

5 aspects of the seder meal

In Jewish homes of our times, the Passover is celebrated in the seder meal (*seder*: 'order'). The ritual text for the seder is called the *Passover Haggadah*. It contains not only the instructions for the meal but also interpretations, psalms, songs and stories that unite generations of Jews in a collective memory and experience of salvation. It is a living text. Here we name five aspects of the seder ritual with reference to today's Torah portion.

Story. *"And you shall tell..."* (13:8). The seder is a ritual telling of the exodus story. It does this by way of a meal at table, using symbols and a collection of readings and responses relating to the exodus.

Symbols. *"Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread"* (13:6). Some of the seder foods are linked to biblical commands; some are related to Passover in other ways. All are part of the drama of the exodus storytelling.

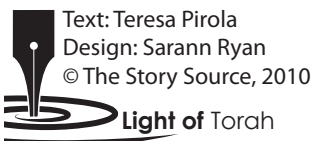
Memory. *"Remember this day..."* (13:3). In Jewish thought, remembrance is not simply the recollection of the past. To remember is to experience the

power of God's action in the present. This idea of memory permeates our Catholic sense of sacrament.

Living. *"It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt"* (13:8). The meaning of exodus is living and personal. What God was doing *then*, God is doing *now* - for us, for you, for me!

Generations. *"And when, in time to come, your son asks you..."* (13:14). Three times in today's Torah portion the command is given to 'tell your children' of this night of freedom. The transmission from one generation to the next is particularly evident in that the seder has the children of the household asking the ritual questions.

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

"The church of Christ acknowledges that in God's plan of salvation the beginnings of its faith and election are to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets."

(Nostra Aetate, 4)

After centuries of estrangement between the Church and Judaism, a gradual revolution is underway as Catholics rediscover their deep historical and spiritual links with the Jewish people. This radical reappraisal was officially set in motion at the Second Vatican Council with the document *Nostra Aetate* and has continued to find expression in subsequent documents and initiatives down to this day.

This leaflet series, **Light of Torah**, seeks to bring the message of *Nostra Aetate* into the hearts and homes of parishioners. It does so by engaging Catholics in Torah reflection. Each week, we explore a portion of the Torah (the first five books of the bible) drawing on Jewish sources and insights. In this way, Catholics engage with the ancient stories of their own Scriptures with an appreciation of the Jewish people, their long history of biblical interpretation, and the fact that Jesus himself was a son of the Jewish people. Jesus loved and lived Torah.

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Exodus 10:1—13:16

Bo: 'Go'



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 10:1—13:16

Our Torah portion tells of dramatic events. Three more plagues exhibit the almighty 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 surprisingly brief and simple: just one verse towards the end of the Torah portion. Read as much as you can of the portion, then return to ponder this single verse: 12:42.

Tasting Torah

"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" (Ex. 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."*

Prayerfully 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?

Touching Torah

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 (and perhaps more than one) when our lives underwent irrevocable change. Because of this event, this book, this person, this insight, *'this night'*, our world changed forever.

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.

Depthing Torah

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.

An interpretation from the Talmud describes Passover as *"a night ever under protection from malevolent beings."*⁽¹⁾ This text carries tragic irony when we recall that in 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 (the 'blood libel' charge) that Jews were using the blood of Christian children in their Passover meal. 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 Church and Synagogue.

Doing Torah

Think of 'a night' (literally or figuratively) when God's liberating love entered your life, changing you forever. Share something of that story.



Faith & Liturgy

So much of Catholic liturgy is grounded in Jewish story and ritual. As we Catholics reflect on Ex.12:42 we are reminded of our own special nights celebrated as part of the Easter Triduum. We gather on Holy Thursday and read from the same Torah portion which we have visited today. At the Easter vigil (Saturday night) we gather in darkness and listen to readings from the Torah and the Prophets, remembering the events of Exodus and anticipating the 'dawn' of Easter Sunday.

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

Sources: 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 quotations: JPS.