

Random Thoughts on Thanksgiving

Parshat Vayetze 5770

By Rabbi Mark Greenspan

With Thanksgiving just behind and leftovers still in the refrigerator, I'd like to take a few moments this morning to share some random thoughts with you about this holiday. The other day, a colleague told me that when he's asked which Jewish holiday is his favorite, his answer is, "Thanksgiving." Thanksgiving has all the food and none of the restrictions of other Jewish holidays. There's something quintessentially Jewish about Thanksgiving, and quintessentially American at the same time. Thanksgiving brings us together, whether it's participating in our annual interfaith service or serving dinner to the needy at the only thanksgiving communal dinner that I know of with kosher and non-kosher food.

The pilgrims, who celebrated the first Thanksgiving, modeled their holiday after Sukkot so that Thanksgiving is merely the pilgrimage festival celebrated a month late. But there is more to Thanksgiving than that. At the heart of good religion and good living is the ability to give thanks and to express gratitude. Elie Wiesel once said, "When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude." So here are some random thoughts about thanksgiving; not only the holiday but the phenomena:

1. Thanksgiving can't be measured

I'm not going to stand here and tell you the things about which you should be grateful. I suspect you already know. What I'd like to suggest is that gratitude takes on a different dimension in times of austerity. First of all, we appreciate what we have because we are aware that there are people who have a lot less. Second, austerity makes us aware that the things in life that really count can't be bought or sold or even measured. And third, the things that are important are not *things*, at all, but relationships and connections.

The other day Marilyn and I were in BJ's buying up lots of munchies to put in the hospitality baskets for our daughter's wedding. Standing on line, Marilyn watched as two women in front of us tried to check out of the store. They have a basket full of essentials (nothing frivolous) but as they counted out their food stamps and cash, they came up short. They tried figuring out what they needed and what they could leave behind when Marilyn walked over and told the clerk to ring up the order – we would pay the difference. At that moment I felt grateful that I don't have to think about how much food is in my shopping basket and that I am married to an angel like Marilyn.

2. Gratitude is a choice

My second thought is that thanksgiving is not a matter of prosperity or good luck but an attitude; it's a way of seeing the world. It's not what you have but how you choose to see the world that inspires gratitude. There are rich people who have more than you and I can imagine but who feel poor and other people who have so little and yet feel so rich. In the words of Pirke Avot, *Eizehu ashir?* "Who is rich?" *Ha-some'ah b'chelko*. "A rich person is one who finds satisfaction in his portion in life." If that is true, then gratitude must be cultivated and learned. That is why we have so many *berachot*, so many blessings, that we recite on a daily basis.

The first thing we do when we walk into synagogue in the morning is to thank God, "who causes the rooster to distinguish between day and night." Now, I don't know about you, but I don't hear roosters in the morning; but I do hear my alarm clock. Our ancestors woke up to the crowing of rooster (or some type of bird) each morning – and the first thing they did was respond by saying – "Wow, cool, that's amazing!"

That's a miracle – how did the rooster know that its time for me to wake up.” Do you think they were more chipper in the morning than we are? I doubt it! And yet, by expressing wonder in words, they began to cultivate it into their lives.

3. Sarah Hale is my hero

Today I'm thankful for Sarah Hale. She is one of my all time favorite heroes. Sarah Hale is responsible for Thanksgiving. Although the first Thanksgiving was declared by George Washington in 1777, this holiday did not become a regular event until 1863 when Abraham Lincoln declared a day of good will and reconciliation for all Americans. He would not have done so had it not been for Sarah Hale. Born in 1788, Hale was a writer and editor, and is best known for her poem, “Mary had a little lamb whose fleece was white as snow.” She became the proponent of creating a new national holiday, writing to five presidents before convincing Lincoln that this was a good idea. Hale wrote: “If every state would join in union in celebrating Thanksgiving on the 24th day of this month, would it not be a renewed pledge of love and loyalty to the constitution of the United States.” Hale understood that Americans need a reminder of the values and ideals that unite us; that we have more in common than we realize.

4. Thanksgiving is healing

I have a theory about Thanksgiving. I don't think that it was an accident that Lincoln was the president who chose to establish Thanksgiving as a national holiday and that he did so in the middle of the Civil War. He realized that America needed a day of gratitude, a day on which to step back and give thanks. More than anything, Abraham Lincoln wanted to bring all Americans back together again and he believed that he needed to remind them how much we all have in common. As family after family in the North and the South mourned the loss of their sons, Lincoln began to promote a day on which to remember of what we have rather than all we had lost.

5. Judaism is really all about Thanksgiving

Finally, did you know that Judaism is really thanksgiving-ism? In our Torah portion this morning, we read about the birth of Jacob's sons. Each child was named by his mother based on some life experience. When Leah's fourth son was born, she said, *Ha-pa'am odeh et Adonai!* “This time I will give thanks to the Lord.” The Torah goes on to say, “Therefore she named him *Yehudah*, Judah. The word for ‘give thanks,’ *odeh*, (like the word *today*) comes from the same root word as *Yehudah*. Unlike his older brothers whose names expressed Leah's disappointment and unrequited love from her husband, it is only with the birth of *Yehudah* that *Leah* experiences true gratitude for the blessings in her life.

The name *Yehudah* would later become the name of the southern kingdom and the Davidic monarchy. And later, with the destruction of the temple and the exile of the Jewish people in 586 BCE, the former citizens of the kingdom of *Yehudah*, or Judea in English, would become known as Jews. This name, then, is an expression of gratitude. To be a Jew is to recognize the blessings of life and to live out those blessings each and every day.

For the *Yehudim*, then, Thanksgiving doesn't come once a year; it happens everyday when we open a prayer book, or sit down to a meal, or see a rainbow or greet a friend. Judaism might be defined as a religion that cultivates thanksgiving as a daily practice! The comedian Lenny Bruce once said that Judaism is a dour religion. We don't celebrate holidays; we observe them. I beg to differ with Mr. Bruce. Jews are called on to celebrate life every day and each minute. Thanksgiving happens all the time! It takes place whenever we open our eyes to life's blessings!