

GRASP THE MOMENT

by Rabbi Naftali Reich

Not everyone has the privilege of saying "thank you" to the Creator by bringing a thanksgiving offering to the Holy Temple. The Talmud tells us that only people who were recently delivered from extreme danger - an ocean voyage, a desert journey, a serious illness, a term of imprisonment - can bring this special sacrifice. Why is this so? Why can't we express our gratitude for other momentous occasions in our lives by bringing this selfsame thanksgiving offering?

Furthermore, we find an anomaly in the laws of this sacrifice. The thanksgiving offering falls into the general category of shelamim, peace offerings. However, we read in this week's Torah portion that there is less time allowed for eating the meat of the sacrifice. The peace offering can be eaten for two days, but the thanksgiving offering for only one day. Why does the Torah reduce the eating time of this sacrifice?

The answers to these questions are rooted in the fundamental concepts of the sacrificial service. The purpose of the sacrifices is to foster closeness between the Creator and ourselves. When we bring a sacrifice to the altar we are symbolically offering ourselves up to Him, subsuming our hearts, our minds, our souls, our very lives in the universal embrace of the Divine Presence. Eating the meat of the sacrifice, the Talmud explains, is an extension of the sacrificial service. Through the act of ingesting the sanctified meat, we connect to the transcendent concepts and symbolism of the sacrifice not only through our intellectual and emotional faculties but through our purely physical ones as well. In this way, the experience becomes total and the connection is absolute.

When we bring a thanksgiving offering, we take advantage of moments of outstanding inspiration to forge a closer relationship with our Creator. Life is full of little inspirations and numerous opportunities to express our gratitude to Hashem. Most of these, however, do not move us to our core, and therefore, they are not powerful enough to warrant a sacrifice. But when a person is reprieved after staring death in the face, he is totally energized and exhilarated, and the words of thanksgiving and joy he directs heavenward emanate from the essence of his being. This sort of inspiration can be brought to the Temple and presented to Hashem in the form of a thanksgiving sacrifice. This sort of inspiration can be channeled to foster an everlasting closeness.

But inspiration is an ephemeral thing. Like a flash of lightning, it illuminates our surroundings in painfully sharp clarity and then is gone, leaving only a memory that slowly fades away. During that moment, we gain a totally different and highly vivid perspective of what is important and what is trivial. During that moment, we have the ability to find new direction and meaning for our daily

existence. Later, it is too late. Therefore, the Torah limits the time period for eating the thanksgiving offering. Grasp the moment! If we wait, it will be gone.

A high-level royal minister was deeply involved in a national crisis situation. During this time, while the king and his ministers conferred daily to discuss developments, the king's birthday came and went without the customary celebration. The crisis eventually passed, and the conduct of government affairs returned to normal. Shortly thereafter, the minister purchased a beautiful birthday gift and sent it to the king.

A few weeks later, the king and his minister were discussing the crisis and what could be done to prevent future recurrences.

"We can't afford to go through something like this again," said the king with a wry smile. "Do you realize that I didn't even receive any birthday gifts this years because of the crisis?"

"Your majesty, have you forgotten?" the minister protested. "I sent you a very beautiful gift. Didn't you receive it?"

"Indeed, I did," said the king. "And I thank you. Had you given it to me on my birthday, I would have perceived it as an expression of your joyous celebration of such an important day in my life. But it was given several weeks later. It did not represent your sense of joy but rather your sense of obligation. Much as I appreciate it, I do not consider it a true birthday gift."

In our own lives, we are often profoundly inspired during times of great joy or, Heaven forbid, great distress. On these occasions, we are inclined to take stock of our existence and resolve to make important changes, either to improve our relationship with our Creator, to correct our flaws and shortcomings or simply to spend more time with our families. When this happens, it is important to translate our inspiration into action immediately, for if we wait until we get around to it, more often than not we never will.

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