



The Eternal Nature of Gratitude

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How are we meant to conclude the Amidah? What is the emotional orientation to the end of an intense encounter with God?

In Parashat Tzav, we learn about the *todah*, the thanksgiving sacrifice (Leviticus 7:11-15). It is a subset of the *shelamim* or well-being sacrifice, the only one where the person who brings the sacrifice gets to eat the meat.¹ Upon the occasion of eating meat, likely a rare event at the time, people offered this sacrifice in gratitude to God for the bounty in their lives.

A *midrash* notes that there is an eternal aspect to the *todah* sacrifice that is different from all other sacrifices. This *midrash* also connects the eternal nature of the *todah* sacrifice with the eternal nature of the blessing we know as Modim, the 18th blessing of the Amidah, which makes it different from all other prayers:

¹ Other sacrifices are either offered entirely to God or eaten by the priests. For the function of *shelamim* sacrifices, see Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 217-225.



Vayikra Rabbah 9:7, ed. Margolioth, pp. 185-16

R. Pinḥas and R. Levi and R. Yoḥanan said in the name of R. Menahem of Galia: In the future, all the sacrifices will be canceled; but the thanksgiving sacrifice will not be canceled.

ויקרא רבה (מרגליות) פרשה ט:ז

ר' פינחס ור' לוי ור' יוחנן בש' ר' מנחם
דגליא: לעתיד לבוא כל הקרבנות בטילין -
קרבן תודה אינו בטל.

All the prayers will be canceled, but the thanksgiving prayer, will not be canceled.²

כל התפילות בטילות - הודאה אינה
בטילה.

In this *midrash*, prayer and sacrifice are not essential components of a redeemed world. Indeed, they fall away—with one exception in each category: the thanksgiving sacrifice, and the thanksgiving prayer of the Amidah.³ While praise and request—key features of our current prayers—are temporary, gratitude—the essence of the Modim blessing—remains eternal.

Indeed, the eternal nature of our blessing is related to its placement in the structure of the Amidah: the concluding high point of the prayer, parallel to the *todah* sacrifice, which concludes the list of different sacrificial types in Parashat Tzav. The last part of the Amidah is characterized by a verbal offering of thanks to God.⁴ This is the feeling we are meant to experience as we end the encounter with God through prayer.

But does the Amidah really end with gratitude? In its current form, the Amidah seems to end not with thanksgiving, but with a request for God to grant us peace. The Radbaz⁵ was asked

² The *midrash* derives this from the two mentions of *todah* in Jeremiah 33:11.

³ This blessing of the Amidah is referred to as הודאה (or הודייה) in Rabbinic sources (see Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 4:5; Mishnah Berakhot 5:2, Tosefta Berakhot 3:10, ed. Lieberman, p. 14).

⁴ See Rambam Hilkhot Tefilah 1:5 and Siddur Saadia Gaon, p. 3*: “עצם התפלה הוא: תודה ובקשה והודאה” - the essence of the Amidah is: gratitude, request, and gratitude.”

⁵ R. David ben Zimra, 16th century Spain and Egypt.



this question: why is the end of the Amidah called thanksgiving when two of the three final blessings are requests?⁶ He answers as follows:

Shu”t Radbaz Orah Hayyim/Yoreh Deah 8:15⁷

שו"ת רדב"ז - אורח חיים, יורה דעה (חלק ח)

All [three of the final blessings] are called

סימן טו

“thanksgiving” because the blessing of thanksgiving
(i.e. Modim) is the essence.

נקראו כולן הודאה על שם ברכת הודאה שהיא
העיקר

The Radbaz notes that although there are other blessings of request in this final section of the Amidah, the essential blessing is one of thanks. He notes our tradition of bowing in the Amidah to illustrate the point. Only in the first blessing and the Modim blessing are we meant to bow at the beginning and the end. This is, in fact, an ancient rule about the Amidah:

Tosefta Berakhot 1:8, ed. Lieberman p. 3

תוספתא ברכות (ליברמן) א:ח

These are the blessings in which one bows:

אילו ברכות ששוחין בהן:

The first blessing—at the beginning and end;

ברכה ראשונה תחלה וסוף

Modim—at the beginning and end.

