

5 ways

to draw closer to God's Word

If you have been reading *Light of Torah* for a while, perhaps you are beginning to appreciate the value of the traditional Jewish interpretative methods that inspire these leaflets. Let's review just a few of the ways that Jewish approaches to Scripture can nourish Catholic bible study:



Slow down.

In a fast-paced world, how often do we skim over Scripture? The rabbis teach us to slow down, to read and re-read, taste and savor, the sacred text.



Discover.

Reading scripture with the aid of Jewish commentators helps us to discover our own Christian bible. At times we are led to passages we never even knew existed!



Voice.

Even if reading alone, read aloud. Remember that the Scriptures emerged from an oral-aural tradition. There is something special about speaking and hearing them.



Share.

Havrutah (from the Hebrew: *haverim* = 'friends') is an ancient Jewish method of sharing biblical insights in pairs or small groups. Who is your havrutah partner?



Delve deeply.

The tradition speaks of 'seventy faces' (i.e., many interpretations) of Torah. Don't settle for one 'obvious' explanation. Stay with the text, pondering its subtleties and marveling at its multiple layers of meaning.

The *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their 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, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

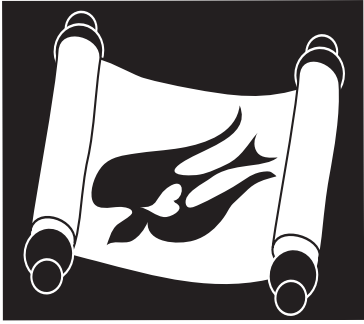
Surely this commandment which I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" ... No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe (Deut. 30:11-12,14).

This passage could be a mission statement for our *Light of Torah* ministry. Our goal is to lead Catholics into an intimate relationship with the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament), to discover God's Word as 'near.'

Our pedagogy is inspired by the biblical traditions of the Jewish people in their love for Torah. Here we find tools that are keenly attuned to our 'grassroots' audience, tools that allow people to engage with the text in ways that are lively, prayerful, imaginative, provocative and joyful.

In this way we respond to the call of the Catholic Church for Christians to rediscover their Jewish heritage-in-faith, and to learn from the profound biblical insights of the Jewish people, remembering that it was from the Jews that we first received the Scriptures and, indeed, Jesus himself.

But where does the average Catholic come across the commentators, writings and traditions of Judaism? The *Light of Torah* series offers a taste of those resources for the lay reader. Read on...



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Deuteronomy 29:9—31:30

In today's Torah portion Moses continues to prepare the Israelites for the journey ahead, the journey to be made after entering the promised land; the journey that will be made without him.

Our focus today is on four lovely verses, 30:11-14. However, as we will see, we will need to read the previous ten verses as well (30:1-10), to get the most out of this discussion.

(1.) Named in this issue are the great medieval Torah scholars: Nahmanides (13th C. Spain) and Rashi (11th C. France). Be'er Yizhak is a 19th C. commentary on Rashi. See Leibowitz, 321-325.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *A Woman's Torah Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY, 1996). Scripture: *NRSV*.

Tasting Torah

Surely this commandment which I am commanding you today is not too hard for you, nor is it too far away. It is not in heaven, that you should say, "Who will go up to heaven for us, and get it for us so that we may hear it and observe it?" (Deut. 30:11-12).

Read Deut. 30:11-14 and note your reactions. To what exactly is the text referring when it says 'this commandment'? Which commandment? Is it the call to repentance issued in the foregoing verses? Or is it God's teachings as a whole? This is a question which has occupied Jewish commentators (1). Read 30:1-14 and offer your opinion.

Touching Torah

If you and your Torah partner hold contrary views, you are in good company; so do Jewish Torah commentators! For instance, Nahmanides connects the commandment with *teshuva* (Hebrew: 'repentance'). Conscious of the dispersion of the Jews in the world, he hears these verses as saying that repentance is never inaccessible due to geographic or cultural barriers; it is freely embraced by one's resolve.

But most commentators, including Rashi, take a different approach; and in the writings of the Talmud we find sages who assume that these verses apply to the whole complex of Jewish observance.

Does the question matter? What is to be gained by such a debate? How do you imagine the Jewish rabbi, Jesus, entering this discussion?

Depthing Torah

A further question arises in Jewish Torah discussions: What significance is added by verses 12 & 13? Wouldn't the meaning of the text remain in tact if they were omitted? Test this for yourself by reading verses 11 & 14 only.

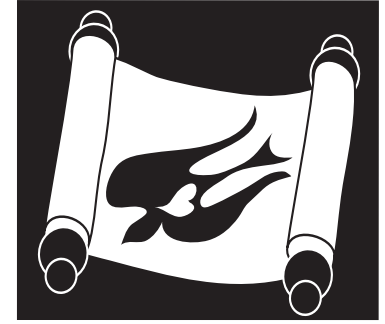
There are two interpretations that emerge from this question, says the Be'er Yizhak. We can hear the text as saying:

1. If the Torah were in heaven it would be inaccessible. But since it's not, we have no excuses to prevent us from reaching for it!
2. Even if the Torah were as far away as heaven, it is of such value that we would still be duty-bound to yearn for it, and we would be crying out 'Who will go up to get it?!' But since it is close, how much more duty-bound are we to embrace it!

And you? How do verses 12 & 13 speak to you? What subtle shades of meaning are illuminated by their presence in the sacred text?

Doing Torah

- Describe a time when the Lord's teachings seemed far away, inaccessible to you.
- Describe a time when the Lord's teaching's seemed very near, intimately close to you.
- What do you think made the difference in these two experiences?
- Is there one teaching in particular that is especially dear to your heart?
- What can you and I do to help others find the Lord's teachings to be near, accessible?



Faith & Life

It was after midnight and I realized that I had forgotten to put out the garbage. Arrrgh! I was already in my pyjamas, it was freezing cold and I was not looking forward to the three story trek from my unit down to the garbage bins.

But I went. I threw on a big sweater, lugged a bag of rubbish down to the bin, and wheeled it to roadside.

As I walked back, I happened to look up. Wow. I stood transfixed as I witnessed the most beautiful night sky I have ever seen (in the city). Clear, bright, star-filled, gorgeous!

I thought of God's promise to Abraham that starry night millennia ago and I was filled with gladness at being alive and knowing that my God was so near to me. At that moment I felt that I stood on hallowed ground (even if I did share it with a garbage bin)!