



Light of Torah

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Give thanks

On the slopes of Moab in sight of the land of Canaan, Moses prepares his people for entry into the promised land. He gives them a ritual to be performed when they get there. After settling in the promised land, the Israelite is to engage in a ritual of thanksgiving. Taking some of the first-fruits of his agricultural produce he is to present it to the priest along with a verbal recitation that acknowledges the Lord who is the giver of all good things. This ancient symbolic action is packed with insights for our own lives today. Come with us as we explore Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

"When you have come into the land that the Lord your God is giving you ... you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land ... and you shall put it in a basket and go to the place that the Lord your God will choose" (Deut.26:1-2).

Read Deuteronomy 26:1-11. Carefully note all the repetitions and points of interest. Can you imagine the action taking place? Ponder the meaning of this ritual. Describe what you 'see' in all its color. E.g.:

1. The action starts in the private sphere (the Israelite's fields) and proceeds to a designated holy place.
2. The ritual is limited but it expresses so much. There is no way we can reciprocate God's bounty, but we can perform a simple action symbolizing an awareness that the earth belongs to God.
3. It involves farmer and priest.
4. Events in the story of the Israelite people are recounted in some detail (vv.5-10).
5. It concludes with a feast, enjoying "all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and to your house" (26:11).

What can you add to these observations?

The sages see this ritual as promoting humility before God, selflessness and service. It is a practice that prevents one from becoming soft and complacent. It is a reminder that wealth is a gift to be used generously for the common good and for the glory of God. This stance of gratitude to God and awareness of blessing is core to Judaism.

Examine the phrasing of the declaration in 26:3. *"I have come into the land that the Lord swore to our ancestors to give us."*

In subsequent generations the Israelite farmer would repeat this ritual declaration. Note that he did not say: "My ancestors came..." but

"I have come..."

For the Jews there is an intense relationship between past and present generations. Every Jew is to identify personally with his/her people, Israel's history, and the great events by which God delivered Israel from slavery. What happened to 'them' (one's ancestors long ago) happened to 'me.' Thus each Jew is obliged to remember with gratitude what God has done for him/her personally, and not to take for granted the blessings bestowed on their ancestors.

Thanks to Judaism, the Catholic approach to the sacraments involves a similar intensity. In remembering past events, sacraments celebrate salvation touching us in the present. The Mass is our central prayer of remembrance and thanksgiving. Every time we celebrate the Eucharist it is not simply a subjective recall of the deeds of Christ; we are present to the saving actions of Jesus; we are invited into an experience of transformation that is as real as it was for the original disciples.

Reflection: Ponder and discuss your experience of remembrance and thanksgiving through religious ritual, in conversation with Deuteronomy 26:1-11.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY, n.p.d.). Scripture: NRSV.