



5 Ways

to reflect on the significance of blood

According to the Catholic understanding of the Eucharist, wine becomes (in the sacramental sense) the Blood of Christ, drawing the congregation into spiritual communion with God and one another. Take some time to reflect upon the significance of blood from the perspective of (i) everyday life, (ii) today's Torah portion, (iii) the signs and symbols of your own religious tradition.

- 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.
(e.g., martyrdom, childbirth), and the heroic actions of those committed to protecting others (e.g., rescue squads).
- 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
- 4. Communion.** Blood can signify the binding together of lives. We are familiar with phrases such as 'blood relative' and 'blood brother.'
- 5. Eucharist.** In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the Blood of Christ resonates with all these dimensions: it is a saving sacrifice, a source of spiritual nourishment, a lifegiving communion in the Lord.



Light of Torah
www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

Torah, in its specific definition, refers to the first five books of the bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy. These texts, preserved and held sacred by the Jewish people, are part of our Christian Scriptures too. They are essential to the biblical foundations upon which the gospel testimony rests.

The Second Vatican Council called for a 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, *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.'



Leviticus 6:1—8:36

Tzav:
'issue a command'



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 6.1—8.36

This week's Torah portion continues with instructions for 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).

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 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 Nachmanides³ offers a different approach. He quotes from the Torah: *"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).

Depthing Torah

Rashi⁴ expresses a similar idea: "Blood represents life, and it can therefore expiate life."

A further explanation is found in the *Sefer HaHinnuk*: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 Abravanel⁶ that the red color of blood symbolizes sin. "God commended that a person 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.

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



Faith & Life

A reader shares:

"When my father 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 father. But I knew I could do this: I could give blood that could help another patient and another grieving family."

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