

# 5 Ways to *PLAY* with God's Word

Rebekah

Rebekah was loved by Isaac (Gen. 24:67), but how did she get on with her father-in-law? The text never tells us, yet it does invite the reader to be alert to some fascinating parallels between her and Abraham. Reflect on the following as you come to know our foremother Rebekah.



**Family.** Rebekah comes from the same land of birth as Abraham and, as the story reveals (Gen. 24:24), is in fact his grand-niece.



**Hospitable.** Like Abraham in last week's Torah portion (Gen. 18:1-8), Rebekah responds 'quickly' to her guest. Like Abraham, she 'hastens' and 'runs' and goes to great lengths to provide hospitality.



**Blessed.** From unexpected guests, both Rebekah and Abraham hear news which directly impacts upon the future of Isaac and the assurance of God's promise. (See Gen. 18:14; 24:48)



**Decisive.** Like Abraham, Rebekah is called to leave country and kin for a foreign land. Like Abraham she makes a choice. Familial customs are sidelined as she responds without hesitation. (See Gen.24:55-58)



**Beautiful.** And what of Sarah? Rebekah never meets her mother-in-law who has died by the time she marries into the family. But, like Sarah, Rebekah is beautiful, resourceful. We are told that she brings comfort to Isaac after his mother death. (See Gen.24:67)

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](http://www.batkol.info) and [www.etz-hayim.com](http://www.etz-hayim.com).



## Light of Torah

Ancient texts  
through fresh eyes,  
alive for today.

# Why reflect on Torah?

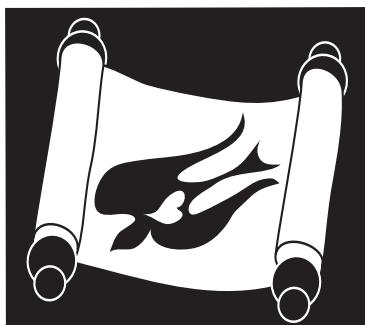
*Torah* is a Hebrew term, best translated into English as 'teaching,' though often translated as 'law.' In its specific sense, *Torah* refers to the first five books of the bible, the part of the Old Testament which we Christians usually call by its Greek name: *Pentateuch*.

These writings are sacred to both Jews and Christians. Without the preservation and on-going study of Torah the Jewish people would not know their sacred story; they would not know from whom they come, and to whom they belong.

Similarly for the Church, without Torah we Christians would not know our own sacred story of belonging to God and God's people. Our knowledge of Jesus, himself a devout Jew who based his life on Torah, would be superficial. In fact, Torah, and the whole of the Old Testament, is the very foundation of our New Testament scriptures.

This series, *Light of Torah*, is one way for Catholics to acquaint themselves with Torah on a regular basis. It leads the reader through Torah texts with the help of Jewish insights. It introduces a rich tradition of biblical interpretation reaching back before the time of Jesus. The Church encourages engagement with Jewish Torah study, recognizing that it was from the Jews that we received the Scriptures in the first place. Jesus himself pondered the Scriptures in a thoroughly 'Jewish' way.

With the help of ancient and living Judaism, then, let's open the Torah...



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Genesis 23:1–25:18

How do you choose a spouse in marriage? What qualities do you seek? What virtues do you hope and pray that your children will find in their husband or wife? This week's Torah portion tells the story of Abraham's quest to find a wife for his son Isaac. With heartfelt instructions Abraham sends his most trusted servant to the land of his birth. There, at a well, the servant approaches his match-making task with a surprising strategy. Read the whole story in chapter 24 of Genesis.

Sources: Frankl, *The Five Books of Miriam* (NY, 1998); *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia, 1989); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (NY, 1994); Schorsch, *Canon Without Closure* (NY, 2007). Scripture quotations: *Jewish Publication Society*.

## Tasting Torah

*“Let the maiden to whom I say, ‘Please, lower your jar that I may drink,’ and who replies, ‘Drink, and I will also water your camels’—let her be the one whom You have decreed for Your servant Isaac”* (Gen. 24:14).

With these words, Abraham's servant prays and establishes criteria for selecting a wife for Isaac. What do you think of his prayer in vv.12-14? How on earth could this formula result in a suitable spouse? Ponder the text before reading on.

## Touching Torah

Having doubts about the authenticity of this match-making mission? You are in good company, for many commentators, both ancient and contemporary, have expressed distaste at the idea that the servant is resorting to magic! Hardly a fitting strategy for a servant representing Abraham, a man of exemplary faith.

Yet other Jewish sages draw a different conclusion. The servant's fervent prayer (the first instance of spontaneous, personal prayer that appears in the bible) gives rise to a character test. His search for Isaac's wife prioritizes not external beauty and good family connections, but inner qualities of virtue. Really, he is testing for the prized virtue of hospitality to strangers. The Talmud says, *“Hospitality to wayfarers is greater than welcoming the Divine Presence”* [Shab.127a]. What an extraordinary statement! Think about this. Why might sacred tradition hold hospitality in such high esteem?

## Depthing Torah

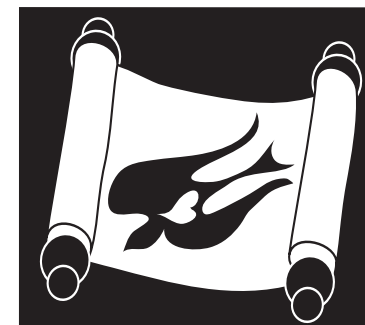
How does Rebekah fare in this test of character? Look carefully at the text. Note the painstaking details in describing Rebekah's actions. She has to 'lower' her jar (presumably a heavy jar sitting on her shoulder). She responds 'quickly' to his request and *runs* to the well after offering (without needing to be asked) to draw water for his camels as well. The text tells us that she 'went down' and 'came up' from the spring, so presumably it was some distance. And she does this multiple times in order to slake the thirst of 'all his camels' – and remember, there are *ten* of them! (See 24:10.) Compassion for animals is an important ethic in Judaism. The text explicitly mentions that she drew water until the camels had *finished drinking*. Have you ever watered a camel after a desert trek? I am told it takes 25 gallons! Why all this detail? (And why is the whole scenario retold twice as the chapter proceeds?) The sages conclude that Rebekah is exceedingly energetic in deeds of loving kindness, hospitable to strangers and compassionate to all living creatures.

## Doing Torah

What do you think? Are Rebekah and Isaac well matched? What challenges will Rebekah face by marrying into this unusual family?

What is special (and challenging) about the gift of hospitality? Describe a time when someone was exceedingly hospitable to you.

Discuss the 'Circle of life' comment at right.



## Circle of life

The day my grandfather died at age 97, his twentieth great-grandchild was born into our family. I was reminded of this as I read chapter 24 of this week's Torah portion, for it opens with the death of Sarah and it closes with Rebekah entering Sarah's tent to be with Isaac. The circle of life... it is beautiful, insistent, natural and the ordinary way through which God enters our lives.

How wonderful it is that Catholic families can go to their sacred scriptures and read 'earthy' stories of life and death, pregnancy and birth, courtship and marriage, family loving and feuding... stories that affirm their humanity and validate their day-to-day joys and struggles. And where do we find most of these stories? Not in the Gospels, not in the epistles. We find them in the Torah, in the Old Testament. We need the *whole* of the bible to nourish our lives.