

## ***Today & Not Tomorrow***

Parashat Tzav 5782

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Several years ago, the actress Mayim Bialik—the star of Blossom, Big Bang Theory, and more recently Jeopardy hosting fame—was in a terrible automobile accident. A Hertz rental car full of tourists collided with her white Volvo in the intersection of Hollywood Blvd and La Brea Avenue in Los Angeles. Bialik was rushed from the scene to a nearby hospital with severe lacerations on her arm, and almost meant the complete loss of her left hand. It took a few years of surgery and physical therapy to recover from this trauma, but just one month after the accident, she invited friends and family to her home and she hosted a *se'udat hoda'ah*. Bialik is a religious Jew, and she wanted to mark her survival and recovery in a Jewish context. With just one working hand, she whipped up a vegan mac-n-cheese, some salads and sides. She admitted that she didn't have the stamina to tidy-up the house or pick up the kids' toys. Committed environmentalist that she is, she even succumbed to using paper plates, because doing dishes was out of the question. She even admitted in an article about the event that she didn't even take a shower before everyone arrived. Can you imagine?! But what she *did* do, before loved ones and community, is thank God that she walked away from that car crash; she asked her guests to give *tzedakah*, and even delivered a *d'var Torah* to her guests linking her personal gratitude to the weekly Torah portion.

Now just in case you're thinking, 'That's just hippy-dippy California; they're always making up new-fangled, new-agey rituals,' this custom of a *se'udat hoda'ah*, a festive meal of gratitude has deep roots in our tradition. Nowadays, when we survive a life-threatening situation, or recover from an illness, or a medical procedure, or even a car accident...we come to shul, have an aliyah to the Torah, and recite *birkat ha'gomer*; "Praised are You, Lord our God, who rules the universe, showing goodness to us beyond our merits, for bestowing favor upon me." And then the congregation responds: "May God who has been gracious to you continue to favor you with all that is good." It's a very meaningful benediction, and reciting it in the context of your synagogue family gives you the feeling of communal love and support as you reflect on such a harrowing experience. For many people, this is a sufficient religious context for expressing that relief of being spared from danger. But sometimes, people have needed to go even further.

Take the case of the great Rabbi Avraham Danzig. Danzig was a prominent late 18<sup>th</sup>-early 19<sup>th</sup> Century rabbi, and halakhic codifier in Poland and Lithuania. At the very end of his Jewish legal code, *Chayei Adam*,<sup>1</sup> he describes a terrible fire that broke out in Vilna, where he was living on November 18, 1804, which corresponded to the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the month of Kislev. He describes in terrifying detail how one building after another in his neighborhood was engulfed in flames, and

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<sup>1</sup> Chayei Adam, *Hilchot Megillah*, Law 155:41 (*Mi she'eira lo nes...*)

how the fire spread to his home as well. Rabbi Danzig was trapped in a room with his family, praying for a miracle. He wrote:

*Nafal shtayim vacheitzi chomot v'korah achat...* two and a half walls collapsed along with one of the rafters. His daughter Vitka was struck by one of them and seriously injured. He describes windows shattering and the door splitting. Unfortunately, he doesn't specifically describe how the family was rescued from this inferno, but somehow they survived. And he goes on to detail a ritual he implemented on the anniversary of their salvation from that traumatic experience. Every year on the 16<sup>th</sup> day of Kislev, he and his family, and eventually his descendants made a special *se'udat hoda'ah*, a meal of gratitude. *Ve'yadliku neirot k'mo be'yom tov*, and they would light candles just like on a festival; *v'litein tzedakah*, and he instructed guests to give *tzedakah* in observance of this great rescue. And they invited *lomdei Torah u'mi she'efshar*, Torah scholars, and basically anyone else who could come, and they had a big meal complete with singing Psalms and other prayers of thanksgiving.

