

Can We Celebrate?

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“It’s like I packed my family up and took everyone to the movie theater to see the remake of Mary Poppins, but instead they screened Edward Scissorhands.” That was one woman’s recent response to a gentle “how are things going,” and perhaps you feel the same way.

Even if we are among the more fortunate, spared the worst of illness and loss, of economic hardship, anxiety, and deprivation, these last nine months have been difficult. Many of us were looking forward to Thanksgiving dinners and family reunions, but over the last two weeks have cancelled trips or pared down our plans.

Thanksgiving was already going to be diminished this year, as the Thanksgiving story of our elementary school years has not held up well in light of recent events. With evidence of racial injustice still so present in our society, we cannot ignore the devastation that European immigration brought to the indigenous population. This year, even with sophisticated medicine and genome identification, we have, in the United States, lost more than a quarter million lives from an illness with an infection fatality rate of only 0.5-1%.

What was it like for those who became ill in past centuries? It is painful to imagine facing smallpox, measles, malaria, chickenpox, or leptospirosis—the various diseases blamed for the epidemics that decimated the previously existing

communities in America, facing them without modern medicine or any clue as to what was happening. How can we celebrate without looking at that injustice, combined with the land appropriations, the removals, and the loss of language and culture?

So what can we do with this Thanksgiving festival? Perhaps it is best to return to the holiday's Biblical roots, to the festival of Sukkot, a holiday called Booths or Tabernacles in the Christian Bible. It is described in three places in the Five Books of Moses. In Leviticus 23 the focus is on the huts and the *etrog* (citron), *lulav* (palm), myrtle, and willow, symbols of the harvest. Numbers 29 dwells on the ancient sacrifices, but in the text from Deuteronomy we find two important principles related to the holiday that we can carry forward. The first: It is not a religious celebration if it is for us alone. For it to be a festival of God we must share it with those who labor for us, male and female, as well as with the noncitizen, the fatherless, and the widow.

This is the Bible's shorthand for those who were needy and without someone to speak in their defense, "the other." If we don't share on the holiday, then it is what the rabbis called a "celebration of the belly" and not a holy day.

We also find a reminder that we should not appear before God empty-handed but each according to what has come to their hand, that is, their own gifts. Some say this refers to the bounty that God has bestowed upon us, but others understand this to mean the generosity of sharing something of ourselves.

For Thanksgiving this year to be a festival of gratitude, in addition to finding ways to provide for those in need and to share from our hearts and talents, we will also have to let go of our disappointment and anger about what is not to be.

In this regard I think of the Biblical character Esau, Jacob's ill-fated twin. He never did get the birthright, but when finally reunited with his brother, he did not take revenge but demonstrated that he was able to let go of disappointment and enjoy what he did have.

"I have plenty," he said. Esau came a long way from the young man who sought instant gratification and impulsively sold his future for a bowl of porridge. Like the more mature Esau, we must let go of our immediate desires and focus on longer-term goals. That was the rabbinic understanding of the Torah's instruction, "and you shall live by them" (the commandments). Break a commandment this day, in order that you may live to fulfill many additional commandments in the future.

Perhaps that model can help us get through these upcoming months when we find ourselves not at our chosen destination.

Weigh the future against the present and be willing to sacrifice for long-term benefit. Include all members of the community in our reckoning for the distribution of the harvest, and be willing to give of our bounty and of our own individual gifts. Then, practicing gratitude, we can taste the good in each day as it comes.

Zeh hayom asah Adonai, this is the day (just as it is right now, even with all its imperfections) that God has brought; *nagilah venismechah bo* (having made sure to alleviate the suffering of others), let us rejoice and celebrate in it.