

5 ways we remember

Our Torah reflection overleaf touches on a theme that permeates biblical thought: *remembrance*. Throughout the Torah, God faithfully ‘remembers’ God’s people, while Israel ‘remembers’ the blessings and liberating works of God. Infidelity is described in terms of ‘forgetfulness.’

Over a meal, share your reflections on the gift and challenges of memory and remembering. Five thoughts to get you started...

1. Family.

Memories forge personal bonds. Loving memories are vital to raising children. Grandparents are special bearers of memories.

2. Identity.

Memory shapes us and tells us who we are. Its loss can be painful (e.g., those affected by Alzheimer’s Disease). Its loss can be dangerous (*‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’*).

3. Healing.

The act of remembering can serve justice and healing (e.g., the

dedication of Jewish efforts to record the name and story of every victim of the Shoah).

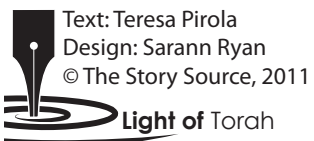
4. Worship.

‘Do this in memory of me.’ Our central act of worship as Catholics is an act of remembrance, originating in Jewish table-rituals.

5. Divine love.

‘The Lord has remembered us’ (Psalm 115:12). Scripture assures us that God’s people are embraced securely by Divine memory; nothing and no one precious to God is ever forgotten, overlooked or discarded.

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Light of Torah

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Why reflect on Torah?

“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

This week we conclude another book of the Torah: Numbers. For those who have been on this Torah reading journey since Genesis: congratulations! For those who have joined us along the way: great to have you with us!

In some ways our Torah journey mirrors the ‘marches of the Israelites’ in this week’s portion. Camp by camp, the Israelites make their way... And with this *Light of Torah* series we make our way through the biblical text—portion by portion, word by word. It’s not always easy. Our reading can at times seem tedious, dry and even disturbing (as in last week’s portion). Along with the enthusiasm and delight there are also pauses and setbacks. Yet we pick up again and ‘push forward’, trusting that the Lord does speak to us in the sacred text, through our searchings, our active listening, and through our spirited interactions with the voices of the Jewish sages and our fellow travellers.

Issue #44

30 July 2011

Numbers 33:1—36:13

Masei: ‘marches’



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Numbers 33:1—36:13

Our focus in this week's Torah portion is 33:1-49, a review of the travels of the Israelites from their departure from Egypt to the steppes of Moab where they stand poised to enter the Promised Land. Commentators have long been fascinated by the detailed itinerary and apparent tedium of this text.

Tip: Create a meditative environment for this reading of 33:1-49. Light a candle. Relax your mind. Don't rush. Approach it as a meditation. Settle into the rhythm of the text. Let God's Word massage its way into your mind and heart...

Tasting Torah

"Moses wrote down their starting points, stage by stage, **by the command of the Lord**" (33:2).

Let's begin with the voices of two of the greatest Torah scholars in Jewish history: Maimonides (12th c.) and Nahmanides (13th c.) Nahmanides interprets the above verse as meaning that the act of recording was itself a divine command. Why would the Lord want such a listing of Israelite campsites in the wilderness journey? Is it simply a matter of geographic record, or something more? Ponder this question in *havrutah*.

Touching Torah

Nahmanides cites the view of his predecessor, Maimonides: The Lord asks Moses to write it all down so that Israel will forever more *remember* the miracles and wonders that the Lord performed to sustain the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years. Without such a record, future generations will forget the wonders, they will disbelieve the miracle of the manna that fed their ancestors in the desert. They will think that talk of miracles is exaggerated, that their ancestors camped at places fertile, pleasant and safe. The Lord predicted this temptation to doubt and therefore told Moses: write it all down! The geographic details in Num. 33 ensures that the journey will be remembered for what it truly was: a trek through places distant, arid, dangerous, deathly.

Depthing Torah

The *Be'er Yitzhak*¹ adds a further creative thought: The record was 'required reading' for the marchers after they settled into their homeland! By reviewing where they had been and what they had gone through, "*they would accordingly take to heart the kindness shown to them by the Omnipresent and the sufferings they endured for their disobedience so that, in future, they would act rightly and not sin.*"

According to this view, to remember is to gain perspective. Memory opens up a path; it provides lessons and guidance for the future. In the present moment we don't always comprehend the full impact of what is said or done. We look back, so as to look forward.

The power of memory in shaping the future is captured in a 1912 reflection by Asher Ginzberg.² He says of Moses: "*The past and the future are the Prophet's whole life... In the present he sees nothing but wilderness, a life far removed from his ideal; and therefore he looks before and after. He lives in the future world of his vision and seeks strength in the past out of which that vision-world is quarried.*"

Doing Torah

How did this Torah reading affect you? Do you agree with sages' interpretations? What insight of your own can you add? What are some of the important 'marches' and 'campsites' in your own life's journey?



Faith & Life

Numbers 33 prompts this reader's comment:

"My mother's address book is a treasure. It records (in tiny print) my and my eight siblings' movements over decades of renting or buying homes. As each home address changes, it is lightly crossed out and the new address written below. Each entry represents a whole story in itself... a marriage, a birth, a promotion, a graduation, a joy, sometimes a sorrow. For those who know the family stories, my mother's address book is an amazing document."

1. 19th c. supercommentary to Rashi. Quoted in Leibowitz, 390.

2. Russian-born Jewish philosopher. Quoted in Plaut, 1133.

Sources: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (Jerusalem, 1994); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006); Ramban: *Commentary on the Torah Vol.6* (NY: Mesorah, 2009).