

The beginning chapters of Leviticus are all about sacrifices. Chapter 7, verse 12, introduces a new idea:

If on account of gratitude (תודה) one offers it, one should offer, along with the gratitude sacrifice, unleavened cakes mixed with oil...

The ancient commentators were puzzled by the reference to a gratitude sacrifice. The text does not specify the particular situations in which one should offer a sacrifice to express gratitude. This gap leads the commentators on a midrashic quest, looking for hints elsewhere in the Torah.

They find those hints in Psalm 107, one of the few other places in Torah where “gratitude sacrifices” are mentioned (verse 22). That psalm speaks of four situations that inspire people to thank God, and those situations have become associated with the gratitude sacrifice. Rashi (11th century, France) says that people who have experienced miraculous rescue from danger should give a gratitude sacrifice, and, basing himself on Psalm 107, he specifies these four kinds of danger: Going into the sea, wandering in the wilderness, being locked in prison, and recovering from grave illness. If you come through any of these ordeals unscathed, you should offer a gratitude sacrifice.

But here is a gnawing question: What if you have gone into the sea and come through unscathed, only to find yourself wandering in the wilderness? If you have escaped one ordeal but remain in terrible danger, does it make sense to stop and dwell on gratitude?

It is this question that the Passover song *Dayenu* addresses. *Dayenu* – the song’s one-word chorus – means “it would be enough for us.” This song comes near the end of the long narrative section of the Seder, in which we recount the story of the Exodus in a variety of ways. The melody, along with the wine and the anticipation of a long-awaited meal, encourages a raucous performance, in which *dayenu* tends to be reinterpreted as “Enough already!”

But a close look at the text of *Dayenu* reveals its more serious message. The passage begins with an exclamation that says, “How many layers of goodness has God laid upon us!” It then steps through the history of the Israelite nation in 15 verses. Here are the first two:

Had He brought us out of Egypt, and not executed judgments against the Egyptians,
Dayenu. – It would be enough for us.
Had He executed judgments against the Egyptians, and not against their gods,
Dayenu. – It would be enough for us.

So far, so good. But after a few verses, people start to squirm:

Had He given us their riches, and not split the sea for us, *Dayenu* - It would be enough for us.
Had He split the sea for us, and not led us through it on dry land, *Dayenu*...
Had He led us through it on dry land, and not sunk our foes in it, *Dayenu*...
Had He sunk our foes in it, and not satisfied our needs in the desert for forty years, *Dayenu*...

Really? In what way would it have been enough for us?! If God had stopped short in any one of these cases, all the Israelites would have died. The entire Exodus would have been an exercise in futility!

To make sense of these lines, we must ask, “Enough for *what*?” Clearly, “*dayenu*” cannot mean “It would have been enough for us to be safe.” Instead, “*dayenu*” must mean “It would have been enough for us to be thankful.”

In the process of our lives, there is never a moment when a good outcome is achieved, once and for all. Every joyful landmark leads to the next challenge. Joy is fragile. In the face of our worry over what might yet go wrong, it's easy to take for granted the good things that have happened so far. And it is tempting to put off gratitude while we check to make sure it won't all be taken away around the next corner.

Dayenu insists that we stop and feel our gratitude for the good things that exist in the moment we inhabit, right now. When we manage to make our way through the sea, we must offer gratitude, even though we know that the next step may bring us into the wilderness. When we recover from a grave illness, we must offer gratitude, even though we know that eventually there will be an illness from which we will not recover.

The miracles that bring us to each of the moments in which we can experience love, friendship, hope, joy – they may not be enough to save us forever, but they are enough for us to practice gratitude in the here and now. *Dayenu*.

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