Tzav: The Uneasy Economics of Holiness



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Every synagogue has had the conversation. The rabbi asks for a raise, and suddenly everyone becomes an expert on what spiritual leaders "should" be content with. We want our clergy transcendent, floating above the mundane, yet we know they have mortgages and tuition bills like everyone else. The discomfort this tension produces runs deeper than most communities care to admit.

Parshat Tzav opens with what looks like a dry administrative ledger, detailing precise instructions on burning fat, specifying which cuts of meat belong to the priest, and imposing strict timelines for consumption. These details often feel like a distraction from "real" spirituality, a bureaucratic descent into perks and payroll. A closer reading, however, reveals that the text forces an uncomfortable tension into the open by addressing head-on the intersection of money and holiness. The Torah does not share our squeamishness about naming this fact directly, codifying the "salary" of the priesthood with the same precision it gives to the sacrificial procedures themselves. The Kohen's portion is law rather than charity.

What emerges from these details is a sophisticated theology of compensation that explores how to support those who serve the community without creating entitlement, how receiving can remain dignified, and whether the physical act of eating can become spiritual service. These questions mattered in the *Mishkan*. As contemporary Jewish communities continue to navigate the economics of religious leadership, they matter now with equal urgency.

1. The Dignity of the Wage

Given the discomfort many feel about paying clergy, it is striking that the Torah does not leave the support of the Kohanim to philanthropy or the honor system. Vayikra 6:16-18 commands that Aaron and his sons shall eat the remainder of the meal offering in a holy place. The text is emphatic about the details, specifying that the consumption must be unleavened and must occur in the court of the Tent of Meeting. The consumption is a positive command, meaning the Kohen eats because God instructs him to, not because donors happen to feel generous. By wrapping the priest's sustenance in the language of divine obligation, the Torah elevates what could be mere charity into sacred duty.

This framing carries halachic weight that extends into contemporary debates about rabbinic compensation. Rabbi Michael Taubes, in a comprehensive analysis published by *Kol Torah*, traces the development of compensation for Torah teaching across Talmudic and medieval sources. The article opens with a discussion of Parshat Bamidbar, but its central contribution appears in the later sections where Taubes explains the principle of *schar batalah*: payment for opportunity cost. Under this framework, compensation represents what the teacher could have earned doing other work. The framing matters because recompense for what was given up preserves dignity in ways that subsistence handouts cannot. Rabbi Jeremy Wieder explores how questions of economic justice intersect with religious obligation, a tension that runs through every discussion of communal support for those who serve.

The behavioral economist Dan Ariely identifies a phenomenon that helps explain why compensation for clergy feels so fraught. In Chapter 4 of his book *Predictably Irrational*, titled "The Cost of Social Norms," Ariely describes an experiment where lawyers were asked to provide discounted legal services to retirees at $30 per hour. Most refused. When asked to provide the same services for free as a charitable act, most agreed. The introduction of money, even favorable money, shifted the frame from communal generosity to commercial transaction, and once market norms entered, people evaluated the deal differently. The Torah solves this problem by keeping the priestly portion in the realm of holiness. The Kohen does not negotiate his fee, does not invoice the donor, but receives his meal from the altar itself, sanctified and commanded. By framing sustenance as *kodesh*, the text removes the shame of dependence and transforms receiving into fulfilling a divine obligation.

The Torah's solution, therefore, is to frame sustenance as command rather than charity, keeping it in the realm of holiness rather than market transaction. This preserves the dignity of those who serve without reducing their service to a job. The wage is holy because it comes wrapped in obligation.

2. The Vulnerability of Dependence

While the system guarantees support, it simultaneously creates a class of people structurally dependent on the generosity and fidelity of others. This structural feature turns out to be as important as the guarantee itself. Vayikra 7:34 specifies that the breast and the thigh of the gift offering have been taken from the Israelites and given to Aharon the priest and to his sons as their due for all time. The arrangement's full implications become clear in a later Torah passage. Bamidbar 18:20 declares that the Kohen shall have no inheritance in the land and no portion among the other tribes. The Kohen owns no territory. His survival is tethered to the spiritual engagement of the nation.

