

# Thanksgiving

## Introduction

In this week’s Torah portion, *Tzav*, we learn the details of the sacrifices. In particular, the *Korban Todah*, or Thanksgiving Offering, a form of the *Zevach Sh'lamim*, or Peace Offering:

[He shall] offer, along with the thanksgiving offering, unleavened loaves mixed with oil, unleavened wafers anointed with oil, and cakes of choice flour with oil mixed in, well soaked... along with loaves of leavened bread... And the flesh of his... offering shall be eaten on the day it is offered up. He shall not leave any of it over until morning. [Lev. 7:12-15]

## The Thanksgiving Offering

Different from other sacrifices in three respects:

**1-It is not just meat.** It's a full meal: Loaves, wafers, cakes, etc.

**2-You must eat everything**, and right after the offering. (Like a good boy!)

Talmud: Ten loaves of each of the four types must be brought, for a total of *forty* loaves! [Menachot 77b]

Abravanel (15<sup>th</sup>-century Spain): Since the entire offering had to be finished that day, the offerer had to invite relatives, friends and neighbors to eat and celebrate with him. They would have the opportunity to hear the news of God's bounty that precipitated the offering, and thank God as well. You are throwing a party to celebrate your good fortune, Torah's order!

Lesson: Thanks must come quickly, right after the event.

**3-It was eaten by everybody**, offerers and kohanim. Other sacrifices were not necessarily eaten:

- The Burnt offering, or *olah* (the original "holocaust") was completely burned to ashes. Nobody ate it.
- The Meal offering (*minchah*), the Sin offering (*chatat*) and the Guilt offering (*asham*) were eaten only by the kohanim

Lesson: Share your good fortune.

## A Jew is one who offers thanks

The word for "thanks", "Todah", has the same root as Yehudi, "Jew" (vav, heh, dalet). When Jacob's son Judah was born, his mother Leah said:

הַפֶּעַם אוֹדָה אֶת־יְהוָה -- This time I will thank God.

עַל־כֵּן קָרָאָהּ שְׁמוֹ יְהוּדָה -- Therefore she named him Yehudah. [Genesis 29:35].

In a sense, then, a Jew is one who offers thanks. That is what our very name means.

## Who *must* make a thanksgiving offering?

Talmud:

Four people are required to bring a thanksgiving offering:

- One who crosses the sea,
- One who crosses a desert,
- One who was ill and recovered, and
- One who was imprisoned and was released. [Berachot 54b]

Psalm 107 describes these 4 situations. Presumably, a thanksgiving offering for other reasons is voluntary.

## Jews give thanks constantly

-First prayer in the morning, upon awakening, still in bed:

מוֹדָה אֲנִי לִפְנֵיךְ מֶלֶךְ חַי וְקַיִּים. שֶׁהֵחֵזַרְתָּ בִּי נִשְׁמָתִי, בְּחַמְלָה. רַבָּה אֱמוּנָתְךָ

*Modeh ani lefanekha melekh hai v'kayam*

*shehehezarta bi nishmahti b'hemlah, rabbah emunatekha.*

I am thankful before you, living and eternal King, for You have returned within me my soul with compassion. Great is Your faithfulness!

Pause slightly between "compassion" and "great". [Kitzur Shulchan Aruch]

-In the Amidah, recited three times a day, we say:

מוֹדִים אֲנַחְנוּ לָךְ

*Modim anachnu lach*

We give thanks to You [O God].

In the other blessings, one can listen to the cantor and answer "Amen".  
But *Modim* must be said by each person individually.

-On Shabbat services, we sing:

טוב להודות ליהוה

*Tov lehodot l'Hashem*

It is good to give thanks to God. [Psalm 92:2]

Midrash:

In the Time to Come [the Messianic Age], all [obligations for] offerings will be cancelled, except for the thanksgiving offering, and all prayers will be cancelled, except the prayers of thanksgiving. [Lev. R. 9:7]

The only surviving offering and prayer will be for thanksgiving!

