

5 Reflections

Blood as symbol & sacrament

Catholics drink the precious Blood of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, where wine, consecrated by an ordained priest, draws the congregation into the divine presence and spiritual communion. Reflect on Eucharist in the light of today's Torah portion.



Salvation. An unobstructed blood flow is essential to health and to life itself. Blood is used in transfusions to save lives. Blood products are used medically to cure disease.



Fertility. Blood signifies the lifegiving power of women when it flows in menstruation and in childbirth. The life of an unborn child is intimately dependent upon the blood (life-force) of the mother.



Sacrifice. Bloodshed can signify death (e.g., war, murder). It can also signify selfless love (e.g., martyrdom, childbirth), the heroic actions of those committed to protecting others (e.g., firefighters, rescue squads).



Communion. Blood can signify the binding together of lives. We are familiar with phrases such as 'blood relative' and 'blood brother.' Blood can signify the first-time sexual union of man and woman.



Eucharist. In the Eucharistic wine, Christ's blood communicates all these dimensions: it is a saving sacrifice, a source of spiritual nourishment, a lifegiving communion in the Lord.



Why reflect on Torah?

Torah, in its specific definition, refers to the first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These scriptures, preserved and held sacred by Jews for thousands of years, are part of the Christian bible too. They are essential to the biblical foundations upon which the New Testament rests.

Given this common biblical heritage, the deep spiritual links between Judaism and Christianity, as well as the need to heal a history of conflict and division, the Second Vatican Council called for a new spirit and practice of dialogue between the two faith communities:

"Since Christians and Jews have such a common spiritual heritage, this sacred council wishes to encourage and further mutual understanding and appreciation. This can be achieved, especially, by way of biblical and theological enquiry and through friendly discussion." (Nostra Aetate, 4)

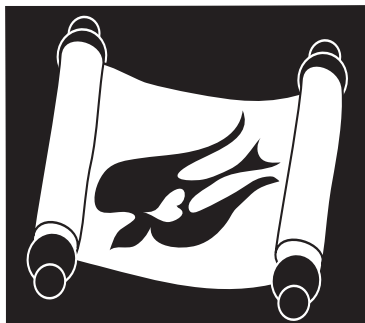
Such 'enquiry' and 'discussion' must not be contained to the level of academia and religious hierarchy. It is a sharing that can take place in family homes and parishes, in small study groups and at the meal table. This leaflet series, *In the Light of Torah*, is a tool for fostering such enquiry. It encourages Christians to reflect on Torah, conscious of the ancient Jewish milieu within which Jesus lived, and refreshed by the insights and traditions of 'living Judaism.'

In the Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

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.





Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 6.1 - 8.36

Today's Torah portion continues with instructions about systems of worship. It begins with further details about how to bring sacrificial offerings near to the altar, and it ends with the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests. Of particular interest to us today are two verses prohibiting the consumption of blood (7:26-27).

(1) Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* II (NY, 1993); Levine, *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (NY, 1989). Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.

(2) Maimonides, 12th C.

(3) Nachmanides, 13th C.

(4) Rashi, 11th C.

(5) *Sefer ha-Hinnuk*: first book of religious instruction among the Jews of the Middle Ages.

(6) Abravanel, 15th C.

Tasting Torah

"You must not eat any blood whatever, either of bird or of animal, in any of your settlements. Anyone of you who eats any blood shall be cut off from your kin" (Lev. 7:26-27).

We find the same prohibition repeated with increasing emphasis in Lev. 17:14 and Deut. 12:23. What is the reasoning behind this law? Curiously, this is the only Jewish prohibition of food consumption that is explained in the Torah. Not that Torah commentators have always agreed on that explanation! Let's hear from some of the revered Jewish Torah scholars of the Middle Ages...(1)

Touching Torah

For Maimonides (2), this prohibition was about resisting idolatry. Ancient pagan dining practices included the blood of animals as a way of communing with the spirits. That, said Maimonides, is why God reacts as vehemently against the consumption of blood as against idolatry ("I will set my face against that person..." Lev. 17:10).

But Nachmanides (3) offers a different approach quoting Torah itself: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11). Thus blood carries the very life force or 'spirit' (*nefesh*) of a creature. Too precious to be food, it is perfect for use in sacred rituals where, rather than being collected as in pagan gatherings, it is poured out, sprinkled, on an altar. "I have given [blood] to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar" (Lev. 17:11).

Deeper into Torah

Rashi (4) expresses a similar idea: "Blood represents life, and it can therefore expiate life."

A further explanation is found in the *Sefer Ha-Hinnuk* (5): "Man's nature might be tainted with a certain measure of cruelty if he eats the life-blood of another living creature."

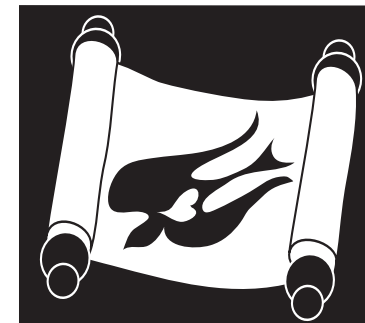
Then again, we hear from Abravanel (6) that the red color of blood symbolizes sin. "God commended that man offer up blood as a token of the confession of sin..."

So, what do you think? From your reading of Torah, is the prohibition in Leviticus concerning the consumption of blood best explained in terms of preventing idolatry, respecting the life-force of living beings, avoiding violent tendencies or reserving blood for cultic purification? Amidst the variety of reflections, one thing is sure: our text serves to sensitize us to the reality and symbolism of blood, in our own lives, in the world at large, and especially in religious expression.

Doing Torah

Table topic: Share your own reflections about blood, 1) as a symbol of death/destruction, 2) as a symbol of life/fertility, 3) as a symbol of self-sacrifice/life-sharing. Continue your reflections throughout Passion Sunday and into HolyWeek.

Prayer: Take your pulse. Listen to the heartbeat of a loved one. Allow the rhythm of the beat, the feel of this life-force, to draw you into a moment of contemplative prayer with your Creator.



Life matters

"When Dad was in hospital with terminal cancer I saw the difference a blood transfusion made to his life; he was in less pain, he was brighter and his eyes regained their sparkle. It was then that I made the decision to become a blood donor. Apart from prayer, there was so little I could do for my Dad. But I knew I could do this: I could give blood that could help another patient and another grieving family."

"Give life. Give blood" was the slogan of a blood donor appeal. Have you ever donated blood to a blood bank? Have you ever received a blood transfusion? Describe that experience.