

Torah from Around the World 159

Be Grateful!

on Parashat Tzav (Leviticus 6:1 - 8:36)

by Rabbi Gary M. Bretton-Granatoor, Vice President, Philanthropy, [World Union for Progressive Judaism](#)

When I was growing up, I was a member of what might now be called a “Classical Reform” congregation. The clergy was robed in clerical vestments; an organ rang out loud enough to shake the rafters (which were seemingly miles high). A “cosmic” choir sang out, made up of professional singers, heard but never seen, and their voices rained down on us as if from on high.

There was much majesty, and the reading of the Torah was always awe inspiring, as the beloved and learned rabbi of my youth wove tales of glory and meaning as he read and translated from the text. While later in life, I learned about Parashat HaShavua (an assigned portion of Torah for each week), the rabbi would read sections of Torah that introduced the topic upon which he would preach, picking and choosing from the breadth of Torah. But there was one book we rarely heard about - and that was the Book of Leviticus. It seemed that the rules of the Priestly class, and especially the descriptions of the sacrifices, were not in keeping with a modern and enlightened Reform religious tradition (I refer to the late 1950's and 1960's).

Well, we have “reformed” (as our teacher Laibel Fein reminded us, “Reform” is a verb) and learning can be gleaned from every passage of Torah. And so we engage with this week's Parasha: TZAV.

The first chapter (Leviticus 6:1-23) deals with three kinds of sacrifice: Olah (the burnt offering), Minchah (the afternoon meal/grain offering) and the Chatat (a burnt offering to absolve one of sin). But it is in the next chapter that we learn of the Korban Todah (chapter 7: 11-17) - the Thanksgiving offering, which is most remarkable and stands as unique among the sacrifices. A free-will offering - to say “thanks.”

The rabbis questioned what might provoke such a free will offering. They suggest that when someone has been in a life-threatening situation and survives, s/he brings a Thanksgiving offering to God, for it is God who brought salvation. In Talmud Bavli, Berachot 54b, Rav Judah said in the name of Rav (a 1st generation Babylonian Amora - teacher) the sages expound upon Psalm 107, King David's hymn of gratitude. We learn that there are four categories of people who should be grateful: those who have survived a dangerous journey through a desert or dangerous road, a person set free from imprisonment, one who recovered from serious illness or one who safely completed a sea journey. In the post-sacrificial cult days, this was done by *benching* (reciting or chanting) Gomel. The person says, “Blessed are You, Adonai Our God, Ruler of the Universe, who bestows benefits on the undeserving and has bestowed upon me all kinds of favors.” The congregation then traditionally responds, “May the Holy One, who has bestowed upon you all kinds of favors, continue to do so. Selah!” {n.b. - *Selah* is an untranslatable word which indicates that

this is the last word on the subject - nothing else need be said - kind of like a rousing AAA-MENNN!}

Vayikra Rabba (a homiletical midrash on the book of Leviticus, which originated in the land of Israel and dates around the 5th - 7th century CE) 9:7 teaches us that in time to come (Messianic age) there will be no need for offerings of atonement, because one day people will no longer sin, but there will always be thanksgiving offerings. So here is a sacrifice that extends beyond the days of the sacrificial-cult - we should incorporate the lessons of the Korban Todah into our own lives.

Beyond the reasons for benching Gomel, each of us witnesses miracles and moments of joy. Each of us finds blessing in our lives - should we not learn to offer unbounded thanks and praise? And should we not mark these special moments by offering something in return? Should we not mark birthdays and anniversaries and personal triumphs with our own acts of Tzedakah? Ought we not consider multiplying the joy we feel by bringing light and hope to others by giving of ourselves? The lesson of the Korban Todah is as fresh today as when taught in the blazing sun of the desert of redemption - offer up something to others when celebrating your own reasons for thanks. Here is a sacrifice for the post sacrifice era. We show gratitude to God for the goodness that befalls us.

The Amidah (standing prayers) also known as the Tefilah (the "great" prayer), the thrice recited group of blessings that serve as the core of almost every prayer service, was said to be composed to replace the daily sacrifices. This section begins with three blessings and ends with three blessings. The penultimate blessing in the ending triptych of the Amidah is called the Hoda'ah (the thanksgiving prayer).

In Mishkan Tefila, we find the following close translation of the traditional Hebrew text:

"We acknowledge with thanks that You are Adonai, our God and God of our ancestors, forever. You are the Rock of our lives, and the Shield of our salvation in every generation. Let us thank You and praise You - for our lives which are in Your hand, for our souls which are in Your care, for Your miracles that we experience every day and for Your wondrous deeds and favors at every time of day: evening, morning and noon. O Good One, whose mercies never end, O Compassionate One, whose kindness never fails, we forever put our hope in You." (MT pg 256)

This is our modern Todah - offered thrice daily, the modern replacement of the sacrificial system. So Leviticus has a message for us modern folk - and it is clear: the key to life to be grateful. In gratitude we recognize that the goodness that comes to us is a gift from the Eternal One, and the only way to properly show gratitude is to share our gifts with others.