

5 Ways to just 'be' together

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

For the Jewish people, the celebration of *Shabbat* ('Sabbath') as a day of rest, renewal, family and faith has been a great source of strength, even key to their survival as a people. In your busy week, what *shabbat* moments help to prioritize your most important relationships?



Stay. Stay a little longer at the meal table and enjoy an unhurried meal, unrushed conversation, heartier laughs or gentler silences.



Sit. Sit silently in the presence of a prayer candle and allow God's love to wash over you. Or find a quiet moment to sit in your parish church. Eucharistic adoration is an especially intimate way to 'be' with the Lord.



Amble. Amble along with friends in the sunshine, through a park, along a coastline, or simply in your backyard, wherever you find a place of natural beauty.



Pause. Pause in the presence of a child. For a tired parent this may not seem a restful space! But sometimes we find special joy and solace in gazing upon a baby or enjoying the antics of a little one.



Hold. Hold your spouse in an intimate embrace, without any purpose or pressure other than the mutual desire to be present to one another. Allow your physical nearness to draw you close, to be a prayer in itself.

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?

What ought to emerge now is a new respect for the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament... Christians can learn a great deal from a Jewish exegesis practised for more than 2000 years.

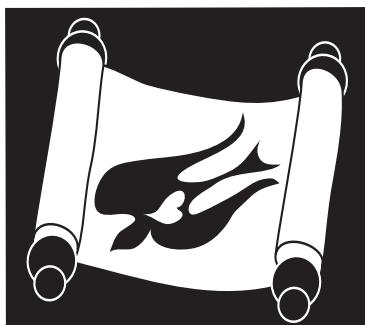
(Cardinal Ratzinger's preface to PBC document, *The Jewish People & their Sacred Scriptures*, 2001)

This *Light of Torah* series offers Catholics a chance to get to know their bible better. It encourages them to read the Torah, the first five books of the bible, week by week. Each leaflet takes a small portion of the Torah, at times only a verse or two, and shares with the reader insights from the interpretative tradition of ancient and living Judaism.

Why would a Catholic be interested to read the Torah, drawing on Jewish sources? For one, Jesus based his life on Torah, and, as a faithful Jew, approached the scriptures in a thoroughly Jewish way. Secondly, given the deep historical and spiritual links between Judaism and Christianity, we can learn a great deal from the sacred biblical tradition which gave rise to our own.

The New Testament writings were never presented as something entirely new. On the contrary, they attest their rootedness in the long religious experience of the people of Israel. (PBC, 2001)

Thirdly, the Church affirms the value and integrity of Jewish biblical interpretation. By understanding better our Jewish roots, we grow more self-aware as a Christian people.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Genesis 18:1–22:24

This week's Torah portion contains a number of engaging stories: the birth of Isaac, the binding of Isaac, the Sarah-Hagar conflict, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah... Yet our discussion will move barely beyond the first line! The sages of old taught that even the tiniest and apparently irrelevant parts of Torah can impart a divine message. Join us as we test this teaching! Begin by reading Gen. 18:1-15. (Hint: read the verses preceding Ch.18 as well.)

1. Quoted in *Rashi*, 174-5.

Sources: Freedman (trans.), *Midrash Rabbah: Genesis* (London, 1983); Herczeg (trans.), *Rashi: The Torah with Rashi's Commentary*, Sapirstein ed. (NY, 1999); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bereshit* (NY, n.d.); Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary* (Philadelphia, 1989). Scripture quotations: *JPS*.

Tasting Torah

"The Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the terebinths of Mamre; he was sitting at the entrance of the tent as the day grew hot" (Gen: 18:1).

Just one line into this Torah portion and the sages were already probing and puzzling over the text. What do you think caught their attention?

Touching Torah

'The day grew hot.' Why would this seemingly irrelevant detail be mentioned?

'The Lord appeared.' Yet there is no indication that the Lord appears to *say* or *do* anything special as is the usual case (e.g., "The Lord appeared and said to so-and-so..."). Nor is Abraham doing anything special to warrant a divine appearance. He is not calling out to God or offering a sacrifice. He is just, well... sitting.

Then there is the ambiguous use of pronouns: *'he,' 'him.'* Although 18:1 is the opening of a new chapter, it reads as if it is continuing a previous story. And what is the preceding story? The account of Abraham's circumcision. In fact, one rabbinic view regards the divine appearance as the grand conclusion to the story of Abraham's circumcision, rather than the opener to the hospitality story which follows.

There are, of course other rabbinic interpretations, but let's stay with this one and follow it a little further. Ask yourself: why would God be showing up, now, at this moment, if there is no divine command to be issued, no blessing to give, no message to be delivered?

Depthing Torah

Rashi (11th c. Torah commentator), echoing the voices of the sages, teaches that on this occasion God visits Abraham, not for the purpose of an important declaration or commissioning, but simply *out of personal concern*. For, having just been circumcised, Abraham is physically recuperating.

R'Chama the son of Chanina said: It was the third day since his circumcision, and the Holy One, Blessed be He, came and inquired about [Abraham's] welfare. (1)

Of course, this explanation is not meant to be taken literally, yet what a tender, imaginative portrayal of God's personal compassion and care for a faithful man. Sometimes this interpretation is used to affirm the importance of visiting the sick, for this is what God did for Abraham.

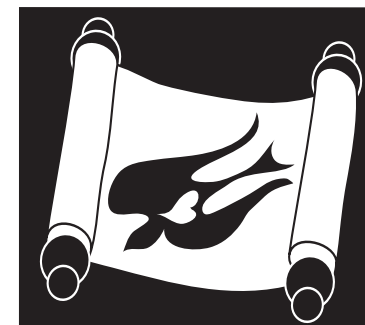
So then, this divine appearance, unlike so many others recorded in the Torah, is not a means to an end, but is given for its own sake; much like friends who get together, not always to accomplish a practical purpose, but simply for the pleasure and comfort of being in each others' presence.

Doing Torah

Has God ever 'appeared' to you when you were physically/emotionally/spiritually vulnerable?

How might Rashi's interpretation of Gen.18:1 enrich the way you live your life?

Alternative rabbinic views present different conclusions. Can you imagine what one might be?



More from Rashi

The text tells us *"The day grew hot"* (18:1). Rashi teaches that God even "bought the sun out of its sheath" so that Abraham would not be troubled by guests, because no one travels during the hottest part of the day. But then, seeing that Abraham was lonely for company, he "brought the angels to him in the form of men."

An ancient *midrash* (Jewish storytelling tradition) suggests that Abraham was not only physically aggrieved by his circumcision but also experiencing emotional turmoil over the thought that the sign of the covenant might lead to his isolation. "Now that I am circumcised, perhaps [travellers] will no longer visit me?" [Gen. R. 48,9]. To this, God offers reassurance through a divine visitation!

As much as these imaginative interpretations make us smile, they also massage our minds and refresh our spirit.