Turns out that even this *seudat hoda'ah* has even more ancient precedents. The parasha this morning describes a certain sacrificial offering that was brought to the *Mishkan* called the *Zevach Ha'shlamim*. Let's just look at those two words more closely for a moment. A *zevach* is a type of sacrifice where only certain parts of the animal are placed on the altar, like the fatty portions, the kidneys—the parts that are really in high cholesterol! But the actual meat of the animal was eaten as part of a shared meal between the person bringing the offering and the officiating priests. A *zevach* was always brought by an individual, not on behalf of the community or all of Israel, but one person who had something special to express to God. *Shlmamim* comes from the word *shalom*, and *shleimut*. Wholeness, completeness, harmony, well-being. Within this category of well-being offerings is the *zevach todah*, a specific sacrificial offering of thanksgiving. And the Torah tells us some remarkable details about this kind of offering.

A thanksgiving offering is *min habakar*, taken from a herd animal; we're talking a cow or a sheep; a big, beefy animal, but that's not all. The offering was also presented along with 40 loaves of bread! Now remember, only the entrails, fat, and kidneys go on the altar. All the meat is eaten by the participants. And all the bread. Now here's the kicker...The Torah says in Leviticus 7:15:

*U'vasar zevach todah sh'lamav, b'yom korbano yei'achel...* All that meat had to be eaten on that same day that the offering is brought. *Lo yaniach mimenu ad boker*, not one flank or shank can be left over till the morning. It's like my mother used to say: "Adam Jeremy, you cannot leave the table until you finish everything on your plate!" Except on this plate there are no lima beans, or peas, or spinach, other vegetables I used to consider gross...this was a meat lovers paradise! And this was no "pan quotidien," this was not your daily bread. This was a mountain of bread! How could anyone be expected to eat a whole cow and 40 loaves of bread in one sitting?!

The 15<sup>th</sup> Century Portuguese commentator Yitzhak Abarbanel said that the Torah intended for this meal to be a public feast. That when you experience a miracle of remarkable proportions in your life, you should share the blessing with other people. The only way that quantity of food could be eaten in such a short time is if the community was invited to partake in it. Like on Hanukkah, when we publicize the miracle by placing the *hanukkiyah* in our windows or outside our homes, we are instructed to publicize not only the national miracles, the miracles that effected the entire Jewish people, but also the personal miracles, the moments of grace and redemption in our own personal lives. In other words, like Rabbi Danzig, like Mayim Bialik, we can have a *se'udat hoda'ah*, a meal of gratitude to share the joy and to thank God with your community. In Jewish tradition, miracles are meant to be broadcast, and celebrated publicly!

I look forward to the day when, for example, the war and bloodshed and destruction in Ukraine finally ceases, and those people can declare an annual day of commemoration of being delivered from this brutal invasion. This is precisely what our ancestors in the Purim story that we read this did week did each year on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar, when they commemorated with feasting, gift giving, tzedakah, and retelling the story of their escape from destruction, and which we continue to observe each and every year since.

But there's one more interpretation of why all that food had to be eaten on the same day it was offered. Rabbi Yitzhak Meir Alter, also known as the Chiddushei Ha'Rim and the first rebbe of the Ger Hassidic dynasty in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century reminds us of what we say in the Amidah...we're about to say it again in musaf. *V'al nisecha she'bechol yom imanu...* that miracles are actually a part of our daily lives. He said, 'Look we may not experience miracles of dramatic proportions every single day, nevertheless each and day does in fact have its own set of miracles. Rather than carrying yesterday's miracles into today, we have the obligation to look for each new day's set of miracles, and be to thankful for them on a daily basis.'

I would love to see a reclaiming of the tradition of *se'udat hoda'ah*, festive meals of gratitude when people celebrate deliverance of various kinds. We do a version of that here at shul too...thankfully Michael Baron's mac-n-cheese Shabbat lunch today is not vegan, but actual, real cheese! And of course we are celebrating a festive meal in honor of baby Maya Litwok today as well. What I am also taking away from parashat Tzav is the focus on each day as its own unit of time. Not that I ever want to forget yesterday's blessings. But the idea of *b'yom korbano yei'achel*, that you've got to recognize today's blessings TODAY, is very powerful.

As we stand for the Amidah in just a few moments, I hope you'll take some time to think about this day, the 16<sup>th</sup> of Adar Sheini 5782, March 19, 2022 and what you are grateful for right now, in this moment—not yesterday, not tomorrow, but today. And let us give thanks to God for all the miracles, especially those we are granted on this beautiful Shabbat.