

5 Ways to view the well

In the Torah, and in the accompanying commentary of the Jewish sages, the well represents not only a physical life source—critical to a nomadic existence in arid lands—but also a source of spiritual life, a place of encounter with divine presence, blessing, revelation. Discuss with reference to the following:

1. Marriage

The well is a place where famous biblical characters discover their future spouses. Jacob meets Rebekah (Gen. 29). Moses meets Zipporah (Exod. 2). Rebekah welcomes Abraham's servant who seeks a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24).

2. Faith

In Gen. 26:18 we read of Isaac re-digging the wells of Abraham which had been covered over by the Philistines. More than a physical task, recovery of the wells represents an act of faith and a commitment to the religious traditions of his father.

3. Miracle

In the midrash, the story is told of 'Miriam's well', a miraculous source of fresh water that accompanied the Israelites through the desert. When Miriam dies, the water (the well) disappears. (Num. 20:1-2)

4. Gospel

John's Gospel tells the story of Jesus' conversation with a Samaritan woman. It takes place at 'Jacob's well.' (John 4:4-26)

5. Over to you...

Can you think of another biblical episode which features a well? Do you have your own story to tell which occurred 'at a well'?

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"Those who study the Torah give forth light wherever they may be. It is like one standing in the dark with a lamp in hand, as it says, 'Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path (Ps 119:105).'"

Exodus Rabbah 36, 3

In its specific sense, 'Torah' refers to the first five books of the bible. These writings are treasured by Jews and Christians alike. Yet Christians often overlook this part of the scriptures, preferring to go straight to the Gospels. When we do this we rob ourselves of the rich soil in which the gospel message is planted. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission (2001) reminded us:

"Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither."

In our times, the Church urges us to appreciate our Jewish roots and to learn from the Jewish people, especially from their vast knowledge and experience of reflecting upon the scriptures. This **Light of Torah** series offers a practical way for Catholic parishioners to do just that.



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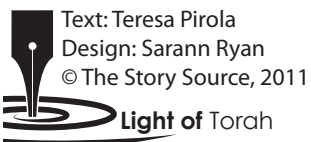
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Genesis 28:10—32:3

Vayetze:

'and he went out'

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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 28:10–32:3

As our Torah portion opens Jacob has just fled his home in Beersheba, setting out on a journey to the household of his uncle Laban who lives in Haran.

During an overnight stop he has a dream in which the Lord God speaks to Jacob of his destiny and role in the unfolding Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 28:10-22).

Upon reaching Haran where he will work, marry and settle for the next twenty years, there is a connecting episode in which Jacob meets Rachel at a well (Gen. 29:1-14).

Tasting Torah

“Now Jacob kissed Rachel, and began to cry in a loud voice” (Gen. 29:11).

Jacob’s emotional outburst at seeing Rachel is puzzling. Why does he weep? Is it romance: love at first sight? Indeed, the sages identify Rachel as the love of Jacob’s life, and Rashi says that through divine inspiration Jacob foresaw that Rachel would not be buried with him, thus he wept. Then again, Rashi says that Jacob wept “because he came with empty hands.” Unlike his mother’s betrothal story (Gen.24:22), he had no gold bracelets to give his potential spouse.

But is there another way to interpret the scene? Read and discuss the Torah text up to Gen. 29:14.

Touching Torah

From where has Jacob just come? From a powerful encounter with the divine. Read it carefully (28:10-22). In a dream he is personally addressed by God and is generously assured of the Abrahamic covenant. He awakes, awestruck by what has occurred, his amazement beautifully phrased in vv.16-17. Even so, the revelation is a confusing experience. God says, ‘I will watch over you,’ yet Jacob knows his life in danger. God promises the Land, but Jacob is about to leave that Land to live in exile. God promises descendants, yet Jacob is leaving behind his family and his possessions. A moment of promise occurs amidst danger, risk, loss. This young man has a lot to process! Is it surprising that by the time he reaches the well after a desert journey he is a mass on pent-up emotions?

Depthing Torah

“When Jacob saw Rachel daughter of Laban, his mother’s brother...” (Gen. 29:10).

What happens at the well? We may think it’s all about Rachel. But look carefully at the text: the most frequently mentioned person is Laban. In just three verses (9-12), Laban is referred to (by name, as father, as brother, as kinsman) no less than seven times. And in verse 10 Laban’s identity as Rebekah’s brother is repeated twice. How might we interpret the Torah’s repetition?

When Jacob sets eyes on Rachel, does he see love of his life, or the face of his kin? Does he feel romantic love, or the relief of reaching familial shelter? In the view of Rabbi S.R. Hirsch,¹ Jacob constantly carried with him the memory of his mother, Rebekah. In Rachel—Rebekah’s niece—he recognizes the living image of his mother. Yes, he also recognizes a potential spouse. But here, too, other dynamics may be at work as Jacob is confronted by the realization that God’s promise of descendants is soon to be fulfilled in his own life.

As noted earlier, this is a tumultuous time for the emotional-spiritual psyche of a young man who is both a family fugitive and a chosen servant of God—and at the sight of Rachel it all comes tumbling out. *“Now Jacob kissed Rachel, and began to cry in a loud voice”* (Gen. 29:11).

Doing Torah

Think of a time when spiritual, geographic and relational upheavals coincided in your life. Share something of that time. How does the Torah speak to you?



Jacob’s strength

“When Jacob saw Rachel...Jacob went over, rolled the stone off the well’s mouth, and watered his uncle Laban’s flock” (29:10).

While some commentators view Jacob’s act of physical prowess as a young man’s attempt to impress a pretty woman, others (such as the 13th c. scholar known as Ramban) see it as evidence of his encounter with the divine which has filled him with the strength to perform the task as well as the motivation to be constructively involved in the affairs of the local community. What is your view?

1. S.R. Hirsch (1809-1888): a leader in the development of Jewish religious/ educational life in 19th c. Germany. See Munk, 390.

Sources: Herczeg, ed., *The Torah: With Rashi’s Commentary* (NY, 1995, 1999); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1994). Scripture: Chaim Stern, trans. (1999).