



# Taste and See

A Justice Framework for  
Faith and Food

Texas Impact

*“Oh taste and see that the Lord is good.—Psalm 34:8*



In “The Lord’s Prayer,” taught to the disciples by Jesus and recited every Sunday by millions of the faithful across the broad spectrum of Christianity, are these words: “Give us this day our daily bread.” Sometimes understood figuratively as asking for regular teaching or guidance from God, these words can also be understood quite literally as an acknowledgment of human vulnerability and the need for daily sustenance—the need for bread, for food, to live.

Giving thanks over food is a practice that is not limited by geography, culture, or religion. People all across the globe and throughout history have offered blessings of thanksgiving before and in some cases after meals. The traditional Jewish

blessing over food is, “Blessed are You, the Lord our God, who brings forth food from the earth.” This simple prayer acknowledges a connection between us and God, our food, and the earth. This connection is so strong in the Jewish tradition that not giving thanks before eating is understood to be like stealing from God, since “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof” (Ps. 24).

In the Buddhist tradition, practitioners recite the “Verse of Five Contemplations” before eating. These five contemplations reflect on the food and its origins, its life-giving function, and the hoped-for spiritual effect on the person, the last line reading, “For the sake of enlightenment we now receive this food.”

### ***Verse of Five Contemplations***

*We reflect on the effort that brought us this food and consider how it comes to us.*

*We reflect on our virtue and practice, and whether we are worthy of this offering.*

*We regard it as essential to keep the mind free from excesses such as greed.*

*We regard this food as good medicine to sustain our life.*

*For the sake of enlightenment we now receive this food.*

In the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, food is central. The first people are gifted with all the food they need to live, but with limits: God tells Adam not to eat the fruit of just one of the trees. To live in harmony in the Garden, with each other and with God, the people need to know and respect their limits, and be thankful for the gift of life and food. As the story goes, however, Adam and Eve overstep their bounds and disobey God through an act motivated by desire and greed. The first sin can be understood as an act of overstepped limits, of overconsumption.

Rather than living in harmony with animals, each other, creation and God, a series of separations are the result. The largest consequence relates directly to food and gets at the connection between people, food, and the earth: by divine decree, humankind must work the land for food, rather than having it given freely: “Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life” (Gen. 3:17).

Food is a basic human need. But it is also much more. Different religions tell different stories about food, have different rituals and practices related



to food, and celebrate with food differently—but food is an important concept in each one. In this edition of **Justice Frameworks**, we will explore understandings about food as expressed in different religious traditions. By doing so, we hope to inspire reflection on the centrality of food and faith in our contemporary lives and begin to ask some questions about our food systems, practices, and priorities.

## **Food Connections: People and the Web of Life**

By design, people have to eat in order to live. This basic fact connects our lives with the food that we eat—and to the lives and environments that grow and sustain our food before it comes to the table. When we eat a carrot, we are connected to the soil, water, air and sunlight that grew the carrot. When we eat chicken, we are connected to the life of the animal and the environment, food, and water that sustained its life. When we eat fish, we are connected to the water in which the fish lived.

Through our food, we are intimately interconnected with the larger web of life that in the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is called creation. In some other traditions such as Buddhism, the earth and all living things are not considered to have been created, so web of life is a better term. Going forward, we will refer to the natural world and all living things interchangeably as creation and web of life, intending full honor and respect for the diversity and range of theological understandings of earthly existence.



## How Much Does Food Really Cost?

In a rich variety of ways, our religious traditions show how food can and should connect people to God, to each other and to the web of life of which we are a part. By lifting up models for how things should be, our religions shine a light on the distance between those ideal visions and our everyday experience. They also offer teachings and practices that enable people of faith to work toward bringing our worldly reality into better alignment with God's hope and purpose, as understood and expressed in our religious traditions. In the case of food, the gulf between what our religions teach and our actual practices is huge.

### In the Home

In the United States today, most of us buy our food at a store rather than growing it ourselves. Many working families rely on pre-packaged, frozen meals or food from fast-food restaurants for busy weekday dinners, and finding time to sit down and eat together can be a challenge. Children today spend less time outdoors than did any previous generation, leading some to describe this condition of disconnection from the natural world as, "nature-deficit disorder."