Rambam in *Mishneh Torah* provides the theological frame for this arrangement, explaining that the tribe of Levi was set apart to serve God and to instruct the masses in His ways, separated from worldly concerns so they could stand continually before God. Their lack of inheritance marks them as distinct from the rest of the nation, a status that carries both privilege and responsibility.

Jonathan Rosenblum engages a contested modern parallel when discussing the contemporary Israeli context, where a significant portion of the Haredi community is supported by government stipends and community funds to pursue full-time Torah study. The analogy to the ancient Levites is imperfect and hotly debated: The priests performed active Temple service in exchange for their portions, while the sustainability and social contract underlying mass *kollel* support remains a source of significant friction in Israeli society. Rosenblum addresses these tensions directly, acknowledging that while the questions echo ancient concerns about dependence and holiness, the modern arrangement lacks the explicit divine mandate that structured the original system.

The anthropologist Marcel Mauss, in his foundational work *The Gift*, analyzed gift economies across cultures and identified three interlocking obligations: the obligation to give, the obligation to receive, and the obligation to reciprocate. Receiving is never neutral because it creates bonds, debts, and expectations. The Kohen is not simply an employee collecting wages but a receiver who bears the weight of the nation's gift, with each meal offering connecting him to the donor in a web of mutual obligation.

The arrangement, therefore, creates structural accountability. A religious leader with independent wealth answers to no one. A priest who depends on the community's offerings, by contrast, must remain attentive to those he serves. The Kohen who grows arrogant or distant risks alienating the very community that sustains him. Dependency keeps spiritual leadership in check through material connection to the people served.

3. Consumption as Atonement

Perhaps the most counterintuitive dimension of the priestly portion is the claim that eating itself constitutes sacred service. The modern reader assumes a simple transaction: the priest performs the ritual, and afterward receives food as payment. The Torah's logic runs differently. For certain offerings, the ritual remains incomplete until the flesh is consumed.

Vayikra 10:17 makes this explicit when Moshe rebukes Aharon's sons for failing to eat the sin offering: "Why did you not eat the sin offering in the holy place? For it is most holy, and He has given it to you to bear the guilt of the congregation, to make atonement for them before the Lord." The Hebrew is striking: the priest "bears" (*laset*) the community's guilt through eating. Rashi on this verse, drawing on *Tractate Pesachim* 59b, explains that when the priests eat, the offerers achieve atonement. The meal completes the ritual circuit. This means the priest does not receive food as reward for services rendered elsewhere. The eating itself is the service. The meal is where atonement happens.

Martha Minow explores the mechanisms of forgiveness from legal and moral perspectives, arguing that forgiveness requires external action, social acknowledgment, and often ritual forms because the mechanics matter for transformation to occur. A meal eaten by the priest becomes a public, embodied confirmation that atonement has happened, making visible what would otherwise remain invisible.

The sociologist Adam Seligman, in *Ritual and Its Consequences*, develops what he calls the subjunctive dimension of ritual, arguing that rituals create a shared fictional space, an "as-if" world where transformation becomes possible precisely because participants agree to treat actions as if they had certain meanings. By treating eating as sacred duty, the act is socially and psychologically transformed. The priest does not merely benefit from the sacrifice but completes it through his consumption.

This reframes what compensation means in the priestly context. Supporting the priest's physical needs and enabling his spiritual function are not two separate categories. They are the same act viewed from different angles. The priest's meal is the culmination of the ritual rather than a peripheral reward for having participated.

4. The Temptation of Entitlement

Where there is guaranteed income and holy status, there is risk of corruption. The Torah places strict limits on the priestly portion precisely to prevent clerical privilege from mutating into abuse. Vayikra 7:23-25 prohibits the consumption of *chelev*, certain fats, and *dam*, blood. The choicest parts belong to God and are burned on the altar rather than consumed by the priest. The Kohen cannot take everything. This limitation is essential to the system, establishing that even those who serve the altar are subject to its laws rather than exempt from them.

