



5 ways

to expect the unexpected

Our Torah portion raises an interesting question for the life of faith: How do we make room for the movement of the Holy Spirit in our lives, especially when it is unexpected, unofficial, uncommissioned, unsought? Are we like Joshua trying to shut things down, or like Moses yearning for a full measure of the Spirit's presence in all? Five practical thoughts follow.

Pray. Love. Adore.

A life characterised by love, prayer, humility, and praise of God is a life lived 'in the Spirit.'

Listen. Openness to the Spirit involves a listening mind and heart. Listen to those with a different view and be ready to dialogue. Listen to the voices of the 'least'—the poor, the young, the marginalised. Listen to the Lord in prayer.

Discern. Competing goods require discernment. Since we can't be or do everything we need to weigh up our

options carefully and seek the Spirit's lead in a given situation.

Plan, but be flexible.

Planning is important, yet our planning should not be so rigid as to preclude unexpected people, events, ideas which the Lord may place in our lives.

Learn from history. Even in the face of longstanding traditions, things can and do change. We only need to remember Vatican II and how it surprised everyone.

Continue the discussion: how do we conduct our lives so as to be alert and responsive to the unexpected movements of the Spirit?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

In his homily at the Easter Vigil, 2013, Pope Francis spoke of the importance of being open to the unexpected ways of God. When God acts in surprising ways, it is not easy. It upsets our plans. It can leave us perplexed. Afraid. Confused. Yet God always surprises us. "Let us not be closed to the newness that God wants to bring into our lives," he said.

We might wonder how the Pope's words will play out in Jewish-Christian relations in the years ahead. Great strides have been taken since Vatican II, a council which was itself a great surprise and a work of the Spirit. As the fruits of the Council continue to unfold in the Church, as Christians become accustomed to viewing Jesus and Mary as Jews, as they discover a deep awe and respect for the eternal friendship between God and the Jewish people, as they become aware of the close spiritual ties between Christianity and Judaism, how will all this transform the way we think, theologize, pray, worship and respond to the world as a Church?

These are big questions which form a backdrop to our reflections in this *Light of Torah* series. Faithful to God's ways, may we 'expect the unexpected.'



Numbers 8:1—12:16

*Beha'alotkha:
'when you bring up'*



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www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 8:1—12:16

Read 11:16-30. In order to assist Moses in his heavy task of leadership, the Lord instructs him to gather seventy elders around the Tent of Meeting. There the Lord comes down in a cloud, speaks to Moses, and imparts some of the spirit on him to the seventy elders. “When the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied” (v.25).

But something unexpected happens. Two men who were *not* part of the select group also have the spirit rest on them, and they begin prophesying! Note the reaction of Joshua, and then ponder the response of Moses.

Tasting Torah

And a young man ran and told Moses, “Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp.” And Joshua son of Nun, the assistant of Moses, one of his chosen men, said, “My lord Moses, stop them!” But Moses said to him, ‘Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!’ (Numbers 11:27-29; NRSV)

How does Moses react to the unexpected prophesying of Eldad and Medad, neither of whom have been officially commissioned?

Touching Torah

Isaac Arama¹ views this incident as an example of Moses withstanding the test of jealousy. There is a Talmudic text that says: “A man envies everyone except his own son and disciple” (San. 105b). Arama points out that Moses’ humility goes a step further.

Apart from not envying those who were his disciples and the work of his hands...Moses earnestly desired that all the people of God should be prophets and that the Almighty should bestow His spirit upon them without him. Although this was a thing which every other man would be jealous of, Moses did not display jealousy.

After pondering the passage yourself, do you agree with Arama? Is there anything you wish to add or question? E.g., notice how this passage follows on from the previous story of the people’s complaints about the lack of meat.

Depthing Torah

Could it be that what we see in Moses is not a display of heroic humility, but rather the fatigue of a man worn down by a rebellious people? Upon hearing of two more men not conforming to his commands, perhaps he just hasn’t the energy to take it up! In which case his response to Joshua could be interpreted as either sarcasm or a plea to “leave them be (and me as well!).”

Not surprisingly, this interpretation does not find traction in the tradition. As Martin Buber² has pointed out, a tiny detail in the text gives rise to an even stronger affirmation of Arama’s view. While the report is that two men are *prophesying*, Moses replies using not the verb but the noun. “*Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets.*” In other words, Moses is not referring to a fleeting instance of the prophetic urge; rather he is expressing a desire that all should attain the permanent status of prophet, a status which he knows full well involves direct communion with God.

From Moses’ example, Hirsch³ concludes: “*We are shown that there is no monopoly on spiritual leadership... The lowliest of the nation shares with the highest the opportunity of being granted Divine inspiration.*”

Doing Torah

How do you enter this Torah conversation? What details of the text affect your interpretation? What links do you find with other parts of Scripture? What contemporary expressions of this biblical scene come to mind?



In the voice of the prophet Joel

“Then afterward I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions. Even on the male and female slaves, in those days, I will pour out my spirit.” (Joel 2:28-29).

1. Isaac Arama (1420-1494) Spanish Talmudic scholar.

2. Martin Buber, (1878-1965) philosopher.

3. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) German-Jewish rabbinical leader.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.