



No Leftovers:

The Meaning of the Thanksgiving Offering

Rabbi Shai Held

The sacrificial offering associated with giving thanks to God (*korban todah*) differs in crucial ways from other sacrifices mentioned in the book of Leviticus. If we discern the rationale behind those differences, we will have gone a long way towards understanding the meaning of gratitude in Jewish piety and spirituality.



The burnt offering (*olah*, described in Leviticus 1) is totally given over to God and is thus completely consumed by the fire on the altar. The sacrifice of well-being (*zevah ha-shelamim*, described in Leviticus 3), of which the *korban todah* is a prime example, is different: Although parts of it are consumed on the altar, other parts are shared by priests and the people bringing the sacrifice as a sacred meal. Most of the grain offering (*minhah*, described in Leviticus 3) may be eaten, but only by the priests. The sacrifice of well-being, in contrast, may be consumed by those bringing the sacrifices as well. Bible scholar Baruch Levine suggests that this permission expresses the very purpose of the sacrifice: “To afford the worshipers the experience of joining together with the priests in a sacred meal at which God Himself was perceived to be the honored guest.”¹

But the thanksgiving offering is not like the other sacrifices of well-being. Whereas other

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sacrifices of well-being may be eaten until the third day, parashat Tzav tells us that “the flesh of [the] thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day that it

¹ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus* (1989), p. 14.



is offered; none of it shall be set aside until the morning” (Leviticus 7:15). Whatever is left over until the following morning must be burned.

The question is why. Why does the Torah find the prospect of leftovers disturbing? Why must the thanksgiving offering—of all sacrifices—be eaten on the very day it is brought?

R. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) offers one well-known explanation. The Torah’s purpose, Abravanel argues, is to publicize the miracle the person is celebrating. The fact that a great deal of food must be consumed in a short time leads the thankful person to invite “relatives, friends, and acquaintances to share in his meal and his joy.” He will thus have the opportunity to tell them of the wonders and miracles that were done for him, and God’s name will be publicly glorified (Abravanel, Commentary to Leviticus 7:11ff).²

I’d like to propose another (perhaps complementary) way of thinking about why the thankful person needs to invite others to share in his meal: The nature of gratitude is such that it is inherently outward-looking.

Think of a moment in your life when you have had an overwhelming sense of gratitude to God or to another person. Imagine especially a moment when you received something—whether a much-needed meal, a kind word, or a gesture of deep love—that you were not at all sure would be forthcoming. You may well notice that when you fully inhabit the sense of gratitude, you feel an urge to share the gifts you have received with others. When we are moved to the depths of our being by having been given something, we seek to become givers ourselves. A grateful heart overflows.

Gratitude, crucially, is not just a feeling. Many moral philosophers maintain that a core aspect of gratitude is the desire to respond. Philosopher A. D. M. Walker, for example, writes

² See, similarly, R. Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (also known as Netziv, 1816-1893), *Ha’ameik Davar* to Leviticus 7:15 and 22:29.



that “pleasure at being favored, however undiluted, does not amount to gratefulness in the absence of any desire to make a return... What distinguishes being grateful from being (merely) pleased or glad is the grateful person’s desire to make a return. More precisely, he wants to favor another because he has been favored himself.”³ Gratitude is, psychologist Robert Emmons insists, a “moral emotion” in that it “leads to behavior intended to benefit others.”⁴ A crucial component of authentic gratitude is an urge to repay or pay forward the kindness we have been shown. Gratitude is the bridge between the realization of how much I have been given, and the commitment to be a giver myself.

What I am suggesting is that the laws around the consumption of the thanksgiving offering are intended to express and inculcate a core religious value: When one has been the

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beneficiary of God’s kindness, one is expected to bestow kindness oneself. This is both a normative claim—gratitude should be inclusive and outward-looking, and a descriptive, psychological one—true gratitude by its nature is inclusive and outward-looking. Otherwise, as Walker argues, it is merely pleasure or gladness, but not gratitude.

The Torah tries to teach something similar about the joy Jews experience during the three pilgrimage festivals: “You shall rejoice in your festival,” Deuteronomy teaches us, “with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities” (Deuteronomy 16:14). Deep joy is meant to be shared. In this instance, it is not just one’s family or friends who must be included, but also (and perhaps

³ A.D.M. Walker, “Gratefulness and Gratitude,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, New Series, vol. 81 (1980-1981), p. 49.

