

5 reflections on family

In this week's Torah portion, Moses' wife, Zipporah, is present through her absence. Her father Jethro, however, is centre-stage. He teaches his son-in-law vital lessons in leadership and positively shapes Israel's emerging leadership structure. Reflect on your own familial networks: how they reflect gift and tension, learning and labor, contribution and absence.



1. Moses undertakes weighty responsibilities on behalf of his people, to the point where they could appear to interfere with his familial duties. Is a similar tension part of your life? How do you manage it?



2. Some families are under immense pressure because a member has a public profile. E.g., a politician or celebrity in the media spotlight; a minister of religion who symbolizes sacred values. Is this part of your family's story?



3. Some families manage to work together in a business or other collaborative venture on a daily basis. For others, this is a recipe for disaster. What is your experience? What factors help or hinder a family working relationship?



4. Moses, raised in Pharaoh's court, had witnessed only a dictator's leadership. He needed Jethro to show him how to delegate and empower others. What paradigm shifts in your life have occurred through familial influences?



5. Name some key 'life lessons' you learned growing up in your family and lessons you gained later through the inclusion of in-laws. What important values do you most wish to pass on to the next generation?

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?

"A fundamental question [in Christian-Jewish relations today] is the sheer ignorance that many Christians and Jews have about each other. A crucial task is to increase our mutual knowledge, and so enhance mutual respect."

Thomas Casey SJ, Director,
Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies, Rome.

Christianity grew out of the Jewish community, and Judaism remains the rich soil in which our Church is planted. So many of our Christian beliefs, rituals, prayers are inherited from Judaism. The Scriptures which shaped Jesus and the early Church were the Hebrew Scriptures. The New Testament cannot be understood apart from the Old Testament.

Yet, two thousand years later, after centuries of estrangement between the two religions, we find our Church faced with the task of reacquainting itself with the Jewish people, appreciating their unique role in salvation history, and learning from their wealth of thousands of years of biblical reflection.

Where does one start? *Light of Torah* is one practical response. It is a resource that encourages Catholics to read the Hebrew Scriptures, specifically the first five books of the Bible (the *Torah*), with attention to Jewish interpretative traditions. In this way, we become familiar with the ancient stories from our ancestors in faith and the lively ways in which they engaged the text.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Exodus 18:1—20:23

Our Torah portion this week, set in the wilderness of Sinai, includes a momentous event: the giving of the Ten Commandments, a story familiar to both Jews and Christians. However, we put this scene aside for now and focus on the Torah narrative leading up to this event. Let's look at Exodus 18:1-27, where Moses' father-in-law takes centre stage. It is a story much less familiar to Catholics, yet it is there in our Scriptures awaiting our prayerful exploration.

Sources: Bialik & Ravnitzky (eds.) *The Book of Legends* (NY, 1992); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996); www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20091217_1.pdf.
Scripture quotations: New JPS.

Tasting Torah

Jethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Israel His people, how the Lord had brought Israel out from Egypt. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God" (18:1,5).

Read 18:1-27. Like the sages of old, be attentive to the use of *repetition* in the text. Do you notice it? Like a drumbeat, reference to Jethro as Moses' 'father-in-law' is repeated 13 times in just 27 verses. What sparks of enquiry might the sacred text be trying to ignite in us? Ponder this, with a friend, before reading on.

Touching Torah

The text could have highlighted Jethro's identity as a foreigner, a pagan priest, a leader among the people of Midian. Instead it highlights his identity as 'father-in-law.' Thus it implicitly reminds us that Moses—ex-prince of Egypt, Hebrew fugitive, reluctant leader, savior to his people—is a *married* man. Nothing surprising about that, you say. After all, the Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob—were all married. Yet, whilst the Torah is relatively vocal on the topic of the Patriarchs' wives, it is strangely silent about Moses' wife. E.g., the Torah announces her arrival with Jethro (18:6), but quickly falls silent again. We are told that Moses goes out to greet his father-in-law, they embrace, they ask after each other's welfare, they go into the tent and converse (18:7). Not a word about Moses' wife, Zipporah.

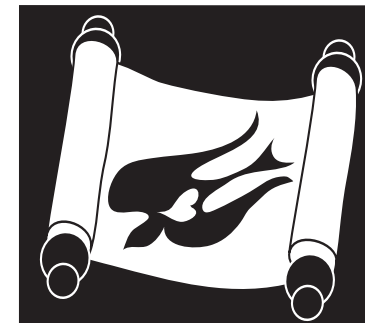
Depthing Torah

On the rare occasions that Moses' wife appears in the Torah there is always a jarring note. Earlier in Exodus (4:24-26), she is involved in a circumcision scene that has troubled commentators down the ages. Later she is the focus of a conflict between Aaron, Miriam and Moses (12:1). The long period of separation between Moses and his wife has given rise to midrashic (storytelling) suggestions that her presence would have interfered with Moses' mission.

Compare all this to the wives of the Patriarchs. Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah are active participants; they evoke a response from their husbands who love them, listen to them, grieve their deaths. Thus a curious contradiction emerges as our Torah text reminds us, 13 times, that *Moses has a father-in-law (read: Moses has a wife)* and at the same time includes uncomfortable silences and question marks surrounding his wife. The Torah celebrates Moses as a great leader to his people; yet, in contrast to the Patriarchs, his wife and children are in the shadows. Why? Do we find here the emergence of a new kind of vocation to spiritual leadership that precludes normal family relations? How do you interpret the repetition and absence in the text regarding Moses, Jethro and Zipporah?

Doing Torah

Moses marries into a pagan, Midianite family. Reflect on the gifts and challenges of interfaith and intercultural marriages/families. In what ways do spouses and families bless one another?



Faith & Life

"For me, one of the great learning experiences of my early adult years was sitting around the barbeque at Sunday family gatherings, chatting with my father-in-law about home renovations, business ideas, how to invest well, and so on. None of these lessons have been directly related to my career path, but all of them have shaped me and stood me in good stead in so many practical situations. And it was bonding. I didn't just absorb 'ideas,' I absorbed something of my father-in-law himself, as a person, as a husband and father, as a builder, investor and homemaker."

Talking point:

Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, teaches his son-in-law how to reorganize his judicial activities. Have you had a 'Jethro' influence in your life; a family member or close friend who helped you to rethink familiar practices?