

## Parashat Emor: So Much to be Grateful For

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Emor is the eighth out of ten parashot in Vayikra. The parasha begins with some of the restrictions given to the Cohanim, including whom they may and may not marry, and which funeral they may attend (and thereby become ritually impure). The parasha continues with the requirement that all Cohanim who serve in the Mishkan be without any physical blemish. It then goes on to detail who among the people may offer sacrifices and who may not, who may eat from the sacrificial meat and who may not, and the prohibition against sacrificing an animal with a blemish. The details refer to sacrifices given on the holidays.

You might very well feel that these topics are entirely unrelated to you and your world. But before you throw the whole thing out, give it the benefit of the doubt. We are talking about the Torah, after all, which contains infinite layers of allegory and meaning, and if you dig deep enough, the relevance will be revealed. Of that, I have no doubt.

This year I would like to discuss an interesting combination of some of my favorite themes: gratitude and will, both of which appear in the parasha.

**17** "And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: **18** Speak to Aaron, and to his sons, and to all the children of Israel, and say to them: Whoever he be of the house of Israel, or of the strangers in Israel, that brings his offering... **19 according to his will**, you shall offer a male without blemish... **20** But whatever has a blemish, that you shall not bring; for it shall not be acceptable for you. **21** And whoever brings a sacrifice of peace-offerings to the LORD in fulfillment of a vow clearly uttered, or for a **freewill-offering**, of the herd or of the flock, it shall be perfect to **one's will**; there shall be no blemish therein... **29** And when you sacrifice a **sacrifice of thanksgiving** to the LORD, you shall sacrifice it **of your own will**... **32** ...I am the LORD who hallows you, **33** that brought you out of the land of Egypt, to be your God: I am the LORD." (Leviticus 22)

Rabbi Yehuda Brandes quotes a well-known midrash on one of the Psalms which is recited every day during Shacharit- the Psalm of Thanksgiving: "All of the sacrifices will be annulled at the end of days, except the Thanksgiving Offering... [Hence] all prayers will be annulled [too] except those of thanksgiving" (Midrash on Tehillim 100:4). Rabbi Brandes is suggesting that "the Sacrifice of Thanksgiving is the most important of all sacrifices... **because it is brought without any external obligation. It is based only on the goodwill of the person offering, who is doing so with happiness and gratitude.**"

Desire and will are at the core of the human experience. We always feel a sense of lack, and therefore we are always in a state of want. This will of ours is usually undefined, leaving us with a kind of vague dissatisfaction which is a result of endless layers of undefined desires. (A simple but familiar example is when we look in the refrigerator for something that cannot be satisfied by

food.)

Will and gratitude are opposites. Our will knows no limits, whereas gratitude is an acknowledgement of plenty, and a sense of having enough, even if it is only momentary.

There are several levels of gratitude. The first is "basic manners" – we ask for something, we get it, and then we say thank you. This, however, is not the meaning of the sacrifices of thanksgiving, and the ones that will still be offered at the end of days.

Another (higher?) level of gratitude is that of acknowledgement of good fortune. At this level we are aware of all the good that surrounds us, unrelated to whether we ask for it or not. But we still continue to wish and to desire, therefore I don't think the midrash was referring to this level either.

What, then, is that unique sacrifice, that unique psalm of gratitude, that will remain after all others are rendered unnecessary?

I would like to suggest a third layer of gratitude (an even higher one, perhaps?) in which **we acknowledge reality as the expression of our OWN absolute will, that reality is actually the fulfillment of all WE wish for.** I am not talking about accepting reality as an expression of God's will (although that, too, can be very challenging!). Hence, the Thanksgiving Sacrifice was given according to "your" (i.e., our, human) will and not His (God's) will. Seeing reality as an expression of OUR human will, therefore, is the highest form of gratitude.

I am certainly not at that level yet – that is to come at the End of Days. But I do choose to see this level as a compass in my life, a guide to the right direction. For now, I know how to say a polite thank you when my wishes have been fulfilled. I am able to acknowledge the good around me (though not all of it, yet). I even "know" that everything in the world is the expression of God's will, as we say in the Kaddish: "Glorified and sanctified be God's great name throughout the world which He has created according to His will." But is everything I experience an expression of my unconscious will? Is my life an absolute reflection of my most hidden wishes? I completely believe my teachers - those giants throughout the generations who understood the mysteries of the universe - who say that they are. But this is not yet my experience.

A day will come, though, when, according to our Sages, all of our desires, our prayers, our pleading and our sacrifices will be void. Not because reality will change; not because there will be universal peace and all disease will be cured; not because resources will be divided equally and justly; not because all streams of Judaism will be recognized. But because on that day we will know that there is nothing more to ask for, nothing more to pray for, because everything will be exactly according to our deepest will.

Meanwhile, until our consciousness arrives at its End of Days, we will continue to say thank you politely, and express genuine gratitude for all the good around us.

There is so much to be grateful for!

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha