



## 5 facts about Purim

Here we depart from our focus on the sacrifices of Leviticus to comment on the Jewish festival of Purim. Purim celebrates an event of deliverance-from-evil told in the Book of Esther. It is a melodramatic tale of how the beautiful Queen Esther, herself a Jew, saved her people in Persia from a massacre at the hands of a villain named Haman.

**Esther.** The Book of Esther is part of the Christian bible too. Have you ever read it? On Purim the Esther scroll is read in Jewish communities.

**Revelry.** The rejoicing of Jewish communities on Purim has a carnival atmosphere: costumes, masquerades, plays and plenty of wine! Food baskets given as gifts for friends and for the poor are also part of Purim.

**Remembrance.** Purim is a fun-filled victory celebration. However a somber note also sounds. The Sabbath prior to Purim is called *Shabbat Zachor*, 'Sabbath of Remembrance'. On this day an added reading from Exodus tells

of Amalek, a biblical character of cruelty, traditionally identified as an ancestor of Haman. Thus, while Purim remembers a victory, the ever-present reality of human suffering and the commitment to resist evil are also remembered on *Shabbat Zachor*.

**Fast.** Observant Jews observe The Fast of Esther recalling Queen Esther's personal fast and that of the Jewish community prior to Esther's intervention on behalf of her people [Esther 4:16]. The fast is usually held a day (or a few days) prior to Purim.

**Meal.** Purim closes with friends and family gathering for a special afternoon meal.

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# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

*"Sounding the depths of the mystery which is the church, this sacred council remembers the spiritual ties which link the people of the new covenant to the stock of Abraham."*

- Vatican II: *Nostra Aetate*, 4)

The Second Vatican Council ushered in a new era for Jewish-Christian relations. Its teaching decisively rejected anti-Semitism and positively affirmed the spiritual bond between Christianity and Judaism. It recognized that the Church owes its very existence to the faith of the Jewish people of whom Jesus himself was a son.

With this recognition we can turn with even greater joy and expectation to the study of Torah, the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These scriptures, preserved and held sacred by Jews are part of the Christian bible too. They are essential to the biblical foundations upon which the New Testament rests.

This leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, offers a way for Christians to reflect on Torah, refreshed by Jewish insights and traditions.



Leviticus 6:1—8:36

*Tzav:*  
'issue a command'



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

### Leviticus 6:1—8:36

In last week's Torah portion we heard about certain details of the sacrifices: their ingredients, their preparation and the conditions that required them. This week's Torah portion gives priestly instructions concerning the ritual handling of these ancient sacrifices.

From the various types of offerings, we focus here on one: 'the sacrifice of thanksgiving.' Thanksgiving offerings expressed gratitude to God for deliverance from peril or misfortune. Read the ritual instructions for this sacrifice in 7:11-15. What details do you observe?

## Tasting Torah

*"And the flesh of your thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day it is offered; you shall not leave any of it until morning"* (Leviticus 7:15).

In contrast to other sacrifices, a shorter timeframe is stipulated for eating the thanksgiving sacrifice. Did you wonder why? Discuss this with a friend, then let's hear from some of the Jewish sages<sup>1</sup> through the centuries.

## Touching Torah

For Maimonides (12th c. scholar), respect for the sacredness of the offerings means that they must be in the best possible condition. Delaying the feast gives the meat a chance to spoil.

Gersonides (14th c. French scholar) expresses himself in direct, gastronomic terms: the meat is tastier before daybreak!

The *Sefer haHinukh* (a famous medieval Jewish education text) views the instruction as an invitation to spiritual growth: *"there is in this an allusion to our trust in God; a man should not begrudge himself his food and store it for the morrow."* This view resonates with rabbinic opinion in the Talmud: *"He who has bread in his basket, and says: 'what will I eat tomorrow?' has little faith in God"* (Sot. 48b). Recalled here is the miracle of 'bread from heaven,' *manna* in the desert, which the Israelites gathered "enough for that day" (Exodus 16:4).

## Depthing Torah

Abravanel (15th c. Spanish-Jewish Torah commentator), introduces a social dimension: *"Seeing that he has only one day and one night for consuming his sacrifice, the owner invites his relatives and friends to share his meal and joy. On being asked what motivated this feast, the host will recount the Divine wonders."* Thus the purpose of having a limited time for eating is to publicize the miracle.

The *HaEmek Davar* (a 19th c. Torah commentary) agrees: *"This is designed to increase the number of participants in the feast on the day of the offering so that many people will learn of the miracle..."*

Note that what began as an apparently obscure cultic text (to 21st century sensibilities) becomes enlivened with meaning by the creative, prayerful energies of the traditional Jewish interpreters. In what way do your own creative, prayerful energies engage with the sacred text? How would you enter into this conversation with the sages?

## Doing Torah

- Describe a time when an invitation to a community meal was a memorable occasion of thanksgiving to God. What was the 'miracle' for which you gave thanks?
- Enriched by our Torah discussion, listen afresh to Eucharistic Prayer III in the Mass: *"...we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice..."*



## Faith & life

Spoken without a trace of self-pity, a faithful man living in a religious community said:

"I am not always able to attend community meals because of health and mobility issues. Often the meals are brought to my room instead. This limitation saddens me because I miss the fellowship and interaction of the table gathering."

1. Texts cited by Leibowitz, 81-82.  
Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993); Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays* (NY, 1985, 2001).  
Scripture: NRSV.