



## 5 thoughts

On the subject of blood it has been noted that a mixed message of fear and power, contact and avoidance, is found in all the Torah's passages relating to blood. Blood sustains and endangers, brings plague or deliverance; it can represent life, but also a violent death; it can bind people together in covenant or cause separation... little wonder that it holds such potent symbolism in religious traditions. Reflect on this, naming examples of the significance of blood in human and religious experience.

**1. 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.

**2. 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.

**3. 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., soldiers, rescue squads).

**4. Communion.** Blood can signify the binding together of lives. We are familiar with phrases such as 'blood relative' and 'blood brother.' Blood is shed in the sign (male circumcision) of the Jewish covenant.

**5. Eucharist.** For Catholics, in the Eucharistic species the blood of Christ communicates all these dimensions: a saving sacrifice, a source of spiritual nourishment, a lifegiving communion in the Lord.



Light of Torah  
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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 14:1—15:33  
*Metzora*: 'someone with scaly skin/leprosy'

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"The Old Testament and the Jewish tradition founded upon it must not be set against the New Testament in such a way that the former seems to constitute a religion of only justice, fear and legalism, with no appeal to the love of God and neighbor."*

Guidelines...for Implementing  
Nostra Aetate, 4 (1975)

Given the challenges entailed in reading a biblical text such as the detailed laws of Leviticus, it can be tempting for Christians to pass over great sections of the Hebrew Scriptures, perhaps assuming that they are no longer relevant now that we have the Gospels. But this is a temptation we must resist. For our Church not only affirms both Testaments as divine revelation, it warns against dismissing the Hebrew Scriptures as legalistic or opposed to the Christian teachings on love.

This *Light of Torah* series offers a way to encourage Catholic parishioners to read the Torah, the first five books of the bible, and to learn more about them through Jewish eyes. In this way we learn more about our shared scriptures and we build interfaith bridges.



## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 14:1—15:33

This week brings us to the realm of purification laws. Without attention to the Torah's nuanced usage of the Hebrew terms *tamei* ('impure') and *tahor* ('pure') these laws can be misunderstood. A simplistic contrast of 'dirty/clean' or 'immoral/holy' does not suffice for what is a complex and detailed system. For instance, although at times *tamei* ('impure') can apply to unethical behavior and idolatry, it is not always the case as we shall see in our chosen passage: Leviticus 15.

## Tasting Torah

*"Such is the ritual concerning one who has a discharge: concerning him who has an emission of semen and becomes impure thereby; and concerning her whose condition is that of menstrual separation; and concerning anyone, male or female, who has a discharge; and concerning a man who lies with an impure woman"* (Leviticus 15:32-33).

Read this passage in the context of Leviticus 15:1-33. What do you notice? First, the impurity referred to here, in both men and women, relates to natural, unavoidable bodily discharges (some normal, some abnormal). These purity laws are not accusing anyone of unethical behavior or judging anyone as sinful. The rituals which involve separation, washing, sacrifice, etc are part of the normal course of life.

## Touching Torah

But why the need for such rituals? Plaut, a contemporary Torah commentator, makes the following point from an historical perspective. A sense of ritual purity v's defilement was common in ancient cultures, stemming from an association of certain places and objects with either divine or demonic powers. However, in Leviticus any association of ritual impurity with demonic forces has all but disappeared. Generally, in the Torah the purity laws are set forth simply as God's commands. They are not 'explained' as such, but viewed as part of the obedience requirements that set Israel apart as God's chosen people.

## Depthing Torah

But considering that such laws have evolved into contemporary expressions observed by many Jews today, and that some laws in particular require women to undergo monthly ritual purification rituals, isn't this unnecessary, burdensome and ultimately sexist?

This question finds a variety of responses among Jewish feminists. Some prefer to focus upon (and reinterpret where necessary) the positive meaning of such rituals: e.g., ritual recognition of the sacred and lifegiving powers specific to women; the positive effect that periods of abstinence can have on a marital sexual relationship; etc.

Yet rituals with a long history do not always translate easily into 21st century cultures where gender relations have undergone radical transformation in recent decades. Thus where one feminist sees empowerment, another sees oppression! Not all expressions of Judaism adhere to the traditions of purity laws and there are some Jewish voices which call for their radical reappraisal or abandonment. Judaism faces (as does the Church) the ongoing challenge of how to preserve and articulate its beliefs and practices in ways lifegiving for people today.

## Doing Torah

Many Catholics are not accustomed to reading a passage like Leviticus 15, even though it is right there in their bible. Share something of your experience of doing that today. What questions/insights arose for you?



## Faith & Life

From an outsider's perspective, religious rituals can appear strange, even nonsensical. Somebody walking into a Christian baptism ceremony without any prior contact with or understanding of the community and its traditions may think we are rather odd! But we would hope that an 'outsider' might take the time to learn about the ritual from the perspective of the 'insider'. Likewise, with rituals pertaining to Judaism, the same courtesy and respect is required of Christians; especially given the fact that our traditions share deep biblical and historical roots.

Bibliography: Eskenazi and Weiss, eds., *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Plaut, *The Torah. A Modern Commentary* (NY, 2005, 2006). Scripture: *NRSV*.