

5 Ways to bear light

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

In December Christians light candles to celebrate the birth of Christ, Light of the world, while Jews light candles over eight days to celebrate *Chanukah*. *Chanukah* recalls the rededication of the temple after the Maccabean uprising (2nd century BCE) and the miracle of a small cruse of oil that allowed the *Menorah* (candelabrum) to stay lit for eight days instead of one.



Pause. Pause to savor the symbolism of your candle-lighting practices in December: Advent candles, Christmas candles, Christmas tree lights... Be aware, too, of *Chanukah* practices in the Jewish community.



Listen. Take to heart the words of Isaiah (9:1): "The people that walked in darkness has seen a great light." This bible verse that stirs our hearts at Christmas midnight Mass comes to us through a prophet of Israel.



Read. Open your Old Testament to the First Book of Maccabees and read the story of the Maccabean martyrs, Israelites who chose death at the hands of the Greeks rather than renounce their belief in God.



Act. God, who is Light, dwells within. Get in touch with your inner light. Re-dedicate your whole self, God's dwelling place, to the One who is Light. Do something today, an act of kindness, to let your light shine.



Reflect. In Judaism, the number **7** represents perfection/completion. Thus the eighth *Chanukah* candle goes one step further, representing eternity. In Christian belief, Christ the Light is eternal. Reflect on 'completion' and 'eternity' in your faith experience.

This *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, 2009. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info; www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

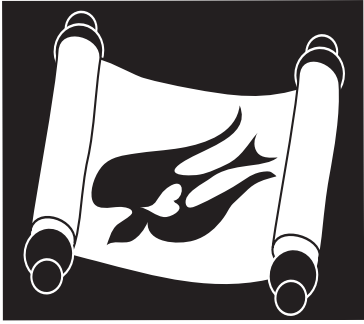
This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, offers a way for Christians to grow in appreciation of the Old Testament, in particular its first five books: the 'Torah.'

It does so, in a unique way: with the help of insights from our Jewish brothers and sisters.

At Vatican II the Church commended this approach to us. The Council Fathers recognised that our Old Testament scriptures come to us from and through the Jewish people and that, with their help, we can grow to a richer understanding of the Scriptures that Jesus, as a faithful Jew, knew and prayed, loved and quoted. To be immersed in Torah is to draw close to Jesus.

For the Jews, Torah is treasured as their sacred text. And for Christians? Torah forms part of our sacred Scriptures too. Together Jews and Christians share this reverence for Torah and are committed to reading it on a regular basis. Just as the Church has a weekly schedule (lectionary) for reflecting on Scripture, so does Judaism have a lectionary for studying a portion of the Torah each week.

The Torah portion that is the focus of this week's leaflet is read on 12 December 2009 in the Jewish cycle. In the month of December, both Christians and Jews celebrate festivals of light: Christmas and *Chanukah* respectively. May the flame in our hearts, the divine spark that can never be extinguished, be rekindled anew as both peoples hear God's call to be 'a light to the nations' (Isa. 42:6).



Torah Portion

For 12 Dec 2009

At this time of year the Jewish people celebrate the festival of Chanukah.

Genesis 37:1—40:23

Have you ever seen a production of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat"? It tells, in song, dance, theatrical energy and raucous humor, one of the most well known and well loved bible stories. Read it aloud for yourself in today's Torah portion.

It is a dark story, a story of envy, resentment, betrayal and murderous thoughts. It is also a story of hope, revelation and redemption. It is the story of a family: Jacob and his sons. In the ancestry of our faith family, it is our story too.

Tasting Torah

Imagine you are with the sages of ancient Israel as they gather to explore this bible story. Upon what do they focus? According to Jewish sources, they regard Joseph as a perfectly righteous man, yet they also recognize in him human weakness. In fact the vices of Joseph's brothers are understood as having roots in Joseph's (and Jacob's) own weaknesses. What do you make of this claim? Does it surprise you? The text gives us three reasons why Joseph's brothers hated him: (a) His father loved him more than they, (b) He told them of his dreams, and (c) He brought ill reports about his brothers to his father.

Touching Torah

On the first point the sages criticize Jacob for showing favoritism for Joseph by clothing him in a special garment and so inciting the envy of his brothers. On the second, Joseph's dreams, there are differing opinions. Some suggest that Joseph secretly harbored the desire to lord it over his brothers. Others suggest that he lacked discretion in relating his dreams. On the third point, the sages have much to share from their fertile imaginations about the details of the 'ill reports' that Joseph gave concerning his brothers, from transgressions in ritual practices to eyes lusting after women!

What about YOU? When you—with your prayerful imagination—listen to this story of complex family dynamics, what do you hear? What insights complete the gaps in the story?

Depthing Torah

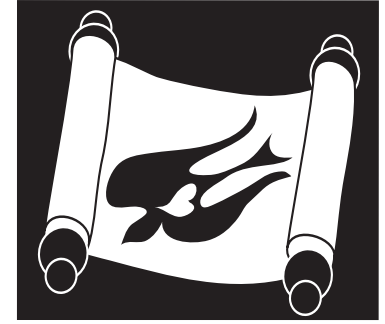
How does this story speak to us in our times? Here is how one person, a Canadian university chaplain, describes it:

"To say that Joseph came from a dysfunctional family is an understatement. Here we have a concrete example of a family fraught with favoritism, sibling rivalry, deceit, and emotional turbulence. Somehow, despite—or rather because of—the trials and tribulations, Joseph the spoiled son grows up. Yes, he was irritating but he was only a boy, and God chose to favor him with the ability to dream dreams and interpret them. Maybe his time away from the affection of his doting father caused him to reflect and examine his actions. Perhaps Jacob could begin to understand the gifts of his other sons more clearly without the distraction of his favored son. The emotional pain caused by the concern for the lost one has a positive effect on the perpetrators. The brothers are rehabilitated because they have learned compassion."

Doing Torah

On family tensions: Every family has its tensions. Yet tensions can be a source of growth and heroic love. With which of the characters in the Joseph story do you most identify?

On dreams: What role do dreams play in your life? Are we naturally suspicious of dreamers, living as they do on another plane? What lessons have you learned from the dreamers in your life?



Faith & Life

A father shares this story:

Our daughter was 'wild' as a teenager... out every night of the week... drinking, drugs, sex. It was a terrible shock and suffering to me as a conservative parent, and even more so when she became pregnant at 18.

That is when things began to change. Realizing she was now responsible for a vulnerable unborn child, she stopped the drinking, drugs and promiscuous behaviour. She put her little daughter first.

Even with family support, it has been very hard for her as a single mother, but she has done a magnificent job; we are very proud of her. The arrival of a new baby has been a ray of sunshine in all our lives. My daughter even comes to me for parenting advice! We talk in ways we never before could. In hindsight, I wonder if this little child has been our daughter's salvation...and mine too. What at the time seemed like a family tragedy (a teenage pregnancy) has in fact become a family grace.