

A not so thankful Thanksgiving

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As we anticipate the upcoming Thanksgiving week, I have to admit, I am not feeling particularly thankful. What I am feeling is sad, frustrated and even angry.

I'm sad that I will not be able to celebrate Thanksgiving with our extended family.

I'm frustrated that my mother-in-law has been stuck in a situation where we haven't been able to hug her or have her over to our home in what feels like forever.

And I am angry at those who have made public health and safety into a political issue. Yes. I am so very, very angry about that.

Perhaps because I am Jewish, I am predisposed to believe that limitless freedom is not a God-given right. On the contrary, I have been taught that from Creation to our parents, God and other humans have the right put limits on what we should and should not do.

And then our faith also teaches that we are not only subject to Jewish law, but we must also adhere to the principle of "dina malchuta dina" the idea that the secular law of the land prevails, as long as it doesn't demand that we do something that violates Jewish law that is.

In Judaism we are taught that we have obligations, one to another. And that when we create a new community, we are obligated to first build a school for the children, a Mikvah for the women, and a cemetery for the dead, before anything else is done. Because without these three institutions, the community becomes unstable. And we are all obligated to contribute to these institutions,

regardless if we ourselves benefit from them, because we all have obligations to the communities in which we live.

Furthermore, not only do we have obligations to support the Jewish community, but we are taught that we also have obligations to help the poor and the needy in the larger communities that we live in, and we're obligated to pay taxes to secular governments, and to be law abiding citizens as well.

Nowhere in any Jewish or American legal document is there anything about unlimited freedom. I was raised on stories of an America that understood this as well. During WWII people rationed supplies for the greater good. They closed their blackout curtains and turned off their lights if air-raid sirens went off. They also planted victory gardens, made tinfoil balls, stopped wearing nylons, and saved their rubber bands.

No one said that it was a violation of their freedom to do these things. Rather, they understood that not only was their freedom but their very lives, and the lives of others, at stake if they didn't pitch in and all work together for a cause that was bigger than any one person.

Because after all, what good is freedom if we are all dead?

Ultimately in Judaism, what is of much greater importance than personal freedom, is personal responsibility. In fact, the very first sin in the Torah is the sin of Adam and Eve failing to take personal responsibility for their actions.

They are kicked out of paradise, and punished for eternity, because when God confronts Adam and Eve with what they have done, Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent.

And this sin is then perpetuated by the next generation. When their son Cain murders his brother Abel, God confronts Cain. And he, like his parents, denies any responsibility for his brother's death.

But Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, points out that what Cain does is even worse than denying personal responsibility. As Rabbi Sacks taught, Cain did not say "It was not me," or "It was not my fault." What he said was that it was not his concern, it wasn't his problem what happened to his brother, and therefore, what he was denying was any moral responsibility. In effect what Cain did was ask God why he should be concerned at all with the welfare of anyone but himself. Rabbi Sacks insinuates that what Cain was essentially saying was "why should we not do what we want if we have the power to do it?" Rabbi Sacks pointed out that in Plato's Republic, it argues that justice is whatever is in the interest of the stronger party, or might makes right." Rabbi Sacks said that if life is simply a Darwinian struggle to survive, why should we restrain ourselves for the sake of others if we are more powerful than they are? If there is no morality in nature, then we are responsible only to ourselves. That, he says, is the voice of Cain throughout the ages. (<https://www.aish.com/tp/i/sacks/On-Leadership-Taking-Responsibility.html>)

Throughout history, the very concept of being a civilized society is that there is a well developed system of government, culture, shared norms of acceptable behavior, and communal responsibility. For instance, the Wild West was not considered a civilized society because each individual could do as they pleased without consequence.

Is that really how we want to live? Without acknowledgement that our actions have an impact on others? An impact that we know can ultimately be deadly?

It would be a fallacy to believe that the United States was founded on the idea of limitless freedom. If it was, we would not have a Constitution, Congress, a President, or a Supreme Court. The very

fact that these institutions exist is because of a shared recognition that if we all want to live together, then we have to create rules and laws that we are all expected to abide by. And that if our union is to endure, then there must be a social contract that needs to supersede party politics or personal interest.

In Patrick Henry's last public speech, given in March 1799, he said, "Let us trust God, and our better judgment to set us right hereafter. United we stand, divided we fall. Let us not split into factions which must destroy that union upon which our existence hangs."

When Adam and Eve failed to take personal responsibility, humanity was exiled from Eden.

When Cain failed to take moral responsibility for his actions, he was punished to wander the earth, forever in exile from society. (Yes I know, how is there a society, if it's just him, and his parents? I don't know, but that is another sermon.)

I can not help but shudder at the idea of what will be the punishment that our country will endure because we have not exercised a real sense of communal responsibility.

As I said, I am not feeling particularly grateful this week. But I am trying. I am trying to find the strength to be forgiving, and the ability to feel grateful. So I will do what our ancestors have done throughout history, I will try to focus on what is good, and pray that my attitude will follow my words. Blessed are You Adonai, who has created humanity in the Divine Image.

Blessed are You Adonai, who has instilled within us the capacity to create tests, vaccines and medicine to heal our bodies.

Blessed are You Adonai, for giving us simple tools to protect ourselves in the meantime, by wearing masks, washing our hands and engaging in responsible behavior so that that we might minimize harm to ourselves and others.

Blessed are You Adonai, who has given humanity stamina and resilience, and the ability to set limits and make wise choices.

Holy One of Blessing, may You grant us an abundance of courage, inner strength and patience, so that we might continue to behave in ways that will protect all who live.

And let us say, Amen.