

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Toldot

Tel: 815-301-1928

Fax: 815-301-1928

Email: shabbatshalomfax@gmail.com

ShabbatShalom.org

Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

2 Kislev, 5783

The Fax of Life

ת"סב

November 26, 2022

GOOD MORNING! This weekend is known, at least in the United States, as Thanksgiving Weekend. The earliest documented celebration of Thanksgiving dates back some 400 years.

Thirty-eight English settlers aboard the ship *Margaret* arrived by way of the James River at Berkeley Hundred in Charles City County, Virginia on December 4, 1619. The landing was immediately followed by a religious celebration, specifically dictated by the group's charter from the London Company. The charter declared, "that the day of our ships arrival at the place assigned for plantation in the land of Virginia shall be yearly and perpetually kept holy as a day of thanksgiving to Almighty God." As we shall see, this very first Thanksgiving celebration has strong roots in Jewish tradition.

In general, having gratitude is a tenet and a core value of Judaism; perhaps the value of the highest order. In fact, the name Jew is a derivation of the word thank you; it comes from the biblical name Judah. Judah was one of the original twelve tribes and was given that name by his mother Leah as an expression of her gratitude to God (see *Genesis* 29:35). In Hebrew, the word for thanks is "*todah*," which is derived from the same root word as the name Judah.

Unsurprisingly, according to Jewish tradition, the very first thought that we are to have in the morning is one of gratitude. This is articulated by the first prayer that we are enjoined to utter upon waking up every morning – the short prayer known as *Modeh Ani*: "*I gratefully thank you O living and eternal King, for having restored my soul within me with compassion [...].*"

But the Thanksgiving connection to Judaism runs even deeper. Psalm 100 begins with the words "A psalm of thanksgiving." While the vast majority of the book of *Psalms* was composed by King David, according to the Talmud (*Baba Batra* 14b) Psalm 100 was one of eleven psalms that were actually composed by Moses himself. The Talmud (*Shavuot* 15b) records that this psalm was sung by the Levites in the Holy Temple whenever a thanksgiving offering was brought.

Even today when the Jewish nation is bereft of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem (may it speedily be rebuilt in our days!), the Talmud (*Berachot* 54b) records four specific instances for which a person is obligated in saying a special prayer of thanksgiving. One of those occasions is seafaring – safe passage through an ocean journey requires a prayer of thanks. Thus, it is no coincidence that the charter from the London Company mandated a day of thanksgiving when the English settlers arrived safely in Virginia.

As every American school child knows, the Pilgrims of Plymouth have been credited with having the first Thanksgiving feast. But how did they know to give thanks?

The Pilgrim leader William Bradford had a copy of the Bible with him on the *Mayflower*. His Bible contained handwritten notes by the Puritan scholar Henry Ainsworth in the margins. Ainsworth had written out a list of events that required a prayer of thanksgiving to God; "The sick – when he is healed; The prisoner – when he is released from bondage; Those that go down to sea – when they come up to land; and wayfarers – when they arrive at inhabited lands." Where did Ainsworth come up with these four? He had copied it straight from Maimonides, codifier of the Talmud!

As president of the United States, George Washington proclaimed the first nationwide Thanksgiving celebration in America marking November 26, 1789, "as a day of public thanksgiving and prayer, to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many favours of Almighty God."

American born Gershom Mendes Seixas was the cantor and spiritual leader of New York City's only synagogue, Congregation Shearith Israel, until it shut down operations during the Revolution and moved to Connecticut. He later became the temporary leader of a synagogue in Philadelphia, where he used his pulpit to speak out in support of General George Washington.

Many early congregants of Shearith Israel served in the Continental Army. Around 20 Revolutionary War veterans are buried at the synagogue's ancient Chatham Square Cemetery in Chinatown.

After the colonies' triumph, the congregation returned to New York and Gershom Seixas was among a few selected clergymen invited to participate in George Washington's inaugural celebration. This was certainly an act of gratitude by Washington for the Jewish leader's stalwart support during the war. Perhaps more importantly, it was also an expression of Washington's belief about the importance of religious freedom and diversity in the new nation.

When Washington proclaimed the first nationwide Thanksgiving celebration in 1789, Cantor Gershom Seixas wholeheartedly embraced the concept and the synagogue has his original handwritten notes for a selection of prayers to be said on that day. His notes go on to proscribe which psalms are to be said and his remarks for that occasion. It begins,

Order of the service for the holy congregation of Shearith Israel in New York for Thursday, 8th of Kislev 5550 – November 26th 1789.

Being the day appointed by the United States of America to be observed as a public day of Thanksgiving and prayer throughout these states, agreeable to a proclamation by the President of the United States of America.

Of course, like many American traditions, some odd customs have crept into the observances of certain American holidays (e.g. going to the beach on Memorial Day) and Thanksgiving is no different. Nobody has a good explanation as to why watching football is part of the “sacred” observance of Thanksgiving.

Part of the reason for this is probably due to the fact that many Americans use Thanksgiving to remind themselves why they live 2000 miles away from the rest of their family – football is probably as good an escape as any from uncomfortable conversations and/or receiving unwanted parenting advice from relatives you see once a year.

While Jews are prohibited from celebrating non-Jewish holidays, this is generally understood to apply to religious holidays only. Thanksgiving is not perceived as a religious holiday, just a day to pause and give thanks for all the blessings in our lives. For this reason, many rabbinic authorities have permitted Thanksgiving celebrations, though some suggest skipping a year every now and then to highlight that the Thanksgiving holiday is not a Jewