

5 Thoughts about Blessings

Savoring Jewish traditions in Christian life

Blessings are part and parcel of Jewish life. They are brief prayers, often starting with the phrase “*Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe...*” Blessings are prayed in just about every event of daily life: eating, drinking, waking up, putting on new clothes, lighting candles....



1. “*Blessed are you, Lord.*” How can a mere human being bless Almighty God? In Judaism blessings are an affirmation of God who is source of all gifts and blessings. A blessing is a prayer praising and thanking God.



2. “*Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation. Through your goodness we have this wine to offer...*” prays the priest at a Catholic Mass. Listen carefully, aware of the Jewish tradition from which this prayer originates.



3. ‘Blessing’ (*barakha* in Hebrew) is related to the word for knee (*berekh*). This suggests a connection between the act of blessing and the inward disposition of kneeling in humility before the boundless generosity of God.



4. The Talmud says, “If you enjoy something in this world without saying a blessing, it is as if you stole it.” Our Jewish faith-heritage reminds us of the importance of blessing, as both an act and a spiritual disposition.



5. At home, look for many opportunities to pray a blessing: for spouse, for children, for flatmates, for the gifts of time, conversation, food, shelter, clothing, technology and so on. May yours be a truly blessed week!

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, 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?

As a faithful Jew, Jesus’ life and teachings were grounded in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we Christians usually call the ‘Old Testament.’ This makes the Old Testament of foundational importance to us. In fact, to understand Jesus more deeply as Christians, we need to grow in an awareness of the faith and spirituality of the Jewish people. As the Catholic Church since Vatican II has reminded 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.*” Christianity is rooted in Judaism as a plant is rooted in the earth; it cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted.

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, is designed to encourage Catholics to read the first five books of the Bible (the *Torah*) with attention to Jewish interpretative traditions. Even a small morsel of sacred Scripture can nourish us. How well the sages of ancient Israel knew this! They spent hours pondering and debating Torah line by line, even word by word, letter by letter!

In this spirit, let’s take just two verses from the Torah portion of the week, a portion filled with stories of the Israelites’ flight from Egypt across the sea and into the desert. Read as much as you can, then join us as we focus on Chapter 14, verses 15-16.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 13:17—17:16

In Exodus 14:15-16 the Lord speaks to Moses in the midst of a dramatic and terrifying scene: Having escaped from Egypt, the Hebrew refugees find themselves trapped on the shore of the Red Sea: an expanse of water on one side and, on the other, Egyptian chariots in pursuit with murderous intent. In their terror the people cry out to the Lord and even accuse Moses of leading them to their death (v.11). Now, in verses 15-16, God intervenes...

Sources: Bialik & Ravnitzky (eds.) *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996). Scripture quotations: JPS.

Tasting Torah

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your rod, and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground." (14.15-16)

The sages of Israel, so attuned to the subtleties of the biblical text, noticed something odd about these two verses. Before reading on, see if you can spot it for yourself.

Touching Torah

Wouldn't you expect God to command Moses to split the sea *before* telling the Israelites to go forward into it? Yet, the text has the order of the two steps reversed. What can be made of this?

According to one creative interpretation: some of the Israelites lacked faith at the edge of the sea. Yet God asks that they show their faith by marching into the sea even before the waters have parted. Some commentators suggest a back-and-forth discussion among the tribes of Israelites: "I'm not going first into the sea; you go." "No way, I'm not going, you go first!" By contrast, another imaginative version has the tribes competing for the privilege of being the first to take the plunge: "I'll go first." "No, I want to be first!"

How do you imagine the scene? Can you relate it to a moment in your own life when you were called to 'take the plunge' in an unknown and potentially perilous situation? How did you feel, react, behave? Did you 'go first'?

Depthing Torah

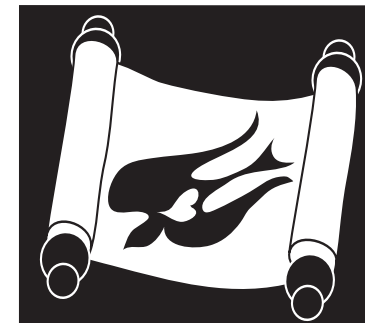
Another *midrash* (story) takes an even stronger view, saying that the people were doubly rebellious at the sea. Why double? Psalm 106:7 contains a repetition [found in the Hebrew text]: "But [they] rebelled at the sea, at the Sea of Reeds." If the first moment of rebellion was the hesitation to go forward into the water, what was the second? The second was to complain about the mud as they were walking through the parted waters!

This interpretation relies on the use of the Hebrew word for mud (*homer*) found in Habakkuk (3:15). The ancient Jewish interpreters knew their bible intimately and maneuvered through the texts freely, creatively, insightfully and prayerfully. In this way they came to conclude: miracles in themselves don't bring people to faith.

Jesus himself shared this view, reluctant to be labeled as a wonder-worker. Just as the Israelites' petty grumblings persisted even after the miracle of the Red Sea, so can we be blind to the divine presence in our lives, held back by our fears or distracted by the 'mud on our shoes.'

Doing Torah

The attitude of 'counting your blessings,' making 'gratitude lists' and practicing affirmation as a lifestyle behavior are all ways to attune our hearts and minds to God's liberating nearness. Review your own practices in this light. Are you quick to notice blessings or burdens? Are you more likely to praise or complain?



Life: gift or burden?

"In my overseas travels, I have met Australians at the top of the Eiffel tower complaining about the beer, I have met Irish in Israel complaining about the heat, and I have met Americans in Italy complaining about the pizza!"

A couple whose newborn baby died after three difficult weeks of hospitalization said: "Julia lived on this earth for only a short time, but in that time she touched hearts and gifted us with her presence. She is our daughter, and we will always love her dearly."

Table Topic

"You can't cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water."

- Rabindranath Tagore

Describe a challenging 'sea crossing' you made at one point in your life. And what about now? Are you standing on a shore now, looking out at a new sea?