

Torah, Torah Study, and Torah Reflections: An Introduction

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The Kalsman Institute on Judaism and Health

Torah Study and Healing

Jewish tradition sees in the words of the Torah a rich treasury not only of guidance for sacred living, but also of implied questions that have kept its readers, listeners, students, and interpreters engaged in stimulating conversation across the generations. People across the spectrum of faith and training have discovered many ways to glean insights from the text. Generations of Jews have been both inspired and challenged by the Torah, whether reading the narrative straightforwardly, or seeking subtler messages or hints of hidden spiritual gems, or gaining perspectives from the comments of others. Indeed, sometimes what we notice in or carry away from our Torah reading depends on the “eyes of the beholder”—on the condition we find ourselves at a given point in our lives.

The Talmud advertises that Torah study brings richness and healing to our lives. Studying Torah gives us an opportunity to interact with tradition, engage our minds and hearts, and reflect on some of the deeper concerns in our lives. Especially for someone facing illness or loss, studying Torah with another person can bring additional comfort and healing.

The word “Torah” can mean many things. Most concretely, a Torah—or a Torah scroll—refers to the parchment roll containing the Five Books of Moses (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). However, Jews commonly speak of “Torah” in its broader sense of “Teaching”. All of Jewish sacred scripture may fall in this category, as well as the centuries of preserved Rabbinic teachings that followed the canonization of the Bible. Indeed, many Jewish scholars and mystics have understood or imagined Torah as a living stream of teaching, conversation, and illumination—both human and divine—that is simultaneously revealed and transmitted as we study the words and thoughts of our ancestors and sages. In this near-infinite pool of literature and wisdom, of human drama and divine discourse, there is always more to learn.

“Torah study”, then, can involve reading and reflecting on Biblical passages. It can be a scholarly endeavor that includes the comparison of varying quotations and the study of classical Rabbinic commentaries and other related texts in Hebrew or in translation. It can involve meditating on a single phrase or word or letter with our soul’s eyes. Torah study can also be a

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conversation with another person about what a text means, what it is asking or trying to teach, what we find striking or challenging—or even objectionable—in it, or about what it makes us consider.

There is a Jewish tradition that each human being has a spark of the divine within us, and that Torah—in the sense of divine teaching—is revealed not only through the written texts preserved in our synagogues and libraries but also in the “text” of each of our lives. In this view, learning Torah with a study/conversation partner allows us an additional window (or mirror) into the Torah of our lives. Reflecting on words of Torah together, or reflecting on life/on one another before a Torah text, can be particularly meaningful in times of illness, struggle, or other life transition.

Torah Reflections

The Torah Reflections project of the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center began in January of 2001, initially to serve Jewish patients at several hospitals in San Francisco. The goal was to bring brief, accessible, healing-oriented commentaries on the current Torah portion—or on an upcoming Jewish holiday—that might spark helpful personal reflection or conversation. These 1- to 2-page pieces were intentionally written to be broadly inclusive, speaking to Jews across the spectrum of denomination, affiliation (or lack of affiliation), and belief—and in particular addressing or supporting the kind of spiritual journeying and questioning that can come with periods of illness or hospitalization.

The project quickly grew in scope and distribution, as the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center received positive feedback and subscription requests from patients, family members, volunteer visitors, hospital chaplains, and other professional colleagues in increasingly wide circles. Within a few months, authors from other Jewish healing centers and chaplaincy settings were recruited. A collaboration with the Jewish Healing Center of San Diego, and then with several agencies in other North American communities, brought in new voices and markedly expanded readership and visibility.

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Underlying the perspectives of many Torah Reflections authors is the understanding that we all face illness and loss—our own or someone close to us—at some point in our lives. Engagement with this important part of life can be enriching, and our tradition has many wonderful spiritual resources in this area that speak to the breadth of views people may hold toward God, suffering, and healing.

Many Torah Reflections frame traditional texts and teachings specifically through a healing lens, validating and responding to the experience of those facing vulnerability, illness and loss.

As an example, in addressing the somber, mid-summer commemoration of the destruction of the Temple in ancient Jerusalem, a Tisha b’Av Torah Reflection offers the following:

Historically, in addition to assuring our basic survival, we sought to regain our spiritual bearings. In the face of crisis and despair, we aimed to nurture our individual and collective efforts to continue to “choose life” and hold onto or find new meaning in our continuing identification with the Jewish people. Our tradition has preserved many responses that can be of help when we confront our own, personal catastrophes.

This Tisha b’Av Torah Reflection then presents suggestions based on some of these responses, i.e. lamentations, memorials, vows, reaching out for help, prayer and meditation. It also acknowledges that:

in the face of near-absolute desperation and seemingly impossible odds, the Jewish People found ways to rebuild, to forge new paths, to live and bless and flourish again following its catastrophic losses. The Shabbat following Tisha b’Av is called the Sabbath of Comfort, *Shabbat Nahamu*. As we move past the tragic anniversary date on our calendar, our tradition encourages us to begin to seek consolation.

Some readers find solace and inspiration as they contemplate the questions and struggles faced by their Biblical forebears. Some are grateful for the invitation to think and talk about the issues raised by the different Torah Reflections authors—contemporary voices navigating the terrain of transition and loss, frailty and yearning. Others, simply in receiving and considering these pieces, or incorporating the language and practices offered by our tradition, feel a sense of affirmation, or a renewed sense of connection to their community, that counters the isolation so commonly experienced during illness or in an institutional setting. Still others have used Torah Reflections to broach a difficult subject or spark an important conversation with a loved one, a

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colleague, or a new patient. Both Jewish and non-Jewish readers have expressed their appreciation for the healing-oriented perspectives and for the insights into Judaism they have gained from the Torah Reflections.

Torah study is a time-honored way to mine the precious spiritual gems that can be found in our texts and in our lives. We hope these Torah Reflections provide openings for fruitful learning and exploration, conversation and comfort, reflection and renewal.

Rabbi Natan Fenner coordinates the Torah Reflections project for the Bay Area Jewish Healing Center in San Francisco, and authored the Tisha b'Av text cited above. To view a current Torah Reflection, subscribe, or learn more about the project, visit www.jewishhealingcenter.org.