### In the Community

Although most U.S. land is forest or pastureland, most Americans live in urban areas. We usually do not know what farms or ranches our food comes from, nor do we know the people who grow our food or raise the animals that we eat. Many of the vegetables and grain consumed in the U.S. come from large, corporate farms; and many of the cattle and other animals raised for food come from large, corporate operations. In the journey from field to table, our food often travels long distances and changes many hands before it gets to our plates.



### In the World

The food we buy in grocery stores is often shipped in from other places—in some cases, from across the globe, resulting in pollution emissions from transport. Increasing demand for meat worldwide has contributed to the loss of forests, which has a detrimental effect on biodiversity and is also a factor in climate change. Cattle ranching is the largest driver of deforestation in the Amazon rainforest, for example.

When our connection to the sources of our food—land, sun, wind, water, farmer, rancher, animal—is weak or broken, then those sources can disappear from our sight and therefore, from our consideration. For example, if working conditions on a farm are poor or the pesticides used contaminate nearby well-water, but all we see is the resulting fruit in the produce section of a grocery store, we are not seeing the whole picture.

We live in one of the wealthiest countries on the planet, but not everyone shares in that wealth. Some facts: More than 17 million Americans lived in poverty in 2009; one in six U.S. families struggle to afford food; and



one in eight children live in a home without enough food.

Often, the food that is available to people struggling with poverty and hunger is not wholesome or fresh. In many poor urban and rural areas, food choices are limited due to a lack of access to fresh foods. These areas in which large grocery stores are absent and the closest sources of food are fast-food outlets and convenience stores are known as food deserts. Where available, fresh and healthy foods usually cost more than cheaper, highly-processed, nutrient-deficient foods. For a family in poverty, then, it makes budgetary sense to buy larger amounts of low-quality, processed foods rather than smaller amounts of more expensive fresh fruit and vegetables.

The result is that poverty contributes to hunger, malnutrition, and obesity—and all the learning difficulties and health problems that are associated with those conditions. More facts: In 2008, over one-third of American adults were overweight or obese and of children ages 9-11, nearly one in five were overweight or obese. The Centers for Disease Control estimates that fully three quarters of U.S. health care spending goes to treat chronic diseases, most of which are preventable and linked to diet: heart disease, stroke, type 2 diabetes, and at least a third of all cancers.

Even though the world produces enough food that everyone could have enough to eat, in 2010 almost one billion people—925 million—were hungry. Malnutrition and hunger-related diseases cause the deaths of over 6 million children under the age of five every year. And although women comprise slightly more than half of the world's population, they account for more than 60% of the world's hungry.

The causes of global hunger are multiple and complex. Contributing factors include an increase in global demand for food; increased demand for animal protein (meat, dairy and eggs), which requires more grain to produce; a diversion of grain grown for food to grain grown for bio-fuel production; floods, droughts and natural disasters; and agricultural subsidies in the U.S. and the European Union that have exacerbating effects on market prices elsewhere.

Where food in our religious traditions serves to bring people and communities together in sharing bounty with others, serving God, and celebrating the gifts of the earth; our food system today hurts people, separates communities, institutionalizes food inequalities, hampers our ability to serve God, and damages the earth. When the full effects of our food system and choices are brought into view, the decision about what to buy at the grocery store becomes more complicated than a simple price comparison. When we consider the human, environmental, and spiritual ramifications of our food choices, we must ask: what are the true costs of our food?

***Those who are focused on the objects of the senses, become attached to those objects. From attachment comes desire; and from desire comes anger; from anger comes confusion of mind; from confusion of mind comes loss of memory; from loss of memory comes loss of intelligence; and from loss of intelligence comes destruction.—The Bhagavad Gita***

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בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Baruch atah, Adonai, Eloheinu melech ha-olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz..  
Blessed are You, the Lord our God, who brings forth bread from the earth.

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### Rules of Slaughter and Humane Treatment of Animals for Food

Judaism and Islam each have systems of dietary laws and practices that regulate the kinds of foods that are acceptable for followers to eat. In the Jewish tradition, dietary laws are called kashrut, more commonly known as “kosher;” in the Muslim tradition, acceptable foods are called halal. There are important differences in the two dietary systems, but also many similarities. One area of commonality is that in both religious traditions, the way that an animal is slaughtered for food matters.

