

5 Ways to Enjoy God's Word

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

Simchat Torah ('Rejoicing in the Torah') is a Jewish festival with joyful processions. In synagogues throughout the world, Torah scrolls are dressed as brides; the faithful take the scrolls in their arms and dance jubilantly. As Catholics we are reminded that we, too, delight in God's Word.



Smile. God's Word is an extraordinary gift in your life. A book that has transformed persons and communities over thousands of years is right at your fingertips... Now that's something to smile about!



Listen. Listen more attentively than usual to the Old Testament readings read in church each Sunday. If any are puzzling or strange to your ears, do some 'homework' to deepen your understanding.



Watch. Absorb God's Word with your eyes. Look at those who read...they are part of the proclamation of God's Word. Watch attentively as the Book is held high during the Gospel procession at Mass.



Enjoy. Family meal tip: Read and discuss a little scripture at the end of your meal with those at table. Perhaps use this leaflet as an aid. Enjoy a celebratory drink together... a toast to Torah!



Dance. Dance for joy before the Word of God?! Oh, come on, don't be bashful. King David danced (2 Samuel 6: 14,21). You can always try this at home!

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

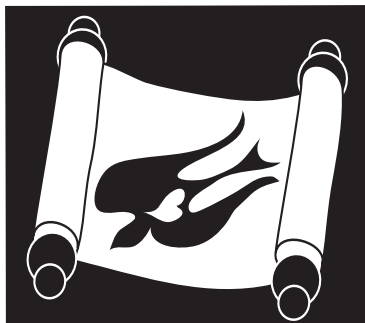
Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

'Torah' refers to the first five books of the Bible. These sacred writings are treasured by Jews and Christians alike. Many Christians, however, have a tendency to overlook this precious part of our bible, preferring to go straight to the Gospels. But when we do this we rob ourselves of the rich soil in which the Gospels are planted. As the Vatican reminds us: "Without the Old Testament, the New Testament would be an incomprehensible book, a plant deprived of its roots and destined to dry up and wither." (PBC, 2001)

At the Second Vatican Council, the Council Fathers urged us to revisit our Jewish roots, and to learn from the Jewish people who gave us Torah, who gave us Jesus, the Living Torah. Together, Jews and Christians share a reverence for Scripture. Together we find there ancient truths, shared wisdom, upon which our respective faith traditions are built.

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, encourages Christians to read Torah, with the help of Jewish insights and traditions. Today's focus is the 'portion' of Torah that is read in synagogues on the Saturday after the Jewish festival known as *Simchat Torah* ('Rejoicing in Torah'). In synagogues, the first five books of the bible are read over the course of a year. The festival *Simchat Torah* (11 Oct 2009) marks the completion of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings and anticipates the opening chapters of Genesis as the cycle begins anew several days later.



Torah Portion

For the start of the Jewish calendar of Torah readings, 17 Oct 2009.

Genesis 1:1–6:8

The invitation today is to open our Bible at its very beginning: Genesis chapter 1. It begins with an account of the creation of the world (1:1-2:4), not in scientific language but in theological language. In a simple story profound religious truths are expressed. Chances are, you are familiar with the story, perhaps having known it since childhood. Herein lies a challenge: to listen again. Even better, to speak it aloud. And better still, to voice it aloud with a friend...

What fresh insight does the Word of God hold in store for me, for us, this day? Prayerfully, let's read, let's ponder, let's question and—in a reverent way—even 'play' with the text. The following comments are offered to assist your journey into Torah.

Tasting Torah

Try reading Gen 1:1-2:4 slowly and deliberately, savouring its rhythmic structure. What is interesting here? Certainly the repetition of 'God-plus-verb'. *God said... God saw... God separated... God called...* But what is strange about it? The austere language and plodding sound-pattern makes it all seem so orderly, effortless. God says, God sees, God separates, God calls... and it is so. Surely the creation of the world cannot be that easy! But here lies the power of the text's structure to communicate its central message. God is portrayed as being totally in control of, and at peace with, the creative process. There is gradual ascent, but no urgency; nothing is forced. God gets there, when God is ready.

Touching Torah

Yet there is a paradox. There is methodical rhythm and careful order, yes. But on the other hand, as the story unfolds, it bursts at the seams with imagery that is anything but calm and restrained: 'swarms' of creatures, 'seed-bearing' plants, living things of 'every kind' (a phrase repeated 9 times). The picture is of unwieldy growth spurts, lifegiving abundance, joyful abandon! And that's before we reach God's crowning creation: human beings. Man and woman are called 'exceedingly good' and told to reproduce. (Isn't it fascinating that God's first command to the human race is to have sex!)

Depthing Torah

And as if that isn't enough, behind the creation story Jewish tradition abounds with even more creation stories. In brief, one of them goes like this: God consults with Torah before creating the world. When Torah expresses her skepticism as to whether the world can survive human sinfulness, God assures her that human goodness will indeed prevail. After all, God has already created repentance... The message: God is not only creative, but decisive and optimistic in the act of creating.

Doing Torah

Created as we are in the divine image, we too are equipped with extraordinary lifegiving power. How terrifying! There is so much that dampens our creative spark: rejection, failure, the slavery of unbridled work schedules. Little wonder that people pull their heads in, saying, "I'm not the creative type." Some are afraid to have a child. But the story of our beginnings calls us not to be afraid; to believe that, embedded in our very existence, is a desire to burst forth, spill over, share, and extend the very life force, natural and spiritual, that pulses within us. **Reflect:** (1) *God is my Creator.* Ponder this intimate relationship. (2) Think of an aspect of your God-given creativity that has been dimmed by hurt or sin. How does God want to 'recreate' that part of you? What healing steps can you take?



Faith & Life

My friend and her husband longed for a child but she was having difficulty conceiving. When she found out that she was pregnant she could not contain her joy. Even the news that she was susceptible to a miscarriage could not dampen her spirits. "Are you sure you want to tell people about your pregnancy just yet?" I cautioned. "Absolutely!" she replied. "The joy for me is that I've conceived!"

There was I, a tired mother of two, thinking: why put all that energy into something that might not come to be? And there was she, fully accepting the risks, and reminding me of the miracle of life.

Sources: Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (NY, 1995); Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, (sourced at www.sacred-texts.com/jud/loj/index.htm); *HarperCollins Study Bible: NRSV* (London, 1993); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2006).