



# *In the Light of Torah*

Ancient texts  
through fresh eyes,  
alive for today.

## *Why reflect on Torah?*

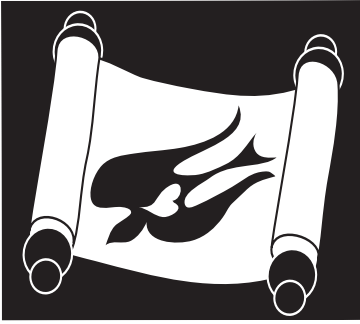
Those following our *Light of Torah* series may notice a break in schedule this week. Why? To accommodate the special significance of this weekend for Christians: Easter!

While our choice of Torah portion does not coincide exactly with the Jewish liturgical calendar, it remains closely linked. Our Torah portion tells the story of the crossing of the Red Sea in the Book of Exodus. Trapped at the edge of the sea, with Pharaoh's army bearing down upon them, the Israelites cry out to God who intervenes by parting the waters and bringing them to safety.

This story, so central to both Jewish and Christian faiths, is remembered in the Jewish celebration of Passover (which begins at sundown on 8 April 2009) and is read at the Easter Vigil in Catholic Christian churches (on the night of 11 April 2009).

For Christians, our Torah portion today contains a surprise. It takes as its focus two verses which the Easter Vigil Exodus reading omits. The Easter Vigil reading finishes with the victory song led by Moses (usually sung as a psalm). Our Torah discussion begins with the victory song led by Miriam.

'Why reflect on Torah?' is the question we asked at the top of this page. Answer: to enrich and expand our usual Christian reading of Scripture with the help of Jewish sources and traditions. Read on, and we will do just that.



## Torah Portion

Today's Torah Portion is chosen here for its relevance to the festivals of both the Jewish Passover and the Christian Easter.

### Exodus 14.1-15.21

As the band of Hebrew refugees flee from Pharaoh's army, God intervenes by parting the Red Sea and bringing them through on dry ground. Safely encamped on the other side, the Israelites break into song and dance, celebrating their salvation by the mighty hand of God.

1. *Mekhilta* 10:84. Quoted in Goldstein, 140.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Frankel, *The Five Books of Miriam*, (San Francisco, 1996); Goldstein, *The Women's Torah Commentary* (Woodstock, Vermont, 2000); Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.

# Tasting Torah

*"Then the prophet Miriam, Aaron's sister, took a tambourine in her hand; and all the women went out after her with tambourines and with dancing. And Miriam sang to them: "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea." (Ex. 15:20-21)*

Who is Miriam? Our text tells us she is Aaron's sister. Thus she is also Moses' sister. In Exodus we see all three siblings exert leadership in the Israelites' desert journey. Says the prophet Micah, *"I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam (6:4)."* We first meet Miriam in the opening chapters of Exodus (2:4) where she keeps watch over her baby brother in the reeds during his escape from Pharaoh's soldiers. Yet the first time we hear her named 'Miriam' is in today's Torah portion.

# Touching Torah

In the Bible, names shed light on the text's meaning. Miriam's name contains two Hebrew words: *mar* ('bitter') and *yam* ('sea'). How do 'bitterness' and 'sea' feature in the Exodus story? (Hint: read on to v.23.) 'Miriam' is also derived from the Egyptian word *mer* ('beloved').

Our Torah portion refers to Miriam as prophet, yet gives no reason for this title, an omission which stirred the imaginations of the Sages! One tradition holds that, in defiance of Pharaoh's death-wish for newborn Jewish boys, it was Miriam who urged her parents to risk lovemaking and conception, having foreseen the birth of Moses and his leadership role for the Hebrew people.

# Deeper into Torah

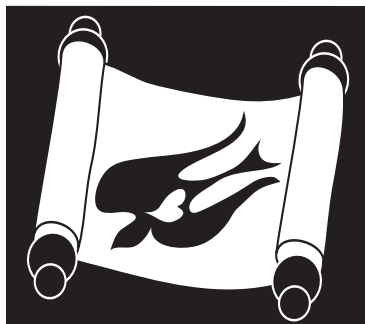
What else is intriguing about our text? Notice how Miriam, and the women who follow her, bring out their tambourines (‘hand-drums’, ‘timbrels’). What is odd about this? A people have just fled in haste, fearing for their lives, yet they packed musical instruments?! The *midrash* comments on this with an optimistic view of the faith of the Israelites: “The righteous ones were confident and knew that the One who is in every place would perform miracles and deeds of might as they came out of Egypt, and they were prepared with instruments and dances.”(1)

What else do we notice? Miriam’s Song is recorded as one sole verse, a verse found in the preceding Song led by Moses which lasts 18 verses. Do you find this puzzling? A body of scholarship suggests that the Song led by Moses may in fact have been composed by a woman. In fact, one ancient manuscript calls it the Song of Miriam. This is in keeping with an ancient tradition of women hand-drummers going out to greet victorious troops returning home after battle.

# Doing Torah

If there is ever a time for Christians to dance and sing in praise of God’s saving power, Easter is it! Ponder this parallel: Miriam, the first individual in the Torah to be called ‘prophet,’ proclaims the saving work of God at the Red Sea. In the Gospels, another Miriam (Mary) is the first to proclaim the resurrection of Jesus at the empty tomb.

Now, in what ways will YOU actively praise and proclaim the wonders of God this Easter?



## Halleluya! (‘Praise the Lord!’)

“During World Youth Day I was with a pilgrim group boarding a train to travel into the city. I was with a group of ten, but there were many more groups of youthful pilgrims getting on the same train. The atmosphere was joyful, but on this occasion not at all boisterous; rather subdued you might say. Maybe everyone was tired! Anyway, we were travelling along, and someone pulled out their guitar and began singing soft ‘Alleluias’. A few more joined in, and before you knew it there were soft alleluias wafting through the whole train! At the time it seemed the most natural thing in the world. A train-full of people all praising the Lord!”

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# 5 ways to celebrate Exodus

## Jewish influences in Christian life

Each year at *Pesach* (Passover), the Jews tell the Exodus story by way of a home-based *Seder* meal. The *Seder* meal is not a Christian tradition, but Christians can draw inspiration from it, without co-opting Jewish practice. What might a Christian 'exodus ritual' in the home look like? Here are some ideas which have been tried with success.



**Gather.** Christians gather at church during Holy Week. In an 'exodus ritual' we also gather at home, in family households, around the meal table, to tell the story of salvation of the Israelites' flight from Egypt.



**Symbols.** Add symbols to your meal table: biblical symbols (bitter herbs, unleavened bread, lamb) and/or other 'exodus' images (e.g., sand, a dusty sandal, cactus, tent-cloth, tambourine, water/mud...)



**Story.** Tell part of Exodus (e.g. Ch.14) with dramatic flair, involving multiple voices/images. Mention exodus stories in our own times (e.g., fall of the Berlin wall). Invite those gathered to share personal exodus stories.



**Song.** Choose a favourite song or hymn that celebrates freedom and sing it at table. E.g., 'We Shall Overcome' (African-American spiritual), 'Freedom Now' (Tracy Chapman).



**More.** For more practical ideas, and an exploration of the rationale behind this table ritual, download a copy of the free booklet *Celebrating Exodus: Home-based Rituals for Christians* from [www.batkol.info](http://www.batkol.info). You can also access it at [www.chatswoodparish.org.au](http://www.chatswoodparish.org.au)

*In the Light of Torah* is a parish leaflet series designed to encourage Christians 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. Further reading: [www.batkol.info](http://www.batkol.info). Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.

