

Interfaith Thanksgiving Service 2024
November 23, 2023/10 Kislev 5784

Good morning! Happy Thanksgiving! I am Rabbi Peter Stein from Temple B'rith Kodesh and it is an honor to be with all of you today.

Thanksgiving is a time to come together, but it is not a time to simply melt together into a bland mass.

And we know this...I am confident that if we were to put a poll up the screen asking you to choose between pumpkin pie and apple pie (or God forbid, chocolate cake!), we would see our differences. And I won't even raise the question of white versus dark meat or smooth versus chunky cranberry sauce!

Today is a day to come together in all of our glorious diversity. And we've seen that in the beautiful texts and teachings offered by my brothers and sisters from the Christian and Muslim faiths. Today is a day for us to celebrate our authenticity and the beauty of what makes us unique. And with that, to forge a path together to the future.

In that spirit, I want to share a teaching from my Jewish tradition. It comes from the midrash, stories and commentaries about the biblical texts.

There is a famous midrash, a commentary to the book of Genesis, about Adam in the Garden of Eden, on the first night of his life.

Adam had spent that first day of existence in that paradise, exploring under the bright sunshine and blue sky.

And then, the sun began to set. As it moved below the horizon, it turned dark...and cold. And Adam feared that he had somehow destroyed the bright and beautiful world. He spent a long and fearful night, lamenting that he had somehow caused the world to go dark. What had he done, he kept asking himself, to cause this destruction?

After many hours, the sun began to rise. The light and the warmth returned. And Adam realized that there was a rhythm to the day and a power in the world that was greater than him. He gave thanks to the Creator for the beauty of that brand new day.

For our whole lives, we have understood that rhythm. That yes, it gets dark each night, but dawn will come. Each day will bring renewed light and hope. And we know that there is an annual cycle, that in these weeks especially...as the days grow shorter, the trees shed their leaves, and the temperature drops...yes, winter will come, but then it will end. And we will see a return to long, warm days and the renewal of Creation.

I think of these images also in a symbolic way. We are living in a time with painful darkness in so many parts of our community. In so many of our homes, there is loneliness and pain. Across our neighborhoods, we suffer the plagues of violence, hatred, and division that have taken root across our community.

And yet, I do believe: we have the ability to create light. We have the ability to restore our community to a place of hope and goodness. We have the ability...and the responsibility...to say that we will not accept a city and a country that tears people down. Yes, there is a natural rhythm and a higher power, but that doesn't excuse us from recognizing that our actions and our choices can destroy—or heal—the world we live in. We are the stewards of all creation.

In the Jewish prayer tradition, there is a set of blessings recited each morning. They are known as *nisim bchol yom*...the miracles in every day. These aren't miracles like supernatural acts that are beyond belief. No, instead, the recitation of these blessings is meant to be a discipline that helps us see the good in each and every day...the possibility for healing and renewal in each and every day.

Blessed is God, who lifts up the fallen. Blessed is God, who clothes the naked. Blessed is God, who gives strength to the weary.

Because, if we remember the potential that is implanted within us, we will take actions that lift up those who are downtrodden. If we remember and act on our extraordinary human potential, we will work to ensure that every human being has clothing, food, shelter, education, and opportunity. If we recognize and respond to our healing power, we will work to strengthen those who feel a heavy weight on their shoulders and aren't sure of the path forward.

It's not about praying that God will fix all the problems. After all, we are assembled today in all our glorious diversity, and I believe that we are united by our faith in *human* potential, however we worship and however we believe.

And another in that set of morning blessings: Blessed is God, who frees the captive. We live in a time of grave peril, where hostages are being held, where innocents are trapped in war zones, and where slavery persists in our country and in places around the globe. Innocents of so many identities suffer through terrible violence. Today, I pray not simply that God will free the captive, but somehow that we will find the wisdom and the courage to create pathways to freedom, safety, and peace for all of God's children.

Returning to the story of Creation in the book of Genesis, I note that with each act of creation, God observes and then declares "it was good."

We have been gifted with a tremendous gift and an extraordinary responsibility. All the acts of creation are good. There is beauty and goodness in every human being.

Let us work to preserve and restore that goodness. On this Thanksgiving day, let us give thanks not just for what we have but for what we can create.

I am confident of one thing: that we absolutely have everything that is necessary to heal the world. There is nothing we lack in order to perform the essential work of creating safety, dignity, opportunity, equality, and peace.

But sometimes, what we need to do is buried beneath fear and uncertainty. Sometimes, what we need in order to take action is hidden by complacency.

And so, on this Thanksgiving Day, this is my prayer: may we blessed to recognize that we are enough. We are strong enough. We are wise enough. And we are courageous enough. Let us give thanks for what we have and resolve that one year from now, when we come together again, we will have risen to a place of even greater goodness.

Blessed is God, who gave us this day. It is good.