

The Founder of Thanksgiving and the Thanksgiving Offering

Parashat Tzav, Leviticus, Chapters 6-8 | March 17, 2022

Let us speak of Sarah Josepha Hale. Born Sarah Buell after the Revolutionary War in New Hampshire to parents who believed in educating daughters, she developed a talent and passion for writing. As a young woman, she lost her mother and siblings and then met a man by the name of David Hale. They were married in 1813, had four children in less than a decade, and as she was pregnant with their fifth child, David caught pneumonia and died. She would, for the rest of her life, continue to wear black in mourning for the man she had loved and lost. One would not have expected that a woman who experienced so much sorrow would be known for great gratitude, but Hale is the mother of the modern American Thanksgiving, and her story, in a fascinating way, teaches us a great deal about the original biblical thanksgiving meal.

Before we turn to the unique *korban* of thanksgiving, we must first turn to another sort of offering altogether. Chapter 2 of Leviticus describes what is known as the “*mincha*,” best rendered as a “meal offering.” Rather than an animal, what is brought is flour, mixed with oil and frankincense, presented in raw, baked, or fried forms. The priest would take a fistful from the offering, place it on the altar, and the priests would eat the rest themselves in the Tabernacle courtyard. What is of interest for our discussion is what is prohibited:

No meal offering which ye shall bring unto the Lord shall be leavened; for no starter, nor honey, shall be offered by fire unto the Lord.
(Leviticus 2:11)

No leavened bread then is allowed on the altar in the Tabernacle or the Temple, and therefore no *se'or*, the leavening agent known as “starter,” can be added to the meal offering. What this means is that just as Jews abstain from leavened bread on Passover, the altar was, in a sense, kosher for Passover all year round. Why? Why should leavened bread be kept away from the fire of God?

One possibility is that leavened bread is an Egyptian invention, and therefore is a perhaps a reminder of the pagan enslavers of Israel. Another explanation can be found in the fact that in the presence of God, all worship must be done with alacrity, and leavened bread requires waiting as the dough rises: after all, matzah came into being at the Exodus because the Israelites could not delay their escape from Egypt. No delay is ever allowed in the presence of the Almighty. Time is so precious to Judaism that, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveichik once put it,

Jews cherish the fleeting moment as if it represented eternity.

The word for leavened bread, *chametz*, appears in rabbinic discussions of delay. “*Mitzvah haba'ah leyadcha al tachmitzena*,” say the sages, meaning, “When the opportunity for a good deed presents itself, do not let it pass itself by.” A ban on *chametz*, leavened bread, on the altar might mark the attitude to time one must take in the Tabernacle.

Yet these explanations, I believe, are insufficient. Recall that along with the leavening agents, another ingredient is also outlawed: “*for no starter, nor honey, shall be offered by fire unto the Lord.*” Honey, here, is date honey, and it is not a leavening agent. Why then is it forbidden as an ingredient in a meal offering?

Rabbi Yoel Bin-Nun offers an interesting answer. Matzah is bread that has not been allowed to rise, to achieve its fullest and most complete end. As such, the offering of an unleavened flour product is an expression of humility and that is why honey is banned as well. He puts it this way:

The offering that a person brings upon the altar is, like prayer, an expression of man standing before God, filled with a sense of his own lowliness and insignificance,

and with a sense of how beholden and dependent he is on God. A person cannot stand before the altar with a proud sense of wealth that declares his independent stature, as in the verse, “My strength and the might of my hand have achieved all of this valor” (Deuteronomy 8:17). A sacrifice offered with such a feeling would be an act of impudence, of pride and arrogance—one of the most serious transgressions in man’s relationship with God. For this reason, “You shall not burn any leaven, nor any honey”—the symbols of wealth and the sense of satiety—“in an offering to God.”

For Rabbi Bin-Nun, unleavened bread, and bread that is devoid of a special sweetener like honey, is a humble declaration of our dependence on the Divine. This, then, is perhaps why *chametz*, leavened flour, is banned on God’s altar.

Let us now turn to another offering, delineated in Chapter 7, known as a “*korban todah*,” an “offering of thanksgiving.” For Jewish tradition, it is brought by one who has emerged from the midst of crisis: released from prison, cured from disease, returned from a dangerous journey. The thanksgiving offering is a *shelamim*, which is eaten (as we discussed last week), with an important difference: along with the animal, forty loaves of bread are also brought and consumed during the thanksgiving meal. Here are the first thirty:

If he offer it for a thanksgiving, then he shall offer with the sacrifice of thanksgiving unleavened loaves mingled with oil, and unleavened wafers spread with oil, and unleavened loaves with oil of fine flour, fried. (Leviticus 7:12)

What is described are three types of unleavened bread—some soft, some wafer-like, thirty in total, joined to the animal offering. To this is added one more type of bread:

Besides the loaves, he shall offer for his offering leavened bread with the sacrifice of thanksgiving of his peace offerings. (Leviticus 7:13)

Thus, leavened bread, *chametz*, ten loaves—not offered on the altar, but brought to the Tabernacle—are also part of the thanksgiving ritual and eaten in the meal. This is how thanksgiving took place in Temple times. An animal offering would be brought, along with forty loaves—four types of bread, with one loaf of each type going to the priest, and the rest, 36 loaves, being consumed with the meat at the thanksgiving meal. The question is obvious. Why is *chametz*, leavened bread, allowed? True, it is not offered on the altar, but if non-leavened bread is so central to Temple rites, then why does a thanksgiving celebration involve it? Here again, Rabbi Bin-Nun offers an answer. If matzah is bread that has not reached its intended state, *chametz* represents the resolution of one’s crisis—the reason one expresses gratitude. He writes:

An offering of thanksgiving is brought by a person who faced some danger or predicament and was delivered from it. Therefore, when he is saved, it is indeed proper that his offering include both *chametz* loaves and *matzot*. The *matzot* symbolize the trouble that he was in, the bitter cry that he uttered, and the process of redemption from that predicament to an open space of relief. The *chametz* represents the completion of his deliverance and his current state of tranquility; it is an expression of reaching the end of this particular road, the attainment of peace and satisfaction.

