

5 ways

to approach the sacred text

As we conclude the book of Genesis this is a good time to pause to consider the impact of this Torah-reading journey on our lives since opening Genesis with the start of the Jewish lectionary on 22 October 2011. Ask, “*What have I learnt?*”... about the bible story... about Jewish approaches... about our faith heritage... about my relationship with God’s Word...? This is also good time to review a few pointers about our approach to the sacred text; e.g.:

1. Western secular culture often demands instant gratification. But the Scriptures are not like that. They call for patient investment of time and energy.
2. Read *aloud*. Remember, the bible originates from an oral-aural tradition.
3. Learn to relish slow reading. Don’t be afraid to stay with difficult passages.
4. Read in ‘havrutah’, i.e., with a partner, sharing your questions and insights. Havrutah (related to the Hebrew *haverim*:

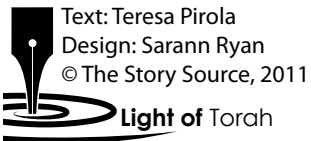
‘friends’) is a time-honored method of Jewish Torah study.

5. Reverence your faith-ancestors. The bible is expressive of a people who have lived and breathed this book into existence.

An additional Torah study challenge for those looking for ‘more’:

Compare the blessings of Jacob at the end of Genesis with the farewell speeches of Moses to the Israelite tribes at the end of Deuteronomy just as they are about to enter the promised land. Two ‘greats’ in the story of Israel; both concerned for their people; one speaking from the start of exile, the other anticipating its end.

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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Why reflect on Torah?

Twelve weeks into our year-long Torah journey we come to the final chapters of the book of Genesis. We have considered passages drawn from narratives of creation, journey, marriage and family life, fidelity, treachery, hope.

Have you become more than a reader? Are you becoming a student of the Torah? Are you bringing your questions and insights to the text? Have you had the opportunity to share this adventure with a friend? Have the ponderings of the sages heightened your biblical appreciation?

Light of Torah offers an engagement with the Word of God, specifically the Torah (the first five books of the bible), by drawing on the insights of Jewish interpretative traditions; insights that can enrich our own Christian reading of the sacred texts. We do so in response to, and in the spirit of, Vatican II:

“Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation.

This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussions.” (Nostra Aetate, 4)

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Genesis 47:28—50:26
Vayechi:
‘he lived’



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 47:28–50:26

Our Torah portion opens with a poignant deathbed scene. Jacob, who once thought he'd lost his son Joseph forever, is able to share with him this moment of farewell. He also blesses his two grandsons, Manasseh and Ephraim. But wait! Something isn't quite right. Jacob is overturning the usual customs of the paternal blessing, placing his right hand on the younger grandson instead of the elder. Read the whole of chapter 48 and join the Torah discussion.

Tasting Torah

"When Joseph saw that his father was placing his right hand on Ephraim's head, he thought it was wrong..." (Gen. 48:14).

Joseph reacts swiftly when he realizes that his elderly father's blessing is about to favor the younger over the elder. Is his concern for protocol or is there a deeper reason?

And is Jacob's action intentional, or is his eyesight the problem? Of what earlier scenes in Genesis does this remind you? Discuss!

Touching Torah

Perhaps Joseph—and you too—are recalling the multiple crises in Jacob's life which were triggered by the favoring of the younger over the elder. Let's recall them here:

- The deception which led Isaac to bless Jacob instead of Esau created familial havoc, forcing Jacob into exile. [Gen.27]
- Jacob's choice of Rachel over Leah led to deception by Laban and bitter feelings between sisters. [Gen.29]
- Jacob's favoring of his son Joseph over his older sons led to deep resentments and a family tragedy [Gen.37]

And now, in blessing his grandsons, Jacob wants to show favor to the younger?! Has history taught him nothing? Is this the start of another family feud? And yet in 48:19 Jacob seems fully aware of what he is doing. How do you interpret this scene? What deeper meaning lies in this Torah passage? Probe and debate the text with your havrutah partner.

Depthing Torah

In contemporary Jewish commentary we find an interpretation based on the meaning of the grandsons' names.¹ Recall 41:50-52:

Joseph named the first-born Manasseh, meaning 'God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home.' And the second he named Ephraim, meaning, 'God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction.'

Each name expresses Joseph's mindset. At the birth of his first son Joseph is emerging from a painful ordeal and ready to forget his Hebrew origins. But by the time his second son is born, Joseph is beginning to hanker for his Hebrew roots. Egypt is the place of his success, but it is not his homeland. It is a place of exile, 'the land of my affliction'.

Looking ahead to the book of Exodus we know that this is the start of the long, dark exile of which the Lord had forewarned Jacob (46:4). Manasseh and Ephraim are the first grandchildren to be born in this exile. Thus in favoring Ephraim, Jacob's blessing signals an important message to future generations. Those who might be tempted to assimilate or give up hope are told that they must never forget their homeland—or their God.

Doing Torah

The Torah invites reflection on the deep 'forgettings' and 'rememberings' in life, which lead towards, or away from, one's God-given destiny. At this point in your life, are you 'at home' or in 'exile'?



Faith & Life

It is sometimes said that "the second generation seeks to remember what the first generation sought to forget." We see this in the descendents of immigrants, of soldiers, of victims of war. And in many kinds of social trends from political ideologies to fashion.

Wherever you find yourself on the generational spectrum, share something of the 'rememberings' most precious to you.

1. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant & Conversation* (Jerusalem: Maggid, 2009), 337-340.
Scripture: NJPS.