## Always be grateful?

Jews are taught to always be grateful, in bad times as in good.

Jewish saying: When you break a leg, be thankful to God you did not break both legs. If you break both legs, be thankful to God you did not break an arm.

We must always be thankful to God for what we DO have, and not dwell on what we do not have. The glass must be seen as half full.

But is it too much to ask, to ask someone to thank or praise God when something bad happens to him? What if you are not truly grateful?

Some of this is hinted at:

-When someone dies, we tell the family:

*Baruch dayyan ha-emet*

Blessed be the true judge

Note distinction: Not thanks, but praise: "We trust that God knows best".

-Hallel, six psalms (113-118) that thank and praise God, is recited on Pessah, Shavuot, Sukkot, Hanukkah and Rosh Chodesh.

-But not on Purim, because the miracle did not happen in the Land of Israel, and in the end the Jews were still the subjects of a foreign ruler. (Unlike the case of Hanukkah.)

-But only partially on the last six days of Pessah. The Talmud [Megillah 10b, Sanhedrin 39b] says that when the Egyptians drowned in the Sea of

Reeds, God prevented the angels from singing songs of praise because "His handiwork was drowning in the sea." The Taz [Orach Chaim 490:3], Chavot Yair [225] and Or HaChaim [on Exodus 13:17] conclude from that that a full Hallel cannot be said on the last 6 days of Pessah.

Is not reciting a full Hallel or not reciting Hallel at all equivalent to telling God: "You could have done better, so we are toning down thanks and praise"?

## **Does God need praise and thanks?**

No, but we need to express thanks:

The Nun Study: In 1986, 678 American nuns, aged 75-106, participated in a study about aging. In 1930 they had written a short biography, including their reasons for becoming nuns. The study found that the more positive the emotions they expressed in these essays (contentment, gratitude, happiness, love, hope, etc.), the more likely they were to be alive and well sixty years later. Positive emotions increased their life expectancy by up to seven years. [Danner et al, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2001, 80:5, 804-813]

Gratitude research is showing that gratitude improves health and immunity against disease, makes people sleep better, enhances self-respect, reduces toxic emotions (resentment, frustration, regret, envy, desire for revenge) and makes depression less likely. Saying "thank you" improves friendships and employee performance.

There is an instinctive human wish (need?) to give thanks, sometimes by giving something.

## **Should American Jews celebrate Thanksgiving?**

Most American Jews (even Orthodox) celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving. Some, however, refrain, and cite laws forbidding Jews to follow non-Jewish customs. For example, the Torah says:

You shall not copy the practices of the land of Egypt where you dwelt, or of the land of Canaan to which I am taking you; nor shall you follow their laws. [Leviticus 18:3]

Some interpret this to mean no gentile customs must be followed. However, Tosafot (~12<sup>th</sup>-century France) says it means only idolatry and “foolish customs” are forbidden.

The Ran (14<sup>th</sup>-century Catalonia) and Maharik (15<sup>th</sup>-century Italy) disagree and go further, saying that only idolatry is prohibited. Jewish law follows them. So, as long as no idolatrous rites are involved, Jews can follow local customs.

Contemporary rabbis:

- Rabbi Moshe Feinstein: Thanksgiving is not associated with any religion. It is a secular holiday and may be celebrated on a voluntary basis. It is prohibited to turn it into an obligation or mitzvah.

- Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik: Agree.

  - One year he moved his lecture to an earlier time so he could catch a plane to Boston to have Thanksgiving dinner with his wife and sister.

- Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner: Thanksgiving is based on the Christian calendar and some people celebrate it with Christian religious rituals. It is thus prohibited.

Jews warmed to the Thanksgiving holiday from the very beginning. When President Washington instituted it, Rabbi Seixas of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York arranged a special prayer service and called on Jews "to support [our] government, which is founded upon the strictest principles of equal liberty and justice."

At any rate, Jews don't *need* a Thanksgiving holiday -- they thank God multiple times a day every single day.