

5 Separations to create order

The dietary laws of ancient Israel may seem remote and strange until we start to consider how we manage our own values through the conscious act of separating people and things. As you read the examples below, consider: In what way does separation create harmony and wellbeing, or conflict and destruction? Which separations raise controversial ethical issues? Which separations are arbitrary, and which are necessary?



Everyday separations: recycling practices; male v female public restrooms; fences and boundaries separate properties; stadiums and concert halls use ticketing to divide seating; the 'rules' of fashion.



Safety separations: e.g., household cleaners and food are not kept in the same cupboard. Fire is kept away from petrol. A fence keeps unsupervised children away from the swimming pool.



Relational separations: the umbilical cord is cut; children grow up and leave home; at some point every human being experiences separation from a loved one through death.



Socially-engineered separations: consider the separation of persons that occurs through immigration policies, jails, quarantine units, and - a horrific example - ethnic cleansing policies.



Religious separations: priestly systems, religious dietary laws, Lenten observance, separation of colors to signify different liturgical seasons/occasions (e.g., you don't see green during Lent, nor black garments on a bride).

The *Light of Torah* leaflet series for Catholic parishes encourages parishioners to be attentive to the gift of Torah as part of their 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, 2010. Reproduction permitted for non-commercial church use. Further reading: www.lightoftorah.net; www.batkol.info and www.etz-hayim.com.



Light of Torah

Ancient texts
through fresh eyes,
alive for today.

Why reflect on Torah?

"From the earliest days of Christianity, our identity and every aspect of our life and worship have been intimately bound up with the ancient religion of our fathers in faith."

Benedict XVI 12.2.09 Rome

When Pope Benedict made this statement he was drawing on key ideas of the Second Vatican Council, expressed in its groundbreaking document *Nostra Aetate* concerning the Church's relationship with the Jewish people.

How can we understand ourselves as a Christian people, without appreciating the people from whom we came, whose heroic fidelity over the centuries brought forth the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament), who brought forth Jesus himself, who gave us Mary, the apostles and early disciples, indeed the Christian church itself, which was so beautifully 'Jewish' at the time of its birth?

For all these reasons, we turn as Christians to the study of Torah. In its specific definition, Torah refers to the first five books of the bible, that foundational part of Scripture so precious to Jews and Christians alike. How fitting that, at the Church's urging, we learn to appreciate Torah with the help of Jewish sources and methods of biblical appreciation.

To this end, this leaflet series *Light of Torah* is offered as a practical tool for use in homes and parishes.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar of Torah readings:

Leviticus 9:1—11:47

Today's Torah begins with the first priestly acts carried out by Aaron (Lev. 9). It continues with the story of an illicit rite carried out by two of Aaron's sons, with disastrous consequences (Lev. 10). Finally, in Lev. 11, we hear of the distinctions between 'clean' and 'unclean' foods. This latter chapter concerning dietary laws forms the basis of our discussion here.

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 the 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, thus bringing forth a beautiful world. And why does Leviticus call for a detailed system of separations? To create spiritual order out of chaos, thus creating a lifestyle of holiness for the people.

Depthing Torah

Note: there is no indication that forbidden creatures are unwholesome in themselves (remember, God created them 'good'). Other ancient religions associated certain animals with evil gods, but uncleanness in the Torah is different. The goal of separations is not to ward off evil spirits, nor primarily a matter of health (though commentators sometimes mention elements of hygiene). Rather, the goal is affirmation of Israel's relationship with God and determination to avoid idolatry.

Perhaps it is a bit like Catholics abstaining from meat on Good Friday: there is nothing intrinsically bad about meat; rather, the practice signifies something about our spiritual values.

Christian scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann has pointed out the enduring impact of ancient Israel's holiness code (e.g. dietary laws) for Christians. While specific details of ritual practice have been discarded, 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

Describe a time-honored religious practice that you treasure. Who taught it to you? What special meaning does it hold for you? What impact does it have on your life?

Name some other practices that bring spiritual order/coherence to people's lives.



A calming ritual

"A childhood memory: I remember being at my friend's house when his father had a heart attack. His family were devout Catholics. As we waited for the ambulance to arrive, we were 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 how calming it was to have that well-worn prayer ritual to fall back on. This experience had a big impact on me. I saw the power of religious ritual at work, making a real difference in a time of crisis."

Sources: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, (Minneapolis, 1997); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (NY, 1993); Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* (Jerusalem, 1988). Scripture quotations: *NRSV*.