



In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

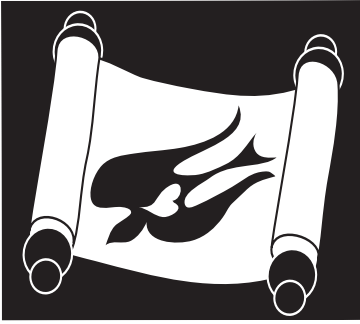
Why reflect on Torah?

When was the last time you read the Book of Leviticus? In reality most Christians have never read it, nor particularly want to! “Isn’t that the book with all those ancient Jewish rules and regulations?” you ask. “Surely there is more value in reading the Gospels!”

This is precisely why this leaflet series *In the Light of Torah* exists; to encourage Christians to become familiar, week by week, with the Old Testament scriptures. Specifically, it explores the Torah, the first five books of the Bible. In Torah we find the Scriptures that formed Jesus, the biblical texts he knew and loved, prayed and taught. There we find the biblical foundations of the New Testament. And yes, there we find the Book of Leviticus.

The Church reminds us that both Old and New Testaments were formed under divine inspiration (*Dei Verbum*, 16), and that their relationship must be properly understood. The New Testament must not be set *against* the Old Testament; e.g., as if to suggest that Judaism is a religion of only justice, fear and legalism. Rather, the New Testament, with its teaching on love of God and neighbor, finds its very foundations in a proper understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures.

With this in mind then, and with the help of both Jewish and Christian insights, let’s open the Book of Leviticus...



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Leviticus 1:1 - 5:26

Today we begin the Book of Leviticus. Compared to the action-packed stories of Genesis and Exodus, we are struck by a lack of movement. The entire book is set in one place: at the foot of Mount Sinai. There, in the wilderness, God speaks, forming the people by unveiling a series of laws or instructions: how to worship, how to behave, how to deal with transgressions. Through a system of order and repetitive ritual, the identity of God's people is solidified.

Tasting Torah

How does a mere human being relate to the deity, to Divine Presence, to God who is infinitely greater than all human experience and imagining? How does one approach the unapproachable? Religious ritual is one way. By doing sacred things in an agreed-upon manner, people find a way of expressing their relationship with God in concrete terms, in time and place.

Thus Israel's sacrificial system was viewed as God's gift, a way of 'drawing near' to God. In fact, the Hebrew name for one of the most common forms of sacrifice, *korban*, has been rendered 'near-bringing' or 'near-offering' by some Jewish translators. In bringing the gift to be offered near to the altar, the worshipper draws close to God.

Touching Torah

Our passage describes five sacrifices. The idea of killing and burning (or cooking) animals in religious ritual can seem offensive to readers today. To help make sense of Leviticus, it is worth noting that animal sacrifice was common in the ancient near-eastern cultures. Sacrifices were often the occasion for a community meal, making costly meat available to many. Some sacrifices (e.g., those in Lev.1-3) were happy celebrations of the human-God friendship. Indeed, some could be likened to your parish community gathering for a festive barbeque! Other types of sacrifice (e.g., those in Lev. 4:1-5:26) were aimed at reparation, helping people deal with guilt and unrest in the community when wrongdoing was committed.

Deeper into Torah

With its detailed sacrificial rules, Leviticus can be described as a priest's manual. But wait, what do you notice about about the opening verses?

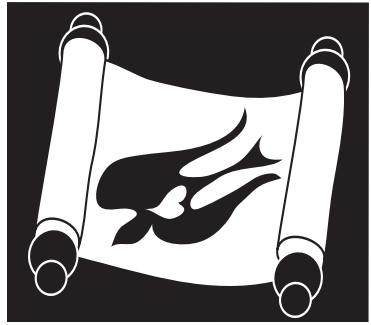
The Lord summoned Moses and spoke to him from the tent of meeting saying: Speak to the people of Israel and say to them... (Lev.1:1-2)

The Lord's words are not only for priests but for the whole people of Israel. Just as God is all-holy, so the people are called to holiness. Through Leviticus the people learn what it means to be a *holy people*. Their laws for worship are not imposed burdens; rather, they express the honor of being friends with the Creator of the universe!

Imagine, then, you are a first century Christian Gentile. You were not born a Jew, but now, through conversion to Christ, you discover that the God of Israel calls you, too, to be among God's chosen people! Imagine the joy of hearing the letter of St Peter addressed to you: *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people"* (1 Peter 2:9) This statement of Christian vocation does not come out of thin air; it is grounded in the story of the people of Israel, who know themselves to be chosen, priestly, holy... because they belong to God.

Doing Torah

Describe one ritual that has drawn you nearer, closer to God. E.g., grace before meals, family rosary, first communion, Sunday Mass. Perhaps you remember a particular Lenten practice from when you were a child...



A sacred place

The large verandah of one family's holiday home has been a place of fond memories and warm conversations for over thirty years. The family has dramatically marked this sacred site with a large Celtic cross on the wall.

This week: Name sacred places, home rituals and holy symbols which are part of your everyday experience of faith and life. How do they draw you closer to God and to others?

Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman's Commentary* (N.Y., 2008); Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (N.Y., 1995); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001). Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.

5 Sacred Sites at Home

With the destruction of the Temple in 70 AD, the Jews lost their sacrificial system. As Judaism re-invented itself, one ritual proved essential to its survival: the weekly Sabbath meal celebrated in Jewish homes. For Christians, too, the home is holy ground. There, God's people live and love on a daily basis. Think about your home's natural 'sacred sites', and the precious rituals and relationships that they accommodate.



1. The meal table. The family dining table is more than a place of physical nourishment. It is where families gather to nourish one another in love. It is a place to thank God for food and sustenance.



2. Conversation corner. Comfy chairs, a space for coffee cups. A place to discuss difficult decisions, share a burden or revel in a joy; a place to praise each other, pose a challenge, pray together.



3. The marriage bed. Through years of joy, hardship, romance, the mundane, this is a sacred place for holding one another in reverence and love. There a couple's wedding vows are renewed throughout their lives.



4. A loving passage. The entrance to your home is a sacred site! It's the spot where we kiss each other hello and goodbye; a place of warm handshakes, greetings and farewells, hospitality and affection.



5. Outdoor sanctity. The garden, the balcony, a leafy outlook... How can these become contemplative spaces to gaze upon and delight in God's creation?

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. Reproduction of this leaflet permitted for non-commercial church use.

