

Dietary Laws in Leviticus

Our focus this week is the dietary laws in Leviticus 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 master plan, created beings draw close to their Creator.

"You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:45).

"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 drumbeat.

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.

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 religious systems 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 reflects our spiritual values at a sacred time.)

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 practised 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.

Reflection

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

Bibliography: Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Minneapolis, 1997); Freedman & Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Song of Songs* (New York, 1983); Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (New York, 1996); Nachshoni, *Studies in the Weekly Parashah* (Jerusalem, 1988). Scripture: NRSV.

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