The prophetic books provide the counter-narrative, the warning of what happens when those boundaries collapse. Shmuel I 2:12-16 describes the sons of Eli as scoundrels who knew not the Lord, sending servants to demand raw meat from those bringing sacrifices and taking by force if necessary. They seized portions before the fat was properly burned, violating both the procedure and the spirit of the system. The text identifies the precise nature of their sin: They prioritized culinary preference over sacred protocol, demanded raw meat for roasting rather than accepting the boiled portions, and resorted to intimidation when refused. The slide from service to self-service reached completion.

Shira Berkovits, founder of Sacred Spaces, has devoted her career to building accountability structures into religious institutions. In her interview, she discusses how organizations can establish policies and oversight mechanisms that prevent those in positions of spiritual trust from exploiting their authority. Her insight is that the problem is structural as much as moral. Good intentions alone cannot prevent abuse because, without external checks, even well-meaning leaders gradually drift toward self-interest. The community bears the cost of that drift long before anyone names it. The Torah's approach to priestly portions reflects a similar instinct: rather than relying solely on the moral character of individual priests, the system builds limits directly into the structure.

Psychological research confirms this pattern. Dacher Keltner's work *The Power Paradox* demonstrates that positions of power naturally erode empathy over time. People who achieve authority through social intelligence and awareness can gradually lose those very qualities as their power increases. The traits that got them there do not sustain them. Unless checked by external structures, the powerful become progressively less capable of seeing those they serve.

The restrictions on what and when the Kohen may eat, therefore, serve as structural checks against this drift. Through the very act of eating, the priest is reminded that he serves the altar rather than owns it. His portion exists by divine command rather than personal entitlement. Without such limits, spiritual authority drifts toward exploitation. The Torah anticipates this with boundaries that honor both the priest's role and the community's trust.

5. The Economics of Gratitude

The portion concludes with the *Korban Todah*, the Thanksgiving Offering, which inverts the usual scarcity logic governing most sacrificial regulations. Vayikra 7:12-15 details the requirements: the donor brings an animal and also forty loaves of bread of various types, with all of it, meat and bread alike, required to be consumed by morning. The time pressure is so severe that no individual or small family could possibly eat this much before sunrise.

Classical commentators explain that this quantity and deadline are intentional. The Torah forces the donor to invite others, ensuring that private gratitude becomes a public feast. The miracle that occasioned the thanksgiving, whatever illness survived or danger escaped, must be publicized through a community gathering rather than hoarded as a private memory. Gratitude, the text suggests, has a public dimension that solitary reflection cannot satisfy.

Rabbi Shais Taub illuminates this insight through the lens of recovery communities. In such communities, sharing one's story is understood as essential to sustained sobriety because gratitude locked inside withers while gratitude expressed and shared strengthens both the grateful person and the community that witnesses. The *Todah* embeds the psychological wisdom that gratitude cannot remain solitary if it is to do its transformative work.

Modern gratitude research confirms the pattern with empirical precision. Robert Emmons, the leading researcher in gratitude psychology, summarizes the findings in his article "Why Gratitude Is Good," demonstrating that expressed gratitude, as opposed to merely felt gratitude, strengthens social bonds, increases trust, and builds community resilience. The person who publicly thanks becomes a node connecting others. Private sentiment, however sincere, lacks this binding power.

The system of compensating clergy, therefore, culminates in the shared table. The donor brings more than he can consume. The priest receives his portion. Neighbors and strangers join to help finish the meat before dawn. Here the economics of clergy compensation resolve into something beyond transaction: community formed around gratitude, with the priest at the center not as a recipient of charity but as a host of holiness.

Questions for Reflection

1. **When have you experienced a physical act, like eating or walking, transformed into something that felt like service?**
2. **In what ways does reliance on others, financial or emotional, make you feel vulnerable? And how might that vulnerability serve a purpose?**
3. **Who would be at your table if you were bringing a Thanksgiving Offering, and why is it harder to express gratitude publicly than privately?**

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