Jewish and Muslim dietary laws outline specific practices for the proper treatment of animals that will be eaten for food and the method of their slaughter. In both traditions, a blessing is to be said before ritual slaughter begins. In Islam, the

blessing is to be said over each animal before it is killed, acknowledging that the animal’s life is a gift from God. In both traditions, the animal must be healthy and fully conscious, and its life taken with a single, quick stroke of a sharp blade. No other animal is to be present when another animal is slaughtered. These practices are designed to respect the animals, treat them kindly, and minimize their fear and pain as much as possible.

Another commonality between Jewish and Muslim dietary laws is the prohibition against eating blood. Following the ritual slaughter of an animal for food, its body is drained of blood. As the Jewish scriptures explain, “You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood” (Lev. 17:14). As the “life” of the animal, a creature’s blood is to be respected—it is to be poured out onto the ground and covered with earth (Lev. 17:13).



*We cannot live harmlessly or strictly at our own expense; we depend upon other creatures and survive by their deaths. To live, we must daily break the body and shed the blood of creation. The point is, when we do this knowingly, lovingly, skillfully, reverently, it is a sacrament; when we do it ignorantly, greedily, clumsily, destructively, it is a desecration... in such desecration, we condemn ourselves to spiritual and moral loneliness, and others to want.—Wendell Berry*



## Food Waste and Consumption

In the Qur'an, Allah (God) says, "Eat and drink, but do not waste." Mohammed, the Muslim prophet, offered additional wisdom about food consumption: "The vessel that brings the greatest harm when filled up is one's stomach. It is enough for you to have a few morsels to keep your back straight."

The Plains tribes of North America in the 19th century wasted as little as possible of all animal life killed for food. A buffalo's meat and body, for example, could be used in 52 different ways for food, clothing, tools and supplies. In the United States today, it is estimated

that 27% of food available for human consumption goes to waste.

## Sabbatical Year for the Land

All fruit, vegetables, grain and legumes come directly from the land—from land that people till, plant, tend, and sow in order to produce food. In modern agriculture, land is used year-in and year-out, and commonly treated with fertilizer to replenish the diminishing nutrients in the soil. In the shared Jewish and Christian scriptures, though, a different model for agriculture is offered in the Sabbatical Year to be held every seventh year.

The Sabbatical Year is to be a year of rest: "Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather in their yield; but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath for the Lord: you shall not sow your field or prune your vineyard. You shall not reap the aftergrowth of your harvest or gather the grapes of your unpruned vine: it shall be a year of complete rest for the land" (Lev. 25:3-4). This Sabbatical year is identified as a year of sabbath and rest for both the Lord and the land, for the two are connected. During the Sabbatical year, everyone and all animals—livestock and wild animals—are to share the food that the land yields (Lev. 25:6-7).

When the Israelites found themselves in the desert following the Exodus from Egypt, God provided them with daily food, manna. Moses instructed the people to gather as much as they each needed



to eat for that day. "The Israelites did so, some gathering much, some little. But when they measured it..., he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no deficiency: they had gathered as much as they needed to eat" (Ex. 16:17-18).

## Feeding His Clothes: A Sufi Story

The sultan held a sumptuous feast at the palace. Mulla Nasrudin watched as finely dressed guests arrived at the palace gate. He compared his tattered rags with the elegant silks and satins on the people who entered the festivities. His stomach growled with hunger.

Led by his stomach, he walked up to the gate and presented himself to the guards. Since, by custom, hospitality demanded that he not be turned away, the guards allowed him into the feast. The guards, however, ushered him discreetly to a seat at the very end of the banquet table.

By the time the trays of delicious food arrived at the end of the table where Mulla sat, they were empty.

Mulla sadly left and wandered out the palace gate. He went to the home of a rich friend and explained what had just happened. The friend gave Mulla rich clothes and an expensive turban to top his elegant attire.

Mulla returned to the palace and presented himself at the gate. Thinking he was a visiting prince, the guards bowed low before him. Respectfully, the guards escorted him inside and seated him at the head of the table.

More trays of food arrived, and servants piled delicacies on Mulla's plate. Before long, everyone was staring at Mulla. He had rubbed curry into his sleeve. He had poured wine on his turban. He had smashed roasted eggplant all over his cloak. Finally, the guest next to him was moved to ask, "Pray tell, but why have you rubbed messy food into your fine attire?"