מודים תחלה וסוף

This type of bowing—at the beginning and end of the blessing—is reserved for only two of the Amidah’s blessings, Avot and Modim. The bowing underscores the core nature of these two blessings as brackets for the prayer.⁸ In the words of the Radbaz:

⁶ The whole section of blessings 17-19 of the Amidah can be called thanksgiving. But blessing 19 is Sim Shalom, asking for peace, and blessing 17 is Shomei’a Tefillah, asking for God to accept our prayers.

⁷ My thanks to R. Jonathan Ziring for pointing me to this source.

⁸ It is true that we **also** bow at Sim Shalom, the final blessing of the Amidah (although only at the end, not the beginning). But that single bow, accompanied by steps backward, is meant to signal a departing from God’s presence more than essential concluding content. See R. Hanina’s statement in Bavli Berakhot 34a. Indeed, Uri Ehrlich argues convincingly that Sim Shalom is the parting ceremony of the Amidah. Uri Ehrlich, “*Ha-Tefillah Ke-Siah U-Phenomenologia shel Pereidah*,” in eds. Yehoshua Levenson et al. *Higayon Le-Yonah: Hebetim Hadashim Be-Heker Sifrut Ha-Midrash, Ha-Aggadah, Ve-Ha-Piyyut* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2007), p. 481-497. For additional support for the idea that Modim is the essential ending of the Amidah, see Midrash Tannaim to Deut 33:2, p. 209 and Ba”H OH 101:1. For a detailed analysis, see David Henshke, “Le-Toldot Tefillat Ha-Amidah,”

After [asking God to accept our prayers, in blessing 17], we offer gratitude—which is the essence. Then we pray for peace, for one is supposed to offer blessings of peace, like a servant departing from their master.

ואחר כך נותן הודאה שהוא עיקר,
ואחר כך מתפלל על השלום לפי
שהוא צריך לתת שלום כעבד הנפטר
מרבו

What does it mean to end the encounter with God oriented toward gratitude? We declare, in essence, that the entirety of our lives exists only because of You, God. In the current version of Modim, we both admit that God is our God (מודים אנחנו לך שאתה הוא ה'), and then we thank God for our very lives (נודה לך... על חיינו).⁹ But the older versions of the blessing simply offer one clear expression of gratitude beginning with Modim, understanding the word *le-hodot* only as “thanks,” not as “admit.” Here is one example from the ancient Eretz Yisrael tradition:¹⁰

We thank You, YHVH our God and God of our ancestors,
for all the goodness, love and mercy You have granted
and done for us.¹¹

מודים אנחנו לך אתה הוא ה' אלקינו ואלקי
אבותינו על כל הטובות החסד והרחמים
שגמלתנו ושעשית עמנו

In this version of the blessing, we are simply thanking God for all that God has done for us. This is the core emotional stance of our blessing, the note on which we end the Amidah. In our current Modim blessing, we add one more aspirational request at the end of the blessing:

Tarbiz 84 (2016), pp. 362-370, and 380, n. 161 end. For a *midrash* on why Sim Shalom is the final conclusion to the prayer, see Vayikra Rabbah 9:9, ed. Margolioth, p. 194.

⁹ For these two meanings of Modim, see my essay on Parashat VaYeishev, “The Meaning of Judaism: Gratitude and Confession,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/meaning-judaism>.

¹⁰ This also parallels earlier Babylonian traditions. Uri Ehrlich, *Tefillat Ha-Amidah shel Yemot Ha-Hol* (Jerusalem: Yad Ben Zvi, 2013), p. 240-1.

¹¹ Ehrlich, *Tefillat Ha-Amidah shel Yemot Ha-Hol*, p. 240.



May all who are alive thank You.¹²

וכל החיים יודוך

The very end of this blessing is not limited to our own personal lives, or even the particular experience of the Jewish people. Rather, it is a vision of the whole world—everyone who is alive—thanking God. In that way, we can't resist adding one more request in the midst of this prayer of thanks: to see a world in which everyone, not just a tiny subset of people, experiences God's goodness and thanks God.

If the Amidah is the central prayer of our service, and the end of the Amidah is focused on gratitude, then this is the final act of prayer: cultivating gratitude for the overwhelming power and pervasiveness of God's grace. In my own Amidah, I find myself trying to conclude with a focus on the aspects of my life for which I am grateful to God. It is a powerful experience to bow twice in that blessing, at the beginning and the end, a physical expression of my gratitude. On the best days, this focus propels me forward with a feeling of God's care and love, as I transition from prayer to the rest of my day.

¹² The word יודוך may have a double meaning here, also intending that all people acknowledge God, not only thank God.