This then is the spiritual symbolism of the culinary diversity on display in a thanksgiving celebration. Matzah is known in the Bible as “*lechem oni*,” “poor bread,” or “bread of affliction.” The *matzot* thus represent, first and foremost, the moments of distress. The leavened loaves represent the conclusion of salvation for which gratitude is given.

But if this so, why, then, a multitude of *matzot*? Should not the leavened and unleavened bread be equal? Why so many symbols of crisis? Rabbi Bin-Nun has his own thoughts, but in suggesting an answer I’d like to turn back to Sarah Josepha Hale, and in telling her story throughout this essay, I’m drawing on a

book by Denise Kiernan entitled, *We Gather Together: A Nation Divided, a President in Turmoil, and a Historic Campaign to Embrace Gratitude and Grace*.

Seeking to support her family with her writing, in 1827, Hale published a large anti-slavery novel titled, *Northwood*, which saw real success in the United States and even overseas. Long before Thanksgiving was a national holiday, it was marked as a ritual in the New England states, and Hale brought such a celebration to life in her novel. She began to lobby presidents to declare just such a thanksgiving at the federal level. And then, the Civil War began, marked by horrific death. It was after Gettysburg in 1863 that she wrote to Lincoln to lobby for her vision of a day of gratitude. One might have expected the president to think her insane. Thanksgiving in 1863? When more Americans had been lost than ever before? And yet, when one thinks about it, a somewhat similar question could be asked about the individual life of Sarah Josepha Hale herself. After all, here we have a woman who wears mourning clothes for her husband marking the fragile nature of life, and it is this very woman who places gratitude at the apex of her aspirations. Perhaps Sarah Josepha Hale could be the one to help America see that it is precisely life's ephemeral nature that can make one all the more grateful for blessings that are bestowed. And Hale, in Lincoln, found a president after her own heart. Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November to be a national Thanksgiving Day:

The year that is drawing toward its close has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added which are of so extraordinary a nature that they can not fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of Almighty God.

In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign states to

invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict, while that theater has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union.

Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defense have not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship...Population has steadily increased notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield...

No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.

Lincoln thus applied the lessons of Hale's life to America writ large. The overwhelming challenges America faced, he argued, did not do away with the obligation of gratitude: on the contrary, the obligation was enhanced. America now understood, Lincoln said, how uncertain life was—and therefore how life should be cherished. Americans suddenly realized how fragile their national coexistence was, but that should have made us more grateful that outside the battlefield, society had not fallen apart and had in fact experienced blessings. Lincoln implicitly said here what he would soon say explicitly in the Second Inaugural: that the war was a punishment for sin, for the sin of slavery. But this, he added, should also have made Americans grateful for the, "gracious gifts of the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." Lincoln made clear that the terrible challenges America faced were not in tension with their gratitude: they were the very foundation of that gratitude.

Thus does the national Thanksgiving that America knows come into being through Lincoln's declaration. The title of Kiernan's book, *We Gather Together*, is of course taken from the hymn that ultimately became affiliated with Thanksgiving in America. The truth is, the original, biblical, thanksgiving is all about gathering together. In a fascinating addition to the ritual of the *shelamim*, the peace offering, Leviticus stresses that whereas usually the offering can be eaten through the next day, the thanksgiving feast must conclude by the dawn after it is first begun:

And the meat of the sacrifice of his peace offerings for thanksgiving shall be eaten the same day that it is offered; he shall not leave any of it until the morning. (Leviticus 7:15)

As many note, the abundance of bread brought with the offering of thanksgiving, and the very short time given to consume the *korban*, ensures that one will not eat alone, but will instead gather together with anyone around in Jerusalem to partake in this thanksgiving feast, and thereby give gratitude to God. This is the original, biblical, Thanksgiving meal: serve matzah as a symbol of your crisis, and *chametz* as a symbol of the ultimate resolution of that crisis. But the abundance of matzah at this meal is meant to mark the fact that life is *filled* with crisis, and that we celebrate God's blessings all the same.

Kiernan concludes her book on Hale with the following reflection:

The uninterrupted string of annual thanksgiving celebrations that began nearly 160 years ago, thanks to Hale's relentless efforts and Lincoln's recognition of her vision, has since changed in new and complex ways. But we are poised to manifest this holiday rooted in thanks and encourage it to evolve once again. What has become such an integral part of American culture should continue to grow to reflect that culture and the best parts of itself. Appreciation. Inclusion. Compassion. Celebration. Charity. Let today begin a revolution of gratitude, and grace.

Indeed. And one might add that these virtues, along with humility and faith, are what the *korban todah* is all about.

Discussion Questions:

1. If unleavened, unsweetened bread represents a posture of dependence on the Divine, why is the consumption of leavened bread generally permitted without limit? Why do we only refrain from it for the week of Passover?
2. Rabbi Soloveichik points out that the feast following the bringing of a thanksgiving offering would inevitably be eaten in community. What does this teach us about the nature of gratitude? Is the experience of true gratitude an inherently social and communal experience?