

From the Gush

Rav Moshe Taragin

Vayeitzei - Serving Religion for Thanksgiving



Modern-day democracies have transformed civilization by introducing innovative and powerful ideas, both about our personal lives as well as about the type of society we aim to establish. Overwhelmingly, the values of democracy harmonize with traditional Jewish religious values. Without question, the most indispensable value of democracy for Jews, is the principle of freedom of religion. For the first time in two millennia, Jews have been allowed – under the protective eye of modern democracy- to freely worship our G-d and practice our rituals without fear of persecution or reprisal. Additionally, by guarding basic human rights, democracy preserves the dignity of human life in general – a sacred value within Judaism. Man is G-d's masterpiece and the dignity of the human condition must be upheld as a tribute to G-d's "investment". Democracy also delivers a bold social vision: by allocating political authority through popular elections, democracy hopes to craft a more equal and fair society. This vision of a "level society of equal citizens" reflects the Torah's mandate to craft a society of justice and ethical behavior. The many overlaps between democratic values and religious values has inspired Jews to overwhelmingly embrace the concept of democracy, actively participate in the democratic process, and deeply engage in the general culture of democracy.

This week Americans will celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving. This holiday enshrines numerous principles of democracy and morality. The values of Thanksgiving feel almost religious or sacred and Jews across the religious spectrum deeply identify with this holiday and its cultural practices. At its root, Thanksgiving is founded upon the value of gratitude and of acknowledging the assistance we received on the road to our triumphs and successes. **Famously, the Rabenu Bachye an 11th century Spanish thinker, identified gratitude as the gateway to all religious thought and experience. Entitled people view their good fortunes as deserved and rarely sense their dependency on outside factors or the generosity of others; it is difficult for them to express gratitude to others.** Their success is merely a "cashing in" on their natural license. Stalin once wrote that "gratitude is a sickness suffered by dogs"; certainly a moral degenerate and mass murderer such as Stalin would disdain the trait of gratitude. By contrast, humble and modest individuals appreciate the fragility of the human condition and the underlying state of dependency under which we all operate. Admitting our dependency heightens our reliance upon G-d and intensifies our faith in G-d. Additionally, on an interpersonal plain, gratitude helps us better treasure our success and hopefully more freely share them with others. Entitlement often leads to greediness while gratitude pries open the doors of selfishness and egocentrism.

On Thanksgiving people aren't just grateful for personal prosperity; many also express gratitude for modern democracies in general. From its inception, the United States was a modern experiment in building a "city on the hill". Consequently, the success of this experiment has ripple effects across the globe, validating the value of democracy. Thanksgiving provides an opportunity to be thankful that we live in our world of relatively enlightened forms of government.

Beyond the trait of gratitude, Thanksgiving is pivoted upon the value of family; traditionally families convene to celebrate this holiday. Sadly, the professional and

cultural stressors of the modern world often afflict healthy family life. Life in our pressure-cooker known as the modern "city" tense and frazzled and the reassertion of family value on Thanksgiving is crucial. This "Thanksgiving" message about family also resonates deeply for Jews who have perennially consecrated the family setting as site of sanctity and service of G-d.

By highlighting these numerous quasi-religious values, Thanksgiving and its life-affirming values, reminds us of the enduring power of Judaism to enrich the human condition and ennoble our lives. Thanksgiving can help us better appreciate the manner in which our religion improves our station in life.

Is that all? Do we embrace religion solely because of the "human value" it offers? Do we only embrace the service of G-d because it improves the human condition? In addition to improving our lives, religion is meant to be transcendent – an encounter with a higher being on His terms. Judaism is a thrust into a higher realm- a leap into Heaven in ways which can't be articulated or justified solely for their human value. Perhaps the most iconic image of the entire book of Bereishit appears in this week's parsha: a ladder, anchored to earth but scaling the Heavens while angels ascend and descend. Have we pruned this ladder, retaining the lower rungs which are riveted to earth but cropping the upper tiers which penetrate the Heavens? Have we succeeded too well in anchoring religion to earth while amputating the steps of the ladder which are meant to catapult us to Heaven? Have we lost the transcendence of Judaism?

In many ways our generation has been guilty of leveling or grounding religion. In the wake of the Holocaust G-d seemed distant and fearsome. Additionally, the rapid technological changes of the post WWII world cast religion as ossified and irrelevant in a bristling new world of transportation, communication, science and space travel. Responding to these dual challenges- a G-d who felt distant and religion which seemed detached from our world- we reformed the way people viewed Judaism by redefining religion as beneficial to our lives and enriching to human interest. After all, Judaism could provide meaning, values, nobility, moral behavior, community, purpose, vision and family life. Judaism and Torah study were showcased as a manner to fill the void in our modern lives, to reinforce family bonds, and to catalyze robust communal life. Judaism would heighten our moral conduct and improve our married life. In short, we dragged Judaism down from the Heaven and firmly fastened it to this world and to our human lives. Thankfully, we were highly successful and Judaism became popular and religious ambition more widespread. However, we paid a steep price as religion became an endless Thanksgiving meal!

What have we lost in this process? Have we lost the moments of transcendence- when we take leave of this world and search for something higher and something beyond? Has our entire language of Judaism been converted into mundane human terms? Does the term 'avodas Hashem'- literally serving G-d without personal human resonate as loudly as the agenda of tikkun ha'olam- the prospect of employing Judaism to redeem the world at large? Do we think of Heaven and dream of angels, or are we trapped in the human sphere? Thanksgiving provides an opportunity to ponder the "human value" of Judaism and the supplementary values of modernity – each of which advances human progress. Parshat Vayetze reminds us not to flatten Judaism and to walk up the entire ladder until we reach the Heavens and encounter G-d in His sphere.