

5 Ways to *PLAY* with God's Word

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

Play with God's Word?! Yes! Over generations of Jewish biblical reflection, the sages, with reverence and bold confidence, have taken great delight in probing, questioning and debating biblical texts, even weaving imaginative stories to enlarge their sacred meaning.



Learn. As Christians we can be enriched by ancient Jewish interpretative methods. One starting point for learning more is the website of Bat Kol Institute, Jerusalem. Visit www.batkol.info



Look. Like the sages, look for textual clues; e.g., repetition, rhythm, surprising elements, use of numbers, names, and questions in the text. These signal for us to go deeper into the text to uncover layers of meaning.



Imagine. There is a time for historical study, and a time for creative, prayerful storytelling. Both have a place in our reception of God's Word. Don't be afraid to engage your imagination as you ponder the scriptures.



Pause. Take time with the scriptures. Don't rush through a passage. Learn patience to 'stay with' the text, prayerfully attentive to the movement of the Holy Spirit as the Word reveals to you divine treasures.



Pair up. Try the ancient method of *havrutah*, i.e., share scripture with one or two *friends* (*haverim* in Hebrew). "Iron sharpens iron." (Prov. 27:17) Just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so two will sharpen each other's minds by discussion of a sacred text.

This *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes is designed to encourage parishioners to be more attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their own sacred Scriptures, and to the gift of Judaism which gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Text by Teresa Pirola. Illustrations by Francine Pirola. © The Story Source, 2009. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

'Torah' refers to the first five books of that part of the Bible which we Christians call the 'Old Testament.' The five books are Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. As a faithful Jew, Jesus' life and teachings were firmly and deeply rooted in Torah. For this reason Jesus cannot properly be understood by Christians without an awareness of the deep faith and spirituality of the Jewish tradition.

At the 2008 Synod of Bishop, Cardinal Albert Vanhoye said:

"The Old Testament is not simply a piece among others in the Christian Bible. It is the base, the fundamental part. If the New Testament was established on another basis, it would have no real value. Without its conformity to the sacred Scriptures of the Jewish people, it could not be presented as the accomplishment of God's project."

As former secretary of the Pontifical Biblical Commission, Cardinal Vanhoye was drawing attention to Vatican documents which underscore the close relationship between Jews and Christians, especially in relation to their shared scriptures.

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, encourages Christians to read the Torah with the help of Jewish insights and traditions, and thereby to appreciate their indebtedness to the People of the Book, through whom we received the Scriptures; through whom we received Jesus Christ, the Living Word.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 12:1–17:27

This week's Torah portion includes the story of Abraham's call. It leads us to marvel at the impact of God's call on the lives of individuals, and on the path of history.

In baptism we Christians become 'children of God', yes, but only because through faith we become 'children of Abraham and Sarah'. How marvellous that a promise made to a specific race, the Jewish people, should be extended (by the invitation to faith) to every race on earth, to the Gentiles, to people like us!

Tasting Torah

Lech Lecha. Hebrew for "Go-you-forth."

With these words, our Torah portion begins with God's call to Abraham to leave his homeland and kin and to go to 'to the land that I will show you' (12:1). A simple command? Generations of Torah reflection reveal interpretative subtleties. E.g., "Go by yourself. This is one journey which must be made alone" (Hirsch);

"Go to yourself, go to your roots, to find your potential" (Chasidic interpretation);

"Go for yourself, for your pleasure and for your benefit. There, I will make of you a great nation; whereas here you do not merit having children..." (Rashi).

Touching Torah

"Abraham, what did YOU hear that day?"

Ponder this question. Put yourself in the shoes of Abraham. What makes a wealthy man living in Mesopotamia leave all that is familiar for the sake of a land and future as yet unknown? Is he, as stories from Jewish tradition suggest, spiritually restless? Can restlessness be a search for God?

The Ramban (13th c. Jewish scholar/teacher) said that, "one should love God with an excessive, powerful love, till one's soul is totally involved in love of God, and one is constantly obsessed by it, as though ill with love sickness..." Does this describe Abraham? Does his restlessness reveal a passionate lover of God, prepared to risk all, to follow God anywhere?

Depthing Torah

And what of Sarah, Abraham's wife? We are told in Gen. 11:30 that "Sarah was barren; she had no child." And yet four verses later, God is promising Abraham, "I will make of you a great nation" (12:2)! Now doesn't the text have you puzzling over that? Your puzzling is a clue that a powerful biblical insight is at hand...

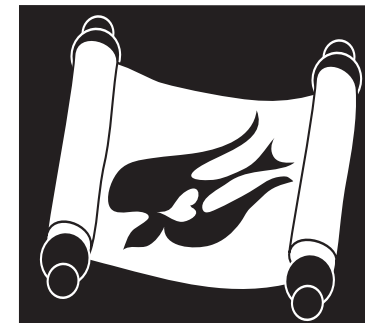
In ancient Jewish commentary we hear that "Wherever it is written 'there is not', there essentially is." (1) Or, to quote a Christian biblical scholar of our own times: "Barrenness...is an effective metaphor for hopelessness. The marvel of biblical faith is that barrenness is the arena of God's life-giving action." (2)

Just when the situation seems hopeless, the divine word breaks through, inviting a creative response. A husband and wife, cloaked in restlessness, disappointment, but also in hope, set out together for a far land. *Lech Lecha*. They 'go forth' with a new kind of faith in a God of surprises.

Doing Torah

Reflect: Restlessness... wandering... , disappointments... daring new adventures... how are these realities woven into your own story of life and faith? Can you relate to Abraham, to Sarah, to the family left behind?

Remember: Never be satisfied. Keep learning. Keep asking questions. Never give up. Keep an open mind and heart. No answer is ever final. The love of God opens up infinite possibilities.



Leaving home

A parent shares...

Our 19 year old daughter was preparing to spend a year as an overseas lay missionary. It was a long awaited dream and she was very excited. The day before her departure, however, I noticed she had been crying. When I showed my concern, out tumbled all kinds of doubts: "What if I miss my family? What if I don't fit in? It's dangerous over there... what if I get hurt?"

My husband and I sat and talked with her for a long while. We were reassuring, but honest. "Yes," said my husband. "There are always risks when God calls us to a special work. We worry for you too! But we can't let our fears stop us..." She seemed happy with our chat and quite at peace when she farewelled us the next day.

1. *Bereshit Rabbah* 38:21
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, (Atlanta, John Knox Press, 1982), 116.