



# Animals in Jewish Ritual: Past and Present

## Introduction

While most contemporary Jewish rituals do not include live animals (animal products are still used for several important ritual objects, like the shofar and torah scroll), some of the intentions behind ancient rites are still relevant. We can find meaning in and learn about Judaism's relationship to animals with rituals still done today, like blessings over food, and even with rituals no longer performed today, like animal sacrifice.

## Vocabulary

HEBREW	TRANSLITERATED HEBREW	ENGLISH
נֶפֶשׁ, נְפָשׁוֹת	<i>nefesh, nefashot</i>	soul/s, spirit/s, person/s
קֹרְבָן	<i>korban</i>	sacrificial offering (animal or non-animal)
לְהַקְרִיב	<i>le'hakriv</i>	to sacrifice or to draw close
כָּל-חַי	<i>kol chai</i>	all life

## Activity 1:

# Saying Blessings over Food from Animals

*Jewish tradition has specific liturgy that corresponds to specific foods, but when it comes to consuming animal products, we only have one set of before and after blessings that apply to many other kinds of foods—they also cover water, candy, or any food that has a mix of ingredients.*

*Before eating meat (including beef, poultry, and fish), eggs, or dairy, there is a Jewish custom to say a blessing called “Shehakol.” This is also the same blessing we say over something with ingredients mixed together such as candy or soda.*

*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech  
ha’olam shehakol nihiyeh bidvaro*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
שֶׁהַכֹּל נִהְיָה בְּדַבְּרוֹ:

*Blessed are you, YHVH (Hashem) our  
God, cosmic majesty, through whose  
word everything came into being.*

*After eating the items above, we say a blessing called “Borei Nefashot”:*

*Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech  
ha’olam borei nefashot rabot vechesronan  
al kol mah shebara(ta) l’hachayot (bahem)  
nefesh kol chai. Barukh chei ha’olamim.*

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם  
בוֹרֵא נַפְשוֹת רַבּוֹת וְחִסְרוֹנָן עַל כָּל  
מַה שֶּׁבָּרָא (ת) לְהַחְיֹת (בָּהֶם) נַפְשׁ כָּל  
חַי: בְּרוּךְ חַי הָעוֹלָמִים:

*Blessed are you, YHVH (Hashem) our  
God, cosmic majesty, who creates a  
diverse multitude of creatures, and an  
absence in all of them through which their  
beings are animated with the Spirit of  
Life. Blessed is the Life of the Cosmos.*

Compare these two blessings.

**1:** *Why do you think the rabbis didn't write a unique blessing for eating animal products?*

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**2:** *If you were to compose a unique blessing to say before eating meat, eggs, or dairy, what would it be?*

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## Activity 2:

# Honoring Food from Animals

*Most modern individuals consider animal products as one of many packaged items available at the local grocery store, and do not often consider the source of their food as being from a living animal.*

*The cup of yogurt, the scrambled eggs, the hamburger get mixed with other items to become a meal, with the source of the food long forgotten. Whereas when we say “borei pri hagafen/creator of the fruit of the vine” over some grape juice and an image of a grape vine comes to mind, our Hebrew prayers over animal products do not connect us back to the animal.*

*Rabbi Dr. Tzemah L. Yoreh wrote some poems because he wanted to have a unique prayer over animal products that connected him to the original source of the food. Read one or both of the following modern day Hebrew poems and answer the questions below. Used with permission of the author, originally printed in *By the Sweat of Their Brow*.*

### בִּיצִים (Eggs)

*Layer of gold eggs  
A scrambled ovation  
Is your just due*

מְטִילָה יְזַעֵד  
כָּל הַיּוֹם מְחַזֶּרֶת  
לְהַשְׁבִּיעַנִי  
בְּעַל כְּרַחֵךְ אֶת דּוֹגְרֶת

