



# Light of Torah

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By Teresa Pirola

## 'This night'

Exodus 10-13 tells of dramatic events. Three more plagues exhibit the power of the Lord. The tug-of-war continues between Pharaoh and Moses as God's agent. The Passover ritual is prescribed and the greatest event of all takes place: the Israelites are liberated from Egypt! Amidst all this breathtaking activity our chosen text for reflection is brief: just one verse: 12:42.

*"That was for the Lord a night of vigil to bring them out of the land of Egypt; that same night is the Lord's, one of vigil for all the children of Israel throughout the ages" (12:42).*

In his commentary, the 11th C. Torah scholar Rashi says: "It is a night of keepings... For the Holy One, Blessed is He, was keeping it in mind and looking forward to it in order to fulfill His promise to take them out of the land of Egypt."

Ponder the detail (e.g., repetition, time of day, context) of the Torah verse, as well as Rashi's comment. Does the sacred text speak to you? How?

The verse is powerful in its understatedness. It immediately follows a statement about the length of time (430 years) that the Israelites had spent in Egypt... *until this night*.

Can't we all point to a moment when our lives underwent irrevocable change. Think of 'a night' (literally or figuratively) when God's liberating love entered your life, changing you forever. As we enter the Exodus story, can we sense the intimacy between God and the Hebrews as communicated by this one verse? *On this night* the Lord *watches over* his people, thus the people will *remember this night* which belongs to the Lord. Because it is precious to the Lord, it remains precious to his people. Continue to ponder this verse, sharing your insights and questions.

God's people are safeguarded, and God's special night is kept holy in return. This ancient text finds contemporary ritual expression in the Jewish seder meal held in the home at Passover. From generation to generation the seder commemorates the Exodus event and is central to the Jewish Passover festival.

A Talmudic interpretation describes Passover as "a night ever under protection from malevolent beings."<sup>1</sup> This text carries tragic irony when we recall that in Europe of the Middle Ages the commemoration of 'this night' of the Lord's watch, was a night when Jews were least protected by the

surrounding Christian culture. Christian passion plays were known to stir up hatred towards the so-called 'Christ-killers' to the point of violence inflicted upon local Jewish populations. The hysteria was fed by a bizarre accusation that Jews were using the blood of Christian children in their Passover meal (the 'blood libel' charge). It is painful for Christians to hear this chapter of their history, yet it is all part of coming to terms with the past and embracing today's new era of reconciliation between Christians and Jews.

## Faith & Liturgy

So much of Christian liturgy is grounded in Jewish story and ritual. During the Easter Triduum we gather on the night of Holy Thursday and read from the same passage which we have visited in today's Torah portion. On the night of the Easter vigil we gather and listen to readings from the Torah and the Prophets, remembering the events of the Exodus and anticipating the 'dawn' of Easter Sunday.

1. Pes. 109b, RH 11b quoted in JPS Torah Commentary.

Bibliography: Larsson, *Bound for Freedom* (Mass., 1999); Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1991); Scherman, Zlotowitz, eds., *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 1995, 1999). Scripture: JPS.