

5 thoughts

“Behold thou art fair, my beloved...” (Cant. R. I. 15 §1). Using biblical love poetry to describe Israel’s fidelity to the Torah’s many precepts, rabbinic literature makes it abundantly clear that the dietary laws are a joy, not a burden, for they draw Israel into intimacy with God. In this vein, consider the following:

1. Holiness

Physical observance draws attention to spiritual priority. The sages are strong in the opinion that the dietary laws draw Israel to a lifestyle of firm belief, love, holiness.

2. Trust

Because the division of foods cannot be simply explained by matters of hygiene or health, the dietary laws invite a deeper trust in God’s wisdom and in the wisdom of one’s ancestors, even if it tests the human intellect.

3. Identity

The practice of doing certain things together, habitually, is bonding. We see this in a sporting team or

an orchestra or choir. How much more so for the sacred customs of a religious community. Israel’s dietary laws are part of forging a profound sense of *peoplehood*.

4. Witness

Further, the dietary laws *distinguish* Israel as a people among the nations. They signal that this community stands for a greater purpose: to keep alive the Name of the Lord in the world at large.

5. Intimacy

Sometimes it takes a lover’s gaze to see beauty. What may appear odd to the ‘outsider’ finds intense meaning within the circle of divine love that envelops Israel.

Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

“The writings of the New Testament acknowledge that the Jewish Scriptures have a permanent value as divine revelation. They have a positive outlook towards them and regard them as the foundation on which they themselves rest.”

The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, n.8
(Pontifical Biblical Commission, 2002)

The Jewish Scriptures (known to us as the ‘Old Testament’) are precious to the Church and yet, sadly, many Catholics look upon them as having secondary importance, superseded by the message of the Gospels. This **Light of Torah** series exists to awaken Catholics to the fundamental importance of the Hebrew Scriptures, in particular the first five books, the Torah (‘Pentateuch’ in the Greek). The Torah was formative for Jesus. As a faithful Jew, he learned, loved and taught Torah. How fitting that we who seek to draw close to the mind and heart of Jesus should immerse ourselves in Torah.

Light of Torah invites you to do just that. Week by week we reflect on part of the Torah with the help of Jewish interpretative insights.



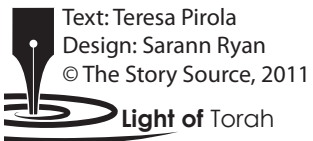
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Leviticus 9:1—11:47

Shemini:
‘Eighth’

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Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 9:1—11:47

Our focus of discussion this week is the dietary laws in Leviticus chapter 11. Paradoxically, the distinctions between 'clean' and 'unclean' foods are a form of *Kedushah* ('sanctity'). As each unique aspect of God's creation finds its place and purpose within the divine masterplan, created beings draw close to their Creator. "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45).

Sources: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis, 1997); Freedman & Simon (eds.), *Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs* (NY, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (Jerusalem, 1993); Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* (Jerusalem, 1988). Scripture: NRSV.

Tasting Torah

"The camel...it is unclean for you." (11:4)

"The pig...it is unclean for you." (11:7)

"By these you shall become unclean..." (11:24)

Read through the dietary laws in Chapter 11 of today's Torah portion. Better still, read aloud, and with someone. What do you notice?

"It is unclean for you!" Note the repetition. And the rhythm. The phrase comes through again and again, like a drum beat. Ponder this...

Touching Torah

What else do you notice? More repetitive phrases... '*creatures that swarm*' ... '*every creature*' ... '*of any kind.*' Where have we heard that kind of phrasing before? Genesis 1, the first creation account! Why would this Torah portion, so focused upon avoiding the 'unclean,' be reminding us of the creation of the world where everything created by God is 'good'? What do the two have in common?

Perhaps you noticed that both are about separating one thing from another. In Genesis, God separates the waters from dry land, the sky from the earth. In Leviticus the Israelites, via a cultic system, separate certain animals into clean and unclean, forbidden and permitted, what can be eaten and what can't. In Genesis, why does God separate? To create order out of chaos, bringing forth a beautiful world. And why does Leviticus call for a detailed system of separations? To create spiritual order out of chaos, creating a lifestyle of holiness for the people.

Depthing Torah

Many Jewish commentators point out that there is no indication that forbidden creatures are unwholesome *in themselves* (remember, God created them 'good'). While other ancient religions associated certain animals with evil gods, uncleanness in the Torah is different. The goal of separation is not to ward off evil spirits, nor primarily a matter of health (though some sages do mention elements of hygiene). Rather, the goal is primarily affirmation of Israel's relationship with God and determination to avoid idolatry. (It might help here to remind Catholics of their own practice of abstaining from meat on Good Friday: there is nothing intrinsically bad about meat; rather, the practice signifies something about our spiritual values.)

Christian scholar Walter Brueggemann has pointed out the enduring impact of ancient Israel's holiness code (e.g., dietary laws). While certain details of biblical ritual are not practiced today, the human need to create a sense of 'right order' in the world (and not just ethically, but spiritually too) remains. By ordering things/people in a certain way, we bring coherence to our lives, we express our core values and ensure their ongoing validity.

Doing Torah

Name a time-honored religious practice that has brought order/coherence to your life. Who taught it to you? How would you describe the meaning it holds for you?



Faith & Life

A childhood memory: I am at my friend's house when his father has a heart attack. His family are devout Catholics. As we wait for the ambulance to arrive, we are all standing in the hallway praying the rosary. *Hail Mary* after *Hail Mary*...

At a time of suffering when our brains were in shock, and there was nothing more we could 'do,' I remember the calming effect of that well-worn prayer. This experience had a big impact on me. I had a sense of the power of religious ritual at work, making a real difference in a time of crisis."