"A thousand pardons," said Mulla, "if my clothes now look their worst. But it was these clothes that brought me all this food. It is only fair that they be fed first."

-from *Wisdom Tales From Around the World*, by Heather Forest

Moses then told the people not to waste any by leaving it for the morning—each day's food was intended to be enough for just that day. Some of them disregarded Moses' instruction and left some until the morning, but it "became infested with maggots and stank" (Ex. 16:20). Later in their sojourn, some of the people become bored with the daily allotment of manna and complain that they want something else. Not satisfied with the food that God is providing them, they clamor for meat. When "a wind from the Lord" sweeps "quail from the sea" and strews it around camp, those with the craving collect the quail, eat it and are killed by a severe plague (Num. 11:31-33).

The proper attitude to have toward the gift of food is one of gratitude. "When you have eaten and are satisfied, you shall bless the Lord your God for the good land which God has given to you" (Deut 8:10).

### **Food Connections: People and People**

When people gather together, there is often food. The breaking of bread and the sharing of food is a basic way that people connect with each other. Our religious traditions have various ways of approaching ideas around food and people—in some holiday traditions, food brings people

*If 'thank you' was the only prayer we uttered, that would be enough.  
—Meister Eckhart, Christian mystic*



*There is a Hasidic tradition that rebbes would be buried in a coffin made from the wood of their table. The connection was, of course, that your hospitality at your table would carry you into the World to Come.—Hasidic folktale*

together in celebration and remembrance; in some teachings, questions about who is included at the table expand into larger questions about who is included in religious community; in some religions, sharing food with the hungry is not merely a suggestion, but is an obligation.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). The physical conditions of hunger and thirst indicate the need for food and water in order to live. Using this metaphor of food, Jesus challenges us to consider righteousness—the seeking of justice, fairness, and compassion—as something we need in order to live rightly in service to God.

In every religious tradition, food plays an important role in gathering people together in celebration.

In the Christian tradition, Easter is frequently referred to as a “Feast.” The commemoration of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead brings to a conclusion the penitential season of Lent and is often celebrated with a meal shared by family and friends.

Passover, or Pesach, is the holiday that in the Jewish tradition commemorates the exodus of the ancient Israelite people from slavery in Egypt. It is a mitzvah, or commandment—often translated as “good deed”—to invite people to your Seder meal; no one who wants to participate is to be excluded. The beginning of the Pesach Haggadah, the script that guides participants through the story and meal, offers these words of inclusion: “All who are hungry, come and eat. All who are in need, come and partake in the Pesach offering.”

The Jewish Sabbath, or Shabbat, mirrors in our lives the seventh day of creation, on which God rested. Shabbat begins at sundown on Friday with the lighting of candles and observance that evening usually centers around a communal meal. Challah is a special bread eaten on Shabbat; two loaves of challah recall the double-portion of manna



that God provided on Fridays for the Israelites as they traveled through the desert. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “The Sabbath is the presence of God in the world, open to the soul of man.” Its celebration usually begins with a meal shared by family and friends.

In the book of Acts, the apostle Peter has a dream in which a voice tells him to eat animals that, according to Jewish law, were considered unclean. When in the dream he objects, the voice tells him, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane” (Acts 10:15). Peter interprets this to mean that he should not call certain people profane or unclean, and this understanding allows him to spread the Gospel message to Gentile populations. Through symbolism of food, a message of wider inclusion is illustrated.

The shared Jewish and Christian scriptures instruct that some of every harvest should be left on the field to provide food for those in need: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien” (Lev. 19:9-10). Most of us today do not have fields, gleanings, or fallen grapes from vineyards to share, but perhaps we have a different kind of harvest from our work that we could better share with others.



Leviticus 25:35 reads, “And if your brother sinks down [in poverty], and his means falter beside you, then you shall strengthen him... that he may live with you.” Rashi, the 11th century Jewish commentator, writes about this verse, “You shall strengthen him—do not leave him that he goes down in the world and falls altogether when it will then be difficult to raise him. Rather, strengthen him from the moment his strength begins to waver. To what may this be compared? To an [excessive] load that is on the back of a donkey: while it is still on the back of the donkey, one person is enough to take hold of it and keep it up, but once it falls to the ground, even five cannot help him back up.” Rashi’s example of the donkey offers a preventative model of giving that challenges us to find ways to help people before their need becomes excessive and causes them harm, a condition that Rashi shows also places stress on the whole community.

