

# 5 Ways to ponder God's Word

## Bible reflection tips

God's Word is a living word. A stirring word. A word that speaks Heart to heart. A love letter. A voice that comes to us through the People of God, and draws us ever more intimately into communion with God and one another. Both Christians and Jews share this lively engagement with Scripture.



**Read.** Above all, read the text! The Exodus story can appear very familiar and we might be tempted to skip over and just read the comments of 'experts.' Always go to the text and read it for yourself.



**Revisit.** While reading the Book of Exodus revisit some stirring 'exodus' songs ("We Shall Overcome"), images (fall of the Berlin wall), speeches (Martin Luther King: "I Have a Dream").



**Watch.** The animated film *Prince of Egypt* is an adaptation of the Moses story. Watch it with your children as a way of encouraging a bible-based discussion at home. Compare parts of the film with the actual text.



**Wrestle.** Don't glibly accept the text. Like the rabbis and sages of old, probe it, question it, wrestle with puzzling aspects. Make an effort in your thinking and study. Fire up your reflections with prayer.



**Pair up.** Try the ancient method of *havrutah*, i.e. share scripture with one or two friends (*haverim* in Hebrew). "Iron sharpens iron." (Prov. 27:17) Just as one piece of iron sharpens another, so two will sharpen each other's minds by discussion of a sacred text.

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](http://www.lightoftorah.net); [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?

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, encourages Catholics to read the Torah with the help of Jewish insights and traditions. Why would Catholics want to do that? Because there is a profound and sacred connection between the two religions.

The 'Torah' (a Hebrew word meaning 'teaching, instruction') refers to the first five books of the Bible. These books come to us through the faith and life of the Jewish people who continue to engage with their sacred texts. As a faithful Jew, Jesus' life and teachings were firmly rooted in Torah. In order to understand more deeply our own sacred scriptures and Jesus himself, we can draw nourishment from the rich faith and spirituality of Judaism.

John Paul II, on many occasions, took the initiative in affirming the close bond between Christians and Jews. During a visit to the Synagogue of Rome (1986), he declared:

*"The Church of Christ discovers its 'links' with Judaism 'by pondering its own mystery' (see Nostra Aetate,4). The Jewish religion is not 'extrinsic' to us, but in a certain manner, it is 'intrinsic' to our religion. We have therefore a relationship with it which we do not have with any other religion. You are our favoured brothers and, in a certain sense, one can say our elder brothers."*

May this leaflet series, designed for Catholic parish audiences, contribute to a growing awareness of the gift of Judaism and the gift of our shared biblical heritage.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Exodus 1:1—6:1

Today we begin a new book of the Torah: the Book of Exodus. The title immediately brings to mind images of Moses the great liberator, the Israelites' wandering in the desert, the Ten Commandments, and so on. For many of us, our familiarity with this Book comes from childhood bible stories, or perhaps from film and song. Now we have a chance to explore it afresh, ideally with a friend, perhaps taking turns to read the text aloud. What buried treasure can we uncover? Read on, with particular attention to the first two chapters of Exodus.

1. Rashi: outstanding Jewish biblical scholar of the Middle Ages.

2. Nehama Leibowitz, 1996.

3. Mark Walsh, 2007.

Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem, 1996); *parashah* commentaries at [www.batkol.info](http://www.batkol.info).

## Tasting Torah

When we first encounter Moses in Chapter 2 of Exodus, he is a helpless child hidden among the reeds on the bank of the river. Within 16 verses, he has been saved, raised as an Egyptian prince and has fled to Midian. Having just intervened to kill an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, he now flees in order to save his own life.

## Touching Torah

Ever wonder why Moses turned his back on his place of privilege to stand in solidarity with his the enslaved Hebrews? The text simply reads, “*One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to his people and saw their forced labor*” (2:11). Surely it was a familiar sight to Moses. What made this time different? Jewish sages of old, down to Torah scholars and students of our own day, have pondered this passage.

According to Rashi (1), Moses “directed his eyes and heart to share their distress.”

Rashi’s interpretation, says one commentator (2), takes into account the use of the Hebrew words *ra’ah* (‘to see’) and *be* (‘into’). Thus the text can read, “he looked into their burdens.”

Says an Australian student of Torah (3), “What strikes me about Rashi’s interpretation is that Moses saw their suffering not only with his eyes, but also with his heart.”

Did Moses act so strongly, even violently, because he saw with ‘eyes of the heart’? Ponder this passage and join in the Torah discussion.

## Depthing Torah

Moses refuses to stand by unresponsively in the face of injustice, but he is not the only one to do this. The courageous disobedience of women is also a key theme in these first chapters of Exodus. We find a Levite woman who hides her son amongst the reeds, thus dangerously contradicting Pharaoh’s edict. The infant’s sister (Miriam) colludes in this challenge to Pharaoh’s authority. Then Pharaoh’s daughter finds and saves the baby, willingly contravening the authority of her father. Each of these valiant women creates a ripple of defiance that will become the swell of the exodus. A clear message emerges: it requires only one person to take a stand against injustice for the river of liberation to start flowing.

## Doing Torah

- Describe a time when you saw something or someone with the ‘eyes of the heart’ or when you ‘looked into the burden’ of another.
- Who is a ‘Moses figure’ in our own times?
- Describe a time you resisted an injustice for the sake of another person.
- From personal experience and reading of this week’s Torah portion, speculate as to what might have been going on within the mind/heart of Moses as he made the transition from ‘prince of Egypt’ to ‘liberator of slaves.’
- How can we teach our children to be obedient to God and disobedient to forces of evil?



In the Babylonian Talmud we read: “The world stands upon the single column that is the just man” (Hagigah, 12b).

### Courage to speak up

Lucy and John have always been a steady witness to me of what it means to live one’s faith in daily life. I recall one holiday period when they took an organised tour to a famous city. The tour included a number of city sights, among them a notorious night club in the red light district. Lucy and John took exception to this. Surely this was not entertainment, they said. Surely this is somehow contributing to the exploitation of less fortunate people. Their objection released a chain reaction in the group. A number of people felt the same way. The end result was that the night club stop was replaced with a harbor cruise. Interestingly, it was the harbor cruise that turned out to be the highlight of the tour!