

Thanksgiving

As we prepare for Thanksgiving (which I've written before is based on *Sukkot*), what is thanksgiving Jewishly? *Sukkot* (Tabernacles) thanks God for material benefits and God's protection as we realize life's fragility and how much is beyond our control.

If I ask you for a thanksgiving prayer, many would answer *she-heḥeyanu* (...God...who preserved us alive...and enabled us to reach this season). The rabbis called it "the blessing of the season." We say it when we do something new in a given time period. The occasion must be repetitive. Accordingly, we say it during candlelighting and *kiddush* (sanctification of the day) on festivals; before: *Rosh Hashanah shofar*, *Sukkot lulav*, first *Hanukkah* candle, *Purim megillah*; moving into a new home (*m'zuzah*); eating the first fruit each season; wearing new clothes (not leather); when seeing a dear friend after a long time. We do not say it for all one-shot deals and life-cycle events (except *pidyon ha-ben*, redemption of the first born son); in anything that causes pain (*b'rit milah*, circumcision for the covenant) or death (slaughtering an animal, leather clothes).

Some might say *gomel* (...God...the granter of favors to the guilty, who granted me favor). We say *gomel* after surviving life-threatening situations. The Talmud (*B'rakhot* 54b), based on Psalm 107:8,15,21,31, defines them as completing a sea voyage or hazardous land journey, recovering from a major illness, or being freed from captivity. Some say after airplane flights, others say no since air travel no longer is hazardous. Some returning from active duty in Israel's military reserves say it. It is best said after a *Torah aliyah*, but anyone may say it after the *Torah* reading. While some say women cannot say it, many, even in the Orthodox world, say that women should say it. This blessing stresses that we do not earn or deserve it, but God's gracious nature grants it.

Some might say the next to last blessing of the *Amidah*, the standing prayer, usually translated as "We thank You..." but better as "We proclaim You..." God to whom all thanks are due. It actually parallels the opening blessings, note the word in the Rabbinic version (said when the reader repeats the *Amidah*) includes *she-heḥeyitanu* (similar to *she-heḥeyanu*) paralleling the *Amidah's* second blessing about God's power, which includes sustaining the living, freeing captives, and resurrection.

Some might say Psalm 100. Its heading actually means "Psalm of Praise," but it can mean thanksgiving, so the rabbis connected it to the thanksgiving sacrifice. Hence we say it on weekdays except on occasions when the sacrifice was not offered.

Finally, some might say 1 Chronicles 16:8-36, said every morning and on the High Holidays. Here too, "Acclaim" contextually fits better than "Give thanks." The rabbis noted its context (King David brought the Ark to Jerusalem, offered sacrifices, and assigned the Levites to praise God), so they said it during the daily sacrifice offering.

These thanksgiving prayers suggest what thanksgiving means. Rabbi Eleazar in the Talmud (*Niddah* 31a) says that Psalm 72:18-19, God does wondrous things, means that even the one who benefits from the miracle does not realize it. Accordingly, we say

thanksgiving blessings every day, beginning when we wake up: thanking God for every aspect of arising in the morning: hearing, seeing, thinking, stretching the body in bed, standing, dressing, washing, emptying bodily wastes, being a Jew and studying *Torah*. The rabbis structured the morning service to thank God for the daily miracles of life, starting with nature—twice we say God who “in goodness, renews creation day after day” before we move into being Jews and studying *Torah*. We also thank God in a short grace before meals and a longer grace after meals. Jews saying 100 blessings a day realize how much we depend on God, and that we should take nothing in life for granted. For a religious Jew, thanksgiving is not one day a year, but every day.