### Hospitality

Jesus sends messengers and teachers out, calling them “laborers” sent to “harvest” (Luke 10:2). He tells them, “Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you” (Luke 10:8). Eating together is shown here to be an important sign of community, welcome and inclusion. The Christian tradition emphasizes

hospitality to all and connects it with service to God. In the book of Hebrews, Christians are reminded, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2).

Jesus taught, “when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed...” (Luke 14:13-14a). Jesus’ ministry included a welcome to some people who at the time were on the fringes of society. When Jesus accepted the hospitality of Zacchaeus the tax collector, he demonstrated that what matters is not one’s social position, but one’s actions and heart. Zacchaeus promises to give half his property to the poor, and Jesus announces, “Today salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19).

During Jesus’ teaching and healing ministry, sometimes large crowds assembled. On two occasions, Jesus’ disciples suggest that the crowds be dispersed so that the people can go buy food for themselves. But Jesus has compassion for them, saying, “I do not want to send them away hungry, for they might faint on the way” (Mt. 15:32). He tells the disciples to give him the few loaves and fish that they have. Jesus gives thanks, breaks them, and the disciples give the food to the crowds. “And all of them ate and were filled; and they took up the broken pieces left over” (Mt. 15:37). In each case, there is more food left over than there was at the beginning. Jesus’ feeding of the four and five thousand (more with women and children included) illustrates compassion, hospitality, the imperative of caring for the entire community, and the importance of responding to need as it manifests.





The teachings of the Prophet Mohammed connect the act of feeding the poor with entrance into Paradise, instructing followers to “Spread the greeting of peace, give out food to the people, pray by night while the rest of the people are fast asleep then you will enter Jannah (Paradise) safely.” Also, from the Hadith, or sayings of the Prophet: “He is not one of us who goes to sleep with his belly full while his neighbor sleeps hungry.”

Deuteronomy 8:10 instructs, “when you have eaten and you are satisfied, give thanks

to the Lord your God for the good land which God has given you.” But what if you have not eaten and you are not satisfied, because you are poor and hungry? Does physical hunger impede our ability to connect with God? Mahatma Gandhi, commenting on the connection between being satisfied and the ability to praise God, said, “There are people in the world so hungry that God cannot appear to them except in the form of bread.”

In Genesis 18:1-8, Abraham offers hospitality to guests. In verse 1, God appears to Abraham while Abraham sits at the entrance of his tent. As soon as Abraham sees three men approaching his tent, in verse 2, he runs to meet the guests. Inviting them to rest and wash their feet, he asks Sarah to quickly make bread. The two most highly respected Jewish commentators on the Torah, Rashi and Maimonides, both understand that Abraham leaves God in order to tend to his visitors. Is being hospitable to others more important than having a conversation with God? Perhaps we could understand Abraham’s caring for others as a pure form of service to God.

## Food Connections: People and God

Our religious traditions offer, in different ways, food as a means of connection between our human lives and the divine life. Some teachings about gratitude for food, consumption and moderation link our food practices with respect for God. In some traditions, food is given as an offering to the Divine. In Catholic Christianity, the bread and wine of the Eucharist are understood to be the actual flesh and blood of Christ. In this section, we will explore some ways that different traditions approach food as it connects people with the divine life.

When the Israelites, newly freed from Egypt, wandered in the desert, God provided food for them. The connection between this food and the people’s understanding of God is clear: “At twilight



you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God” (Ex. 16:12). The way the people gather the food and eat it is a sign of the people’s faith in God. When they try to keep more bread than they need, it rots and becomes worm-ridden, and when they try to gather food on the seventh day—a day for which food has already been provided—God wonders, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions?” (Ex. 28).

In the Hindu tradition, one way that people connect with the gods is by giving offerings, called puja. Puja often includes offerings of food and water to sustain the deities. In the home, a god or goddess is honored at an altar and this altar serves as a point of contact between the worshipper and the divine. Food offerings are a daily way that people can maintain relationship, connect with and serve the Divine.



