

Vayetzei 5781 - Finding Joy in Celebration Delayed  
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It certainly wasn't the big family celebration of years past, with family and the stray friend or two all seated around an ornately decorated table at my uncle's house. For weeks, my family and I had been looking forward to driving down to Los Angeles, and spending Thanksgiving with family. But last week, as the COVID numbers continued to rise at alarming rates, it became clear that traveling and gathering just wasn't the right choice for our family this year. It was a hard, agonizing decision to make, but as soon as we told my parents, it seemed like everyone was a little bit relieved. And so yesterday, I spent the day cooking up a Thanksgiving feast, just for the four of us, and we celebrated with our families on Zoom - 2:00 with Amy's family on the east coast, and 4:00 with my family in Los Angeles. It certainly wasn't the same as years past, and it was tinged with a bit of sadness at not being able to be together, but still it was good to connect, to gather virtually to celebrate and catch up, to toast to "Next year in person." Even though it was much smaller than usual, dinner was still delicious, and the four of us had a lovely time together. I still ended up totally stuffed by the end of the night.

That's been a theme of so many of our virtual celebrations this year - an acknowledgment of how different and challenging this year has been, with a hopeful eye towards being able to be together - in person - again in the not-too-distant future. As we prepare to round out the last few celebrations of the year virtually - Chanukah will bring us through an entire Jewish and secular calendar of holidays we've had to re-think and celebrate without physically gathering - it seems that Thanksgiving and our upcoming holiday of Chanukah offer two important lessons that may help us get through this challenging winter.

Thanksgiving, at its core, reminds us of the importance of tapping into gratitude, even if we have to dig deep. The origins of Thanksgiving may be complicated, and history has shed light on the problematic relationship

between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans, but certainly there is much to learn from this foundational American myth. Regardless, that first Thanksgiving feast was likely at the end of a long, deadly first year in a new land for the Pilgrims. There are some accounts that nearly half of the original Pilgrims had perished in their first New England winter - the result of illness, and a lack of familiarity with the harsh weather and how to effectively work the land. Even Plymouth, which had been a Wampanoag village long before the Pilgrims' arrival, had seen a massive loss of life in the years before the Pilgrims landed, the result of earlier Europeans who brought conquest and smallpox. Out of these frail positions, there may have been some impetus for these two communities to work together - or at the very least, some members of the Wampanoag may have taken pity on the Pilgrims and offered to help orient them to this new land. By the time of their first fall, though the losses of the Pilgrims had been significant, they felt that their survival offered reason for thanks.<sup>1</sup>

Some scholars suggest that the themes of the first Thanksgiving celebration may have had origins in the Jewish harvest festival of Sukkot. As Jonathan Sarna, Professor of American Jewish History at Brandeis University, explains:

They knew what they called the Old Testament, what we call the Hebrew Bible....Now they didn't go out and build huts, obviously. But the notion that one would be thankful for a bountiful harvest was certainly one they would have learned from the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup>

The Pilgrims, religious Puritans who most definitely knew their Bible, saw many parallels between their experience and that of the Israelites. Rabbi Elias Lieberman notes:

While we cannot be certain about what motivated those Pilgrim settlers to initiate a feast of thanksgiving, it is likely that they consciously drew on a model well-known to them from the Bible they cherished. Seeing themselves as new Israelites in a new "promised land," the Pilgrims surely found inspiration in the Bible, in the Books

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/21/us/thanksgiving-myths-fact-check.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.jns.org/did-sukkot-help-shape-thanksgiving/>

of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, in which God commands the ancient Israelites to observe the Feast of Booths—in Hebrew, Sukkot, “To rejoice before Adonai your God” at the time of the fall harvest.<sup>3</sup>

While this year has certainly brought new hardships and new challenges, even in the midst of a difficult year, Thanksgiving reminds us to be grateful for what we *do* have - our health, our families, and the ability to stay connected through modern technologies.

There is another lesson we find in one version of the Chanukah story, found in Second Maccabees, a collection of stories not found in the Hebrew Bible, but preserved in the Apocrypha. Second Maccabees, which quotes from a letter sent around 125 BCE from the Hasmoneans to the leaders of Egyptian Jewry, suggests that Chanukah was actually a delayed celebration of the holiday of Sukkot. Since the Jews had been fighting and hiding in caves when Sukkot fell in the two-year long Maccabean Revolt, they decided to celebrate this central holiday in the moments after they re-entered the Temple in Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup> We read in Second Maccabees:

Now Maccabeus and his followers, God leading them on, recovered the temple and the city; <sup>2</sup>they tore down the altars that had been built in the public square by the foreigners, and also destroyed the sacred precincts. <sup>3</sup>They purified the sanctuary, and made another altar of sacrifice; then, striking fire out of flint, they offered sacrifices, after a lapse of two years, and they offered incense and lighted lamps and set out the bread of the Presence. <sup>4</sup>When they had done this, they fell prostrate and implored God that they might never again fall into such misfortunes, but that, if they should ever sin, they might be disciplined by God with forbearance and not be handed over to blasphemous and barbarous nations. <sup>5</sup>It happened that on the same day on which the sanctuary had been profaned by the foreigners, the purification of the sanctuary took place, that is, on the twenty-fifth day of...Kislev. <sup>6</sup>They celebrated it for eight days with rejoicing, in the manner of the festival of booths (Sukkot), remembering how not long before, during the festival of booths, they had been wandering in the mountains and

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<sup>3</sup> <https://reformjudaism.org/whats-jewish-about-thanksgiving-lots>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/the-first-hanukkah/>

caves like wild animals. <sup>7</sup>Therefore, carrying ivy-wreathed wands and beautiful branches and also fronds of palm, they offered hymns of thanksgiving to God who had given success to the purifying of God's own holy place. <sup>8</sup>They decreed by public edict, ratified by vote, that the whole nation of the Jews should observe these days every year.<sup>5</sup>

This observance of Chanukah as a delayed Sukkot festival may be one early reason for why Chanukah lasts eight days. But this model of a delayed celebration of this most central Biblical holiday offers us a framework for how we might think about so many of this year's celebrations. While many have found new ways to mark birthdays and holidays - both Jewish and secular - there is still a sense of loss at having not been able to celebrate the way we have in the past. There may be some moments - whether Jewish or particular family rituals - that are so central to who we are, that a delayed celebration may offer us something hopeful to look forward to in a post-COVID world. Though we may not know when, exactly, we'll be able to celebrate as we have in the past, we know that this pandemic will not last forever, and it may do us well to hold out hope for a future in which we come together in celebration once again, with a renewed sense of gratitude for those most central elements of our lives: our health and our cherished relationships.

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Maccabees 10:1-8, NRSV translation