies', but that you will *overcome* your enemies even from what appears to be a weaker position. Perhaps this blessing is a one of hope, active resolve amidst struggle.



## Faith & life

Our Torah reflection reminds us that when even a few good people unite for good they can truly make a difference in a world that often appears indifferent to the paths of God. On our own we are like twigs which can easily be broken. But a bunch of twigs bound together is much harder to break, even though each twig in itself is fragile. Share an experience when you found this to be true.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993). Scripture: NRSV

1. Bahya Ibn Pakuda. 11th century. Spain; wrote a Jewish ethical classic 'Duties of the Heart.'
2. Rashi: Rabbi Shelomo Yizhaki (1040-1105), France.
3. Gersonides (Ralbag): Levi ben Gershon. French philosopher (1288-1344).