



## 5 ways

to be happily reverent

How we manage people, things and ourselves in places of worship (e.g., the Mass) can be a source of contention in parish communities. When does relaxedness and familiarity with the sacred become laxness? When does religious strictness become heartless? Today's Torah portion, while speaking of ancient practices, unearths some of these dilemmas in our own lives. Here are five thoughts toward a balanced approach (continue with your own best tip):

**1. Knowledge.** There is no shortage of people ready to tell you what the church "rules" are (from diverse perspectives)! Go to the documents and learn for yourself what the liturgical norms are; where they are strict and where they allow for pastoral adaptation.

**2. Patience.** We are all on a learning curve. As in any family, things can at times be chaotic and imperfect in a parish. What may appear to be a person's irreverent behavior may simply be anxiety or unfamiliarity with a church setting.

**3. Focus.** Whatever else is happening, something sacred IS happening. If we maintain this central focus on the Lord and the Lord's people, it will show through.

**4. Mindfulness.** No matter how many times this ritual action has been done before, be aware of its present context: this specific gathering of people in this unrepeatable moment.

**5. Joy.** Worship is ultimately praise of God. When we are truly praising God, earthly tensions have a way of dissipating.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 1:1—4:20

*Bamidbar:*  
'in the wilderness'

## 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 [interpretation] practised for more than 2000 years.*

(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2001)

Today our *Light of Torah* series commences the Book of Numbers. This book contains colourful narratives of the Israelites' long trek to the Promised Land, including the story of Moses' leadership struggles with a rebellious people.

But—be aware—its opening chapters can be daunting for first-time readers, filled as they are with statistics and detailed cultic instructions. We needn't be deterred by this... for this is God's Word, texts containing gems of wisdom to guide our lives in divine paths and stimulate our conversation with God.

How can we access these gems? One way is to be guided by the great sages of the Jewish tradition. Through generations of Torah study they have plumbed these sacred texts for spiritual meaning using traditional methods renowned for creative brilliance. *Light of Torah* is a resource for sharing such insights with Christian audiences.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Numbers 1:1—4:20

Today we commence the Book of Numbers. Our focus of reflection is drawn from the last twenty verses of our Torah portion, 4:1-20, in particular the final sentences. The Lord's instructions concern how the Tabernacle [a portable sanctuary] should be handled when the Israelites dismantle it in order to move camp. Read these instructions in chapter 4. Note that Aaron and his sons have a specific role in dismantling and covering the holy items, while the Kohathites (part of the Levite tribe) have the duty of transporting them.

## Tasting Torah

*"Aaron and his sons shall go in and assign each to a particular task and burden. But the Kohathites must not go in to look on the holy things even for a moment; otherwise they will die"* (Numbers 4:19-20).

In Jewish tradition we find the rabbis puzzling over these verses: Why the strict rules about who does what? Why the dire warning that the Kohathites must not look upon the holy objects? Where lies the danger? In the creative and prayerful spirit of the sages, ponder this before reading on.

## Touching Torah

The midrash<sup>1</sup> presents two different views, both containing the idea that assigned duties prevent chaos from breaking out in the presence of the Holy One. According to Rabbi Eleazar, the holiness of the Ark (the most precious item) is so overwhelming that people may be tempted to run away from it, preferring to carry something else like the lamp or the table. Rabbi Samuel takes the opposite view: the privilege of carrying the Ark may cause people to abandon the other objects and quarrel over the right to carry the Ark. Either way, at risk is the decorum befitting such a sacred environment. Therefore Aaron must *"assign each to a particular task and burden"* (v.19).

Imaginatively enter the scenes depicted by these storytelling traditions. How does the sacred text speak to you?

## Depthing Torah

Still, the question remains: why does the Torah forbid even 'looking' upon the holy things?

Says Hirsch,<sup>2</sup> the Torah is warning against looking upon a sacred thing without the correct depth of vision. Should the Kohathites have witnessed the covering of the holy objects they might have perceived them as ordinary things being packed up like any other household item. Thus the command to *not* look protects 'the sense of the sacred.'

For Abravanel<sup>3</sup> the holy things covered and kept from sight are a reminder to retain an appropriate sense of mystery. Not everything can be grasped by human endeavour. *"The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings"* (Ps. 115:16). Faith calls for restful trust in a mystery ultimately beyond us.

Yet another view is set forth by Hefez.<sup>4</sup> Enjoying the privilege of carrying the Ark, the Kohathites were in danger of becoming full of pride. By withholding from them an important detail, the Lord helps them to be humble and reverent.

Then again, Sferno<sup>5</sup> explains the text without any resort to symbolism. The matter is purely organizational! It allows for the smooth carrying out of sacred tasks.

## Doing Torah

Where do you find yourself entering this discussion among the sages? Share your views and the experiences that fuel them.



## Faith & Life

*A parishioner says:*

"Some of the sages' views [left] remind me of the value of abstinence and fasting as part of the practice of faith. When something good is available ('seen') all the time we can become complacent, take it for granted, and think we have complete control. By observing periods where we abstain appropriately and for the right reasons, we find that our 'hunger' or 'distance' actually keeps us attuned to life as God's gift."

1. *Bamidbar Rabbah*.
2. Hirsch: 19th c. German.
3. Abravanel: 15th c. Spanish.
4. Hefez: 16th c. Italian.
5. Sferno: 14-15th c. Italian

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