

'The Life of the Flesh is in the Blood'

Chapters 6-8 of the Book of Leviticus continue with instructions for worship. They start with details about bringing sacrificial offerings near to the altar, and end with the ordination of Aaron and his sons as priests. Of particular interest here are two verses prohibiting the consumption of blood (7:26-27):

"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 the explanation! Let's hear from Torah scholars of the Middle Ages...¹

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; 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).

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 colour of blood symbolises 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 Scripture, 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 certain: our text serves to sensitise us to the reality and symbolism of blood, in our own lives, in the world at large, and especially in religious expression.

Table topic: Share your own reflections about blood:

- as a symbol of death/destruction,
- as a symbol of life/fertility,
- as a symbol of self-sacrifice/life-sharing.

Continue your reflections (especially during Palm Sunday and into Holy Week).

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. •

1) Sources: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra II* (New York, 1993); Levine, *JPS Torah Commentary: Leviticus* (New York, 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.

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