

Thanks, No Thanks: Thoughts for Parashat Ki Tavo

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ki Tavo

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

When farmers in ancient Israel brought the first fruits of their orchards to the Cohanim, they recited a passage relating to the history of the Israelites; they thanked the Almighty for bringing them to a land flowing with milk and honey. When they brought the tithes of their produce for the Levites, they declared that they had faithfully met their obligations. "...I have hearkened to the voice of the Lord my God, I have done according to all that You have commanded me" (Devarim 26:14).

The Torah's description of these offerings is gentle and sweet. The farmers had worked long and hard to raise their crops. They were scrupulous to set aside the appropriate amounts to be given to the Cohanim and Levites. They came to the Temple and said with full heart: I did everything correctly; I have performed my obligations with total honesty and sincerity.

What seems to be missing from these passages?

We read of the farmers bringing their first fruits and tithes. But we don't read of anyone saying "thank you" or having offered words of praise. No one seems to have said: "We know how hard you've worked and how generous you've been. You are wonderful. You are worthy of God's blessings. We salute you."

The farmers put in so much time and effort: but no words of thanks or praise are recorded in the Torah. Ouch!

Imagine that you've invited guests to dinner, spent hours cooking and preparing. The guests arrive, eat the dinner with apparent satisfaction, and then get up and leave. No one offers words of thanks, no compliments on the food, not even a simple good bye! It's impossible for you not to be puzzled. Did I do something wrong? Was the food too salty? Did I forget anything?

More likely, you'd first be annoyed with your guests. They lacked the simple good manners to pay a compliment and express appreciation. It might be a while before you invited them back.

On review, you realize you in fact did everything right. The meal was cooked and served to perfection. The problem was with the guests, not with you. Aha: a moment of clarity. I prepared the meal to the best of my ability and I am proud of myself. Whether or not guests offered praise or thanks, I take satisfaction in my work. I don't need their validation.

The Torah omits words of thanks from the Cohanim and Levites to teach an important lesson: we are to do the right thing because we want to stand in the presence of God and say: "I've done as well as possible." Our self-worth is not to be determined by what others say or don't say, but by what we can say about ourselves before God.

It is indeed nice if people show us gratitude and appreciation when we deserve it. If we've gone out of our way for them, or performed well, or given them a gift—they should have the decency to give heartfelt thanks. But if they don't, it's their problem, not ours.

The Torah teaches not only by what it says but by what it does not say. I suspect that the ancient Cohanim and Levites did thank the farmers but the Torah omits this to teach us the larger lesson: do right because it is right, not because you expect gratitude or praise. Our validation comes from ourselves and from God: not from others.