

There are many different kinds of offerings throughout Torah – some are animal, some are vegetable. Some are to be given up – entirely handed over to the Priests or to the poor, and some are instructed to be eaten by the person making the offering.

Parashat Tzav, the second parasha in Leviticus, describes a particular kind of offering, the zevach Todah, the Thanksgiving offering, an offering of gratitude for overcoming something, like having survived a perilous illness or journey. Today, we encourage those who have such a reason for gratitude to say Birkat haGomel, the special blessing of deliverance, during our morning Torah service – but back in ancient times, the response was sacrifice.

The zevach Todah, the Thanksgiving offering was special in that the one who brought it was supposed to eat it herself, but there was a prohibition on there being any leftovers. As verse 15 of Chapter 7 of Leviticus states: “the thanksgiving offering shall be eaten on the day it is offered – none of it shall be set aside until morning.”

Contemporary Rabbi Shai Held notes that this prohibition against leftovers means that the celebrant will wind up involving any others in the celebration and thereby publicizing the miracle: quoting medieval Rabbi Yitzhak Abravanel, “The fact that a great deal of food must be consumed in a short time leads the thankful person to invite “relatives, friends, and acquaintances to share in his meal and his joy.” He will thus have the opportunity to tell them of the wonders and miracles that were done for him.”

Held adds, however that there is another function of this prohibition against leftovers; that gratitude is by nature outward looking. The difference between gratitude specifically, and other positive emotions such as happiness or pleasure, is that gratitude contains an implicit understanding that one has received blessings beyond what can be expected, and that therefore one is called to in turn, to give either back or forwards.

Interestingly, the one other kind of sacrifice for which leftovers are forbidden is the korban Pesach, the Passover offering. Starting in Torah times and onwards, the Paschal offering was instructed to be shared in groups large enough that there would be no leftovers the next morning.

It occurs to me that by demanding the same practice for a personal Thanksgiving offering as for the Pesach offering, Torah suggests that the quotidian miracles of healing and safe travel are in fact no less miraculous than the redemption of our people from slavery in Egypt, and as Held reminds us, in any case, the response should be the same: that we respond to all of our experiences of redemption with sharing, rather than hoarding. As Held writes, ‘Leftovers indicate a failure of empathy.’ Now I don’t suggest that as hosts, we demand that our guests eat until they are overstuffed – rather – that we consider – who might be hungry – and as part of our Thanksgiving, not just on Pesach, but throughout the rest of the year – that we respond by making more room at our tables.