

A Thanksgiving Sacrifice

This week's reflection on Leviticus focuses on the priestly instructions concerning the ritual handling of one of the ancient sacrifices: 'the sacrifice of thanksgiving.' Thanksgiving offerings expressed gratitude to God for deliverance from peril or misfortune. Read the ritual instructions for this sacrifice in 7:11-15. What details do you observe?

"And the flesh of your thanksgiving sacrifice of well-being shall be eaten on the day it is offered; you shall not leave any of it until morning"
(Leviticus 7:15).

In contrast to other sacrifices, a shorter timeframe is stipulated for eating the thanksgiving sacrifice. Did you wonder why? Ponder this, then let's hear from some of the Jewish sages through the centuries.¹

For Maimonides (12th c.), respect for the sacredness of the offerings means that they must be in the best possible condition. Delaying the feast gives the meat a chance to spoil.

Gersonides (14th c. French scholar) expresses himself in direct, gastronomic terms: the meat is tastier before daybreak!

The *Sefer haHinukh* (a famous medieval Jewish education text) views the instruction as an invitation to spiritual growth: "there is in this an allusion to our trust in God; a man should not begrudge himself his food and store it for the morrow." This view resonates with rabbinic opinion in the Talmud: "He who has bread in his basket, and says: 'what will I eat tomorrow?' has little faith in God" (Sot. 48b). Recalled here is the miracle of 'bread from heaven,' manna in the desert, which the Israelites gathered "enough for that day" (Exodus 16:4).

Abravanel (15th c. Spanish-Jewish Torah commentator), introduces a social dimension: "Seeing that he has only one day and one night for consuming his sacrifice, the owner invites his relatives and friends to share his meal and joy. On

being asked what motivated this feast, the host will recount the Divine wonders." Thus the purpose of having a limited time for eating is to publicize the miracle.

The *HaEmek Davar* (a 19th century Torah commentary) agrees: "This is designed to increase the number of participants in the feast on the day of the offering so that many people will learn of the miracle..."

Note that what began as an apparently obscure cultic text (to 21st century sensibilities) becomes enlivened with meaning by the creative, prayerful energies of the traditional Jewish interpreters.

In what way do your own creative, prayerful energies engage with the sacred text? How would you enter into this conversation with the sages?

Further reflection

- Describe a time when an invitation to a community meal was a memorable occasion of thanksgiving to God. What was the 'miracle' for which you gave thanks?
- Enriched by our Torah discussion, listen afresh to the Eucharistic Prayers of the Mass.

1. Texts cited by Leibowitz, 81-82.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra* (New York, 1993); Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays* (New York, 1985, 2001). Scripture: NRSV.

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