### מוֹצָרֵי חֵלֶב (Milk Products)

*Yummy versatile mold  
Curdles all in its path  
To reign over the meal*

מְזַהֶבֶד הַלְבָּן יוֹנְקִים בְּנֵי אָדָם  
בְּרוּכָה הַפְּרָה  
הָאֵם שֶׁל כּוֹלֵם

## (Drops) הטיפות

### Black Milk and White Meat

*Why do you chew upon our tender flesh*

*Splutter the drops*

*Of milk-fed veal chops*

*Upon the spotless white tunic of the chef*

הִקְהָה אֶת שְׁנֵיהֶם  
אָמְרוּ הַטִּיפוֹת הָאֲדוּמֹת  
הַבֶּשֶׂר כְּבָר לְבָן  
אֵיכָה תֵעָלוּ בַּמַּעֲלוֹת

After reading these poems, take some time to consider the poet's perspective, and whether you would want to try saying a poem like this before eating these types of food from animals.

# Questions

*Do you think the speaker in the poem is enjoying the meat, eggs, or milk he is eating?*

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*Is the speaker in the poem considering the animal's life while eating these foods?*

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*If you eat eggs, dairy, or meat, do you think of the life of the animal these products come from? In the case of meat, do you think about how the animal died?*

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Name three things a person can do to honor the life of an animal they are consuming, or whose products they are consuming.

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2. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

Imagine you're writing a letter to the owner of a company that produces and sells meat (including beef, poultry, and fish), eggs, or dairy.

- What do you want to ask them about the life of the animal?
- How would you share your feelings about the animal's life once the food from the animal is on your plate?

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### Activity 3:

# Modern Prayer as Substitute for Animal Sacrifices in the Torah

*In the ancient world, animal sacrifice was the core method of worshipping the divine. Sacrifices were given as expressions of human feelings towards God, like a desire for closeness, a show of gratitude, or wish to be pardoned from intentional or unintentional sins. Though not all sacrifices included animals, animal slaughter by priests in the Temple in Jerusalem was a regular component of daily temple service. When a sacrifice was made, it was also virtually the only time the Israelites ate meat (depending on the sacrifice, flesh was consumed after it was burnt on the altar). Ritual sacrifice no longer takes place due to the destruction of the Temple, and our way of worshipping God today with prayer is a result of the shift away from sacrifices.*

**Think about what ancient Israelites might have thought in offering animal sacrifices and answer the questions below. Then, look at the chart and think about the ways you express or act on the intent that each sacrifice represents.**

*What might have been the value of having an animal in ancient times? Why might an animal be a suitable 'sacrifice' (remember that sacrifice means to brave a loss, to give up something)?*

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*What is accomplished with sacrifices that is not accomplished with prayer? What is accomplished with prayer that is not accomplished with sacrifices?*

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Look at the intent behind some of the original sacrifices described below. Instead of making an offering on an altar, how do you deal with these feelings or intentions either through action or through prayer today?

<i>KIND OF SACRIFICE</i>	<i>PURPOSE/INTENTION</i>	<i>WHAT I DO / HOW I EXPRESS THIS FEELING</i>
<b>Burnt offering</b>	<b>To express complete submission to God's will</b>	
<b>Peace offering</b>	<b>To express thanks or gratitude</b>	
<b>Sin offering</b>	<b>To ask for pardoning of unintentional sins</b>	
<b>Guilt offering</b>	<b>To ask for pardoning of intentional sins like stealing or breaking trust, or if you're not sure if you committed a sin</b>	



# Conclusion

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*It is important to remember that much of our heritage included rituals that used, included, and honored animals. Even if we won't always be able to interact with the animals we are eating before we consume them or their products, Jewish tradition offers a variety of rituals to honor the animal's life. As for ritual sacrifice, which we no longer perform, we can still understand the history and meaning behind the original practice. As you'll learn in the next section, as contemporary Jews we can also renew our tradition with meaning through designing new rituals that honor animals.*

