

Thanksgiving 2004
Vayishlach
Rabbi Stuart Weinblatt

Invariably, at this time of year, I am asked by someone about Thanksgiving, and whether or not my family and I celebrate this most American of all holidays. I am still somewhat surprised by the question, but realize that perhaps it is because most people know that I take such a strong stand on the issue of the inappropriateness of Jews celebrating Christmas. For me as a Jew, that one is easy to figure out, and there is no doubt about whether or not Jews should celebrate it. Christmas, after all, is a Christian holiday celebrating the birth of the person Christians consider to be the messiah. Easter, celebrating his resurrection is obviously out of the question, and not on my radar screen.

Memorial Day, Veteran's Day, July 4th – pure American holidays -- no problem with any of them. Then we get to the days on the American calendar which are a bit less clear, but whose origins disqualify them. Halloween, a holiday originally known as All Saint's Eve, with pagan overtones is not something that we celebrate. Valentine's Day, is more fully and correctly known as St. Valentine's Day, so that is not one that we in my family make a big deal over or even acknowledge. New Year's Eve is ok, except when it falls on a Friday night, as is the case this year.

Before you get the impression that being a Jew means being some kind of scrooge, devoid of any holidays or celebrations, keep in mind that we have parallels in the Jewish calendar for just about each of these days, and many more as well. In fact, just about every month on the Jewish calendar has a holiday.

For those who do not want to miss out on dressing up and wearing costumes, we have Purim instead of Halloween. As for the candy – we don't miss out on that either, as candy and sweets are associated with Purim, Simhat Torah and Chanukah. There is even a day on the Jewish calendar celebrating love, which does not have its origins in Christian history, and is mentioned in the Talmud, called Tu B'Av. Even better than that, Shabbat a holiday, which comes every single week, among other things, is the renewal of family love and devotion. The seventh day parallels the sheva brachot, the seven blessings of the wedding ceremony, and offers the opportunity to express devotion through the reciting of the Eshet Hayil poem, "The Women of Valor".

One thing certainly not lacking in Judaism is holidays. Each one has its own separate meaning and significance, although someone once attempted to capture the essence of most Jewish holidays in three simple phrases: They tried to kill and destroy us. They didn't. Let's eat.

I find it interesting, though that people would ask about celebrating Thanksgiving. Why should it be a problem?

For one, it is based on a Jewish holiday, the holiday of Sukkot. The early pilgrims and founders of America took much of their inspiration from the Jewish Bible. They were inspired by the story of Moses leading the slaves in rebellion against the mighty tyrant,

Pharaoh. They saw in the plight of the Israelites their own struggle and identified with our ideals and history.

The holiday of Thanksgiving feels Jewish. It is family and home-centered, and as if further proof is needed that it has Jewish origins – the whole thing revolves around a big meal. You can't get more Jewish than that!

Just because matzah balls are not on anyone's Thanksgiving menu does not negate the fact that stuffing is really just a form of tzimmes. As long as the turkey is kosher, no dairy products are served with a fleishik meal, and pork is not served, there is no problem.

Furthermore, the basic premise of the holiday is to express gratitude, and that certainly does not contradict Jewish values. The first words we are supposed to say in the morning, and with which we opened our service today are: "*Modeh Ani lefanecha*, I am grateful to You, O God..." In fact, the Talmud says that in the Messianic era, the one prayer that will still be recited is the prayer of thanks. Since all our needs will be fulfilled, we will not need to ask for anything, yet we will still voluntarily utter words of thanks.

Finally, the holiday celebrates the gratitude each of us should feel for living in a free and democratic country, the United States of America.

Our sages in the time of the Talmud developed an important principle governing the nature of our living in various nations. In four words, they concisely stated, "*Dina d'malchuta, dina hu*: the law of the land is the law." In other words, except for several rare life and death situations, when civil law differs from Jewish law, we are obligated to follow the law of the land.

That has been the pattern of Jewish existence throughout the ages. We have survived, and lived in various lands throughout the world, and have managed to preserve our identity, while adapting to the land which has hosted us. More often than not, the environment has been a cruel and harsh one, where we have been subjected to wanton pogroms, oppression, persecution and discrimination.

But all of that changed with our experience in America.

