



5 ways

to think about Passover

At Passover, Jewish families gather for the *seder* meal, a ritual of storytelling and symbolism in remembrance of the Exodus liberation. (For notes on the *seder*, see 'Light of Torah' issue #15, Jan 8th 2011.) In remembering this *past* event, Passover is filled with a sense of God's liberating power in the *present*, leading to a *future* fullness of redemption. This mindset, so deeply Jewish, resonates in Christianity as well.

Peoplehood. Exodus is a defining moment in the story of the Jewish people and their relationship with God. *As a Christian, ponder how Exodus is also a defining moment in the faith story of the Church.*

Participation. At Passover each Jew is to identify with the ancient Israelites as though *he/she* were freed from Egyptian slavery. *Ponder this: salvation is not a spectator event. It calls for active participation by all.*

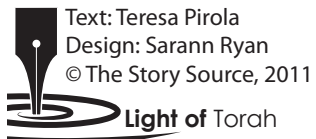
Struggle. Physical slavery still exists in the world. Moral and spiritual slavery are also real, even

for those who may appear to have all the 'freedom' that money can buy. *What kinds of entrapment are you aware of in the world around you? In what way are you contributing to the work of liberation?*

Vigilance. Freedom won can be lost if we are not attentive to living our lives as God intended. *Think of a freedom which you cherish, and how you continue to guard/foster this gift.*

Home. While synagogue services are held during Passover, the primary celebration is the *seder* held in Jewish homes. *Consider how your own home is a place of faith, love, prayer.*

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Issue #29

16 April 2011

Leviticus 16:1—18:30

Aharei Mot:

'after the death [of]'

Why reflect on Torah?

"For the Jewish people themselves, Catholics should have not only respect but also great fraternal love; for it is the teaching of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures that the Jews are beloved of God who has called them with an irrevocable calling."

John Paul II's address to Jewish Community Leaders, Sydney, 26 Nov 1986.

As Jewish families and communities all over the world prepare to celebrate their central festival of Passover (commencing sundown, 18 April 2011), we invite our *Light of Torah* readers to draw close to them in a spirit of gratitude, remembering the marvels God has done through the chosen people of Israel.

And as we Christians, in our own religious tradition, prepare to enter Holy Week and celebrate Easter, let's be mindful of the Jewish context that informs our grasp of the extraordinary events we celebrate. Without the faith of the Jewish people, we would not know 'the God who saves.'



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 16:1—18:30

What does it mean to be holy as God is holy; to live our earthly lives in partnership with the divine? Today's Torah portion shows Israel establishing a code of conduct that makes it 'different' in belief and custom to the surrounding cultures. Of particular interest to us in this discussion are the verses (18:1-5) that precede a long list of rules forbidding incest.

Tasting Torah

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the Land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. (Lev. 18:1-3)

These verses mark a change in style; not just rhythmically, but in the sense that Moses speaks very directly in the Lord's name, "I am the Lord," as distinct from the pattern in previous chapters, "This is what the Lord has said."

Touching Torah

"I am the Lord your God." This phrase is repeated (18:2,4). Rashi (1) draws a connection between this and the verses that open the Ten Commandments where God also says, "I am the Lord your God." Says Rashi, the Lord is saying: *Know who is speaking to you! It is I the Lord your God! At Mt Sinai you accepted my sovereignty, now accept my rules of conduct.*

To Be'er Yitzhak, "I am the Lord your God" recalls the 'powerful king' whose closeness to His people calls for complete obedience. To Meshekh Hokhmah the address is meant for each individual for personal benefit. God who created us knows our bodies and desires, and therefore when we follow God's rules we live in harmony with the way we were designed; we find body-spirit harmony. These are two complementary views, one emphasizing God as Creator, the other ourselves as created. (2)

Depthing Torah

Why does the text specifically warn against Egyptian and Canaanite customs? Surely their practices were no worse than other pagan nations. Why single them out?

Some traditional opinions are forthright in saying that in fact the conduct of these nations was exceptionally corrupt. Such a view is better understood if we recall that Egypt and Canaan are like 'book-ends' to the Israelites' desert passage. When enslaved in Egypt, they had witnessed a sophisticated society. The people they would meet upon arriving at the land of Canaan were likewise used to 'fine cities,' 'houses filled with all sorts of goods,' 'vineyards and olive groves' (Deut. 6:10-11). After years of wandering, one can imagine the Israelites being attracted to this culture. Sums up Leibowitz, "As we know, material progress does not necessarily spell moral advancement. Hence the Torah warns us, at the beginning of the chapter on forbidden relations, not to be dazzled by the external glitter of technological progress and lose sight of moral standards." (3) After all, notes Be'er Yitzhak, if you imitate the Egyptians what was the point of God liberating you from Egypt?

Doing Torah

For reflection: In your own life, have you ever experienced the dilemma of the Israelites as they left one form of slavery only to be tempted by another?



Faith & Life

The challenges of living one's religious values amidst the material pressures of secular society are real indeed. In my own struggles to be truly free, I sometimes recall the comment of a Jewish friend who, after much discernment, moved his family from New York to Jerusalem: "God didn't liberate us from Egypt so that we could be enslaved in Brooklyn," he said.

(1) Rashi: revered medieval Torah scholar. (2) Be'er Yitzhak and Meshekh Hokhmah: 19th C. commentators, quoted in Leibowitz, 244. (3) Leibowitz, 245.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra, Vol.1* (Jerusalem, 1993); Rashi: *Commentary on the Torah, Vol. 3* (NY: Mesorah, 1999); Scripture quotations: NRSV.