

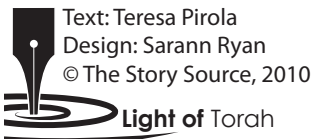


## 5 reflections: waters of life

When John's Gospel refers to Jesus in terms of 'living water' (see 4:13-15; 7:37-38), it draws deeply from the religious memory of ancient Israel. In the sacred writings and traditions of the Jewish people, water often signifies the presence, blessing and providence of God. In particular, Torah (God's Word, God's teaching) is described as lifegiving water. Let's take a prayerful moment to reflect on some water-images in the Hebrew Scriptures and in the rabbinic writings of Judaism.

1. "For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills" (Deut. 8:7).
2. "For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water" (Isa. 35:6-7). "Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters" (Isa. 55:1).  
"For with you is the fountain of life" (Jer. 36:9).
3. "As water is priceless, so is the Torah priceless. As water brings life to the world, so the Torah brings life to the world" (Sifre Deut., Ekev).
4. "Just as water forms a purifying bath, so do words of Torah purify all" (Tanna de be Eliyyahu).
5. "Just as rain comes down in drops and forms rivers, so with the Torah; one studies a bit today and some more tomorrow, until in time one becomes like a flowing stream" (Song of Songs Rabbah I. 2 §3).

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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



## Why reflect on Torah?

Our **Light of Torah** issue this week falls just before the 72nd anniversary of *Kristallnacht*. On the night of November 9th, 1938 a Nazi-orchestrated attack on Jewish neighbourhoods across Germany saw the destruction of homes, businesses, synagogues and human lives. By morning, the streets were littered with glass hence the name *Kristallnacht* ('Night of Broken Glass').

Of what relevance is this leaflet series, **Light of Torah**, to this tragic event which occurred in Christian Europe without adequate protest thus paving the way for the Shoah? Of what relevance is a Catholic publication that draws on the Jewish biblical tradition in order to reflect on the Torah (the first five books of the bible)? By engaging parishioners in this way we hope and pray that our Catholic people will draw close not only to Torah, but to the people who gave us Torah; that our readers will find a heartfelt sense of solidarity with the Jewish people of whom Jesus was a son and from whose great religious traditions Christianity emerged. May this endeavour in Torah study contribute to bridges of understanding between peoples and religions.

Issue #6  
6 Nov 2010

Genesis 25:19—28:9  
Toledot: 'Generations'



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 25:19—28:9

Genesis 26, which will be our focus today, tells a story from the adult life of Isaac. It is a story strikingly similar to a story about his father, Abraham, in Gen.20. Like his father, Isaac receives the Lord's blessing and prospers. Like Abraham he goes to the land of Gerar to escape famine and has a similar exchange with the local king. Like his father he digs wells and finds water... Read Ch.26, especially vv.1-18, and prayerfully ponder the details of God's Word.

## Tasting Torah

After sharing your initial observations of Chapter 26 with a friend, let's focus on a puzzling statement found in v.15:

*"Now the Philistines had filled with earth all the wells that his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham" (Gen.26:15).*

Water is essential to sustaining life in the desert. The Philistines were as dependent as Isaac's family on water for their survival. Why would they go to such lengths to block the wells, even having them 'filled with earth' which would effectively make them difficult to find again? Generations of Torah students have been intrigued by this question. What thoughts and insights do you bring to the discussion?

## Touching Torah

The sheer insanity of the Philistines' action has led some commentators to conclude that the story of the wells carries intense symbolism. As the patriarchs labored to release life-sustaining water out of parched ground, they were also creating a flow of living faith in the midst of a land of idol-worshippers. The action of the Philistines, then, symbolizes the forces of hard-heartedness that seek to stop the lifegiving action of God, with deathly consequences. But what evidence from the text and tradition support this interpretation? Carefully revisit the text before reading on.

## Depthing Torah

*"Isaac dug again the wells of water that had been dug in the days of his father Abraham... and he gave them the names that his father had given them" (v.18).*

Isaac digs for water, but not indiscriminately. He operates in the footsteps of Abraham, honoring the ways of his father. According to Jewish storytelling traditions, just as Abraham had named certain places with titles that reflected his relationship with God (see Gen. 21:31; 22:14), Abraham had named the wells in a similar fashion. Thus in eradicating the wells the Philistines were attempting to extinguish the very *mention* of the God of Abraham. Amidst opposition, Isaac is persistent in recovering both the wells and their names. Like his father, his efforts bring forth what the Hebrew text calls *'mayim hayim'*: 'living water.' This is followed immediately by the Lord's appearance to Isaac: *"I am the God of your father Abraham..."* with the added divine assurance, *"Do not be afraid, for I am with you"* (v.24).

## Doing Torah

Isaac sought to be faithful to the religious traditions of his father. What challenges have you experienced in your efforts to remain faithful to the traditions of your ancestors? A fragile relationship exists between human harmony and availability of the earth's natural resources. Discuss in the light of Genesis 26.



## Faith & Life

*A story of lifegiving water:*

"In parts of Africa, dehydration can be life-threatening. As a lay missionary I have seen mothers arrive at our clinic with their babies dead on their backs. After walking all day in the hot sun they arrive too late. But there are also those who survive, often due to an emergency dose of a rehydration drink consisting of water, sugar and salt. The rehydration drink is a very simple drink, but it saves lives." (Source: Catholic Mission)

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss (eds) *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994); Montefiore & Loewe (eds), *A Rabbinic Anthology* (NY, 1974); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006). Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.