I just visited the wonderful exhibit at the Library of Congress marking 350 years of American Jews living in America. In 1654, a group of 23 Jews left Recife, Brazil to escape the long arm of the Inquisition, as Brazil had fallen from Dutch hands to Portugal. The wayward boat of refugees made its way to the shores of New Amsterdam, where Governor Peter Stuyvesant treated the immigrants with suspicion and distrust, locking them up, until he received word from the Dutch West Indies Company to release the Jews and give them safe haven. I have often wondered whether or not he realized that a significant number of the investors and members of the board who issued the directive were Jews.

The mere fact that there is such an exhibit, at the Library of Congress, is in and of itself, worthy of celebration, and reflects the way in which Jews have been integrated into the fabric of the life of this nation. The story of our 350 year sojourn in America is, in the opening words of the exhibit, “intertwined and conflicting aims of accommodation, assertion, adoption and acculturation from 1654 to today.”

It is a history that includes the story of Leo Frank, who was lynched in 1913 by a mob for a crime he did not commit, and who was murdered simply because he was a Jew in the wrong place at the wrong time. And it is a history that includes the contributions of people as varied as Al Jolson and Harry Houdini. It is a story that includes the accomplishments of Jews in the realm of labor rights, civil rights, and women’s rights, such as the work of birth control advocates Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger.

Beyond the important contributions of American Jews to better our nation and world, and the advances we are responsible for in the realm of the arts, culture, medicine, business, governance, and every aspect of American life, the part of the story that I find most compelling is the struggle to preserve our identity, to survive as a community. We established numerous agencies and organizations to maintain and support the destitute and the poor, to improve the welfare of all, as well as to preserve Jewish customs and tradition.

Here, in America we have been able to advocate freely on behalf of what we believe to be important, and to work for the principles of justice and compassion associated with the ideals articulated by our sages. Jews have been leaders in the causes of social justice and fair treatment for all. We have been able to speak out and organize on behalf of our fellow Jews when they have faced oppression, so that the official policy of the government during the Cold War became one of refusing to work with or accommodate the Soviet Union until they were willing to allow Jews to immigrate to Israel and to stop repressing and oppressing them. Our strong stance ultimately led to the dissolution of the Soviet Empire and the Iron Curtain.

But the challenge facing those early immigrants to America is the same challenge we face today. How do we maintain our Judaism in a land where all is free and open. The waves of Jewish immigrants each had to deal with this issue. In certain respects, it may have been easier to keep Judaism alive in the shtetls of Europe, or in Casablanca or Fez, where we were segregated and kept separate and apart from the surrounding populations.

In today’s parasha, we read that when Jacob meets his brother, Esau, he says to him, “*Im Lavan garti*,” meaning, “I sojourned with Lavan.” Our sages noted that the gematria (numerical value) of the word garti, is 613. In fact, the letters are the same, taryag, representing the 613 mitzvot, or good deeds we are commanded to fulfill. What they claim Jacob was trying to tell his brother was in effect – “Look, even though I was living outside of the land of Israel, the land of our people, even though I was living with the king of crooks and master of deception, with Lavan, I still managed to live as a Jew, to maintain my identity, and to observe the commandments.”

Similarly, that remains the challenge for us, today in America, as well -- to preserve our observance of the mitzvot and our way of life.

I often think of our ancestors, who came to this country, usually with little more than their hopes, dreams, and aspirations of a free life for their offspring. We owe it to them as well to see to it that Judaism is still observed in our homes and families, and among our offspring.

Clearly, America is a better nation because Jews have been welcomed here and allowed to prosper and live freely. And we as a people are fortunate to live in a nation which has afforded us so many opportunities. For all of this, we give thanks, and celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving.

In a famous letter to the Jewish synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, President George Washington set the tone for our nation, when he wrote that in this country, there would be, "to bigotry no sanction, and to intolerance no assistance..." He went on to write in that same letter words which express the very reason we have much to be thankful for this Thanksgiving.

"May the children of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants, while every one shall sit in safety under his vine and fig tree, and there shall be no one to make him afraid."

May we continue to know the blessings of this land, and may the words written by George Washington to the Jewish community of Newport, Rhode Island come to pass.

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