### Spiritual Food in the Christian Tradition

The concept of spiritual food is a central metaphor in Christianity. One of the ways that the Christian tradition speaks of Jesus is as the Good Bread. Jesus tells his disciples, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and



whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (John 6:35). He also tells them, “Do not work for the food that perishes, but for the food that endures for eternal life” (John 6:27). In these passages, Jesus is shown to provide religious sustenance and guidance for those who seek it.

Elsewhere, Jesus uses a food metaphor to ask his disciples to distinguish between a focus on material and spiritual matters: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25). Then he tells them, “Strive first for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). In encouraging his followers to focus not just on obtaining material goods, possessions and sustenance, Jesus reminds us that serving God and seeking righteousness should be a primary aim and focus of our lives.

“While they were eating, Jesus took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my

*We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.—Dorothy Day*

body.’ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:26-28).

At the communion table, Christians gather in community to remember the gift of Jesus’ life, death and resurrection. In the bread and wine of communion, spiritual food and physical food become one—and it is this combined spiritual and physical nourishment that is offered to believers. At the Lord’s Table, the whole community shares in the life of God. In sharing this sacred food, everyone receives the sustenance they need, and no one goes away hungry. Through communion, Christians are connected to the life of Christ and to the lives of all other Christians who together comprise the church, the body of Christ in the world.

### Dietary Rules

As part of their teaching and practice, many religious traditions include guidance about what foods are acceptable—and unacceptable—for adherents to eat. Jews who follow the rules of kashrut and Muslims who eat only halal foods do so for various reasons. Some motivations include: seeking connection to the current and historical religious community; a sense of obedience to God; concern for the treatment of animals; and a desire to sanctify, or bring holiness into, everyday life. In both of these traditions, choices about the food one eats are interwoven with expressions of religious identity.

The fact that Christianity has no prohibitions against the eating of certain foods is itself an expression of religious identity, emerging from a period when early Christians sought to distinguish themselves from their Jewish neighbors while at the same time, seeking to bring the message of Christ to Gentile populations. Similarly, some scholars believe that the Hindu prohibition against eating beef solidified during a time of historical

religious tension between Hinduism and Islam, with the Hindus’ refusal to eat beef being one expression of religious identity. The importance of the cow in the Hindu tradition also stems from an understanding of the profound connections by which all life is interrelated. One Hindu leader explains, “When the cows are cared for, the world at all levels will find happiness and peace.”

Some religious traditions include as part of their practice a vegetarian diet. The Jain tradition places central emphasis on a concept it shares with Hinduism, ahimsa, which is usually translated as “no-harm.” For modern Jains, ahimsa has three basic expressions: non-violence, ecological harmony and vegetarianism. Many Buddhists also choose not to eat meat, interpreting Buddha’s First Precept of “not killing” to include a prohibition against killing animals.

According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), worldwide livestock farming generates more of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions than the total of all cars, trains, planes and boats combined.

In light of the climate change crisis, many Jews and Christians have turned to scripture for guidance about our relationship to and with creation, and some have become vegetarian based on God’s first

words to humankind about acceptable foods. In the book of Genesis, God tells the first people, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food” (Genesis 1:29).



## Feasting and Fasting

Just as many religious traditions have holidays that include feasts as part of observance, many also include days of fasting. Fasting practices in our religious traditions are many and varied, and have important differences of purpose and of historical, cultural and religious significance. That said, there are some similarities of intent and effect in some of the major fasts.

The Jewish tradition marks several fast days, major and minor, in its annual calendar. Yom Kippur is a major fast day, a 25-hour abstention from all food and drink as well as bathing and other activities understood to be physically pleasing. On this Day of Atonement, the fast is intended to focus one's energy away from material, consumptive activity and toward connection to God.

The fasting month of Ramadan in which Muslims abstain from food and water between sunrise and sundown serves a similar purpose of tuning believers' attention toward God. In addition, the duration of the Ramadan fast teaches important lessons about consumption and moderation, challenging practitioners to understand that what we need might be less than what we want.