⁴ Robert Emmons, “Gratitude,” in Shane J. Lopez, ed., *Encyclopedia of Positive Psychology* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 442.



especially) those who are socio-economically vulnerable. Maimonides (also known as Rambam, 1135-1204) amplifies the biblical message dramatically: “While one eats and drinks himself [during a festival], it is his duty to feed the stranger, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for he who locks the doors to his courtyard and eats and drinks with this wife and family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul—his meal is not a rejoicing in a divine commandment (*simḥat mitzvah*) but a rejoicing in his own stomach (*simḥat kereiso*)... Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Yom Tov, 6:18; cf. Laws of Megillah 2:17). Joy that is not at least somewhat outward-looking, Maimonides forcefully suggests, is merely self-indulgence. “True joy,” Gerald Blidstein explains, “overflows the boundaries of individualism and becomes kindness (*hesed*).”⁵ Selfish rejoicing, according to Maimonides, is a contradiction in terms.⁶ Like gratitude, then, real joy looks outward. Like a grateful one, a joyous heart overflows.

The simple requirement that there not be any leftovers from the thanksgiving offering thus teaches us a fundamental theological and spiritual lesson. We are not meant to rest content with being recipients of God’s gifts but are asked to becoming givers ourselves. God’s gifts are meant to flow *through* us and not merely *to* us. As Christian theologian Miroslav Volf writes, “We are not simply the final destination in the flow of God’s gifts. Rather, we find ourselves midstream, so to speak. The gifts flow into us, and they flow on from us... We are

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not just the intended recipients of God’s gifts; we are also their channels... As channels, we exist not just to enjoy things

⁵ Gerald (Yaakov) Blidstein, “HaSimḥah BeMishnato HaMusarit Shel HaRambam,” in *Eishel Be’er Sheva* (1980), pp. 145-163. Passage cited is on p. 155.

⁶ Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (1982), p. 424.



but [also] to pass them on. Our purpose is twofold: To flourish and to help others flourish.”⁷

In their very first encounter, God promises Abraham (then still named Abram) that “I will bless you,” and then adds that “I will make you a blessing” (Genesis 12:2). God seems to want Abram to know right away that being blessed and becoming a blessing are thoroughly intertwined. “The same double blessing is given to us: If we just enjoy good things without passing them on, if we are blessed without being a blessing, then we fail in our purposes as channels. We are givers because we were made that way, and if we don’t give, we are at odds with ourselves.”⁸

The lesson is simple: Gratitude and hoarding are incompatible, even mutually contradictory. A genuinely grateful heart does not understand acquisitiveness or possessiveness.

The prohibition on setting aside any of the thanksgiving offering until the next morning calls to mind another, parallel biblical prohibition. Discussing the paschal sacrifice (*korban pesah*), which is also a sacrifice of well-being (*zevah shelamim*),

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Exodus announces: “You shall not leave any of it over until morning; if any of it is left until morning, you shall burn it” (Exodus 12:10). Something profound is at play here. Think of what we say near the beginning of the Passover Seder (if only we more often acted accordingly): “All who are hungry, let them enter and eat; all who are in need, let them come celebrate Pesah.” If one of the core lessons Israel is meant to learn from its long sojourn in Egypt is to care for the vulnerable and

⁷ Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (2005), pp. 50, 59, 60. For a powerful classic Jewish argument using similar language, cf. R. Judah Loew of Prague (also known as Maharal, 1520-1609), *Netivot Olam*, Netiv HaTzedakah, ch. 2.

⁸ Volf, *Free of Charge*, 60.



downtrodden,⁹ then allowing any portion of the paschal sacrifice to be left over until morning should be unimaginable: Surely there is *someone* in the community who is hungry or alone, and who thus could and should have been invited to participate in our celebration. Leftovers from the paschal sacrifice suggest that the lessons of slavery and liberation have not yet been fully learned and internalized. Leftovers indicate a failure of empathy.

The prohibition on leaving over any part of the thanksgiving offering reminds us that we cannot be at once grateful and self-enclosed. The prohibition on leaving over any part of the paschal sacrifice is intended, at least in part, to remind us that those who are hungry are our responsibility, that we are to open both our hearts and our homes to them. Both laws tell us: Open your hearts, and open your doors.

Shabbat shalom.

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⁹ I have written about this more extensively in "Turning Memory into Empathy: The Torah's Ethical Charge," [Parashat Mishpatim 5774](#).