In the Christian tradition, some kind of fast or physical limitation is often incorporated into the 40-day observance of Lent, the period that leads up to the celebration of Easter. It shares with fasting practices of other religious traditions a concern about understanding what in life is most important, practicing limits, and connecting to God. Yom Kippur, Ramadan and Lent are also days of increased prayer.



In each case, these fasting days are closely related with feasting days. While Ramadan's days are marked by fasting, its evenings are marked by communal feasting, in the gathering of family and friends for Iftar dinners to break the fast. For Christians, the penitential period of Lent ends with the Easter celebration, or Feast. And in the Jewish calendar, the fast of Yom Kippur is closely followed by the celebration of Sukkot, one of the most joyous holidays of the year.

Each year, Christianity, Judaism and Islam have times for feasting and times for fasting. For people in these traditions, feasting and fasting practices are reminders to live somewhere in-between, to find a balance in daily life between the extremes of total lack and excess. Moving beyond our individual lives, these practices call for balance between community extremes of hunger and waste.



Moderation is a central facet of the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha, before he was the Buddha, lived as an ascetic for many years, eating little food and water as part of his religious practice. One day, though, he found that he was too weak to meditate, and realized that without enough sustenance, he would not be able to obtain enlightenment. When a young woman offered him rice and milk, he accepted—and ate and drank. Buddha's teaching about the Middle Path, of moderation and balance, stems from this insight about food, an insight that enabled him to reach enlightenment.



As we consider our food systems, practices and priorities, our religious traditions ask us to be mindful about food and our relationship with it. Through different stories, teachings and practices, we are encouraged to move from a place of separation to one of connection; from scarcity and inequality to shared abundance. We are reminded that a religious understanding of abundance means not that we all get whatever and however much we want, but that we all get enough.

Every step we take toward compassion, hospitality, moderation and care for the whole community is a step toward abundance. We have abundance when everyone has enough to eat and no one goes away hungry. We have abundance when we focus not on increasing consumption, but on increasing connection—connection to other people, to the web of life and to God. When we can operate individually, locally and as a global community in this way, then we will all have enough good food to eat, be satisfied, and be able to give thanks.





Texas Impact was established by Texas religious leaders in 1973 to be a voice in the Texas legislative process for the shared religious social concerns of Texas' faith communities. Texas Impact is supported by more than two-dozen Christian, Jewish and Muslim denominational bodies, as well as hundreds of local congregations, ministerial alliances and interfaith networks, and thousands of people of faith throughout Texas. Texas Impact was founded on the central conviction that religious communities are called to minister to the whole person—to respond with compassion to the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of all people. The Texas religious leaders who established Texas Impact believed that such a ministry cannot be performed adequately without a concern for basic social problems at the state government level.

Methodist Healthcare Ministries (MHM) is a faith-based, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization whose mission is “Serving Humanity to Honor God” by improving the physical, mental and spiritual health of those least served in the Southwest Texas Conference area of The United Methodist Church. MHM partners with other organizations that are also fulfilling the needs of the underserved in local communities, and supports policy advocacy and programs that promote wholeness of body, mind and spirit. The mission also includes MHM’s one-half ownership of the Methodist Healthcare System – the largest healthcare system in South Texas. This creates a unique avenue to ensure that the Methodist Healthcare System continues to be a benefit to the community by providing quality care to all and charitable care when needed, and it provides revenue to MHM for its programs.



**Justice Frameworks** is a publication series of the Texas Impact Education Fund. Bee Moorhead, Executive Director. This edition of **Justice Frameworks** was written by Amanda Robinson and supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation ([www.rwjf.org](http://www.rwjf.org)). Texas Impact gratefully acknowledges Methodist Healthcare Ministries of South Texas, Inc., for their financial support of this publication. The opinions expressed in this document are those of Texas Impact and do not necessarily reflect the views of MHM. Special thanks to Rabbi Neil Blumofe, Reverend Dr. Whitney Bodman, Rabbi Rick Brody, Reverend Dr. Tina Carter, Rabbi Andrea Cohen-Kiener, Reverend Chuck Freeman, Rabbi Steven Folberg, Gaelyn Godwin, Zen priest, Dr. William Greenway, Dr. Pankaj Jain, Dr. David Jensen, Imam Islam Mossaad, Reverend Dr. Clare Butterfield, Alexis Chase, Reverend Dr. Cynthia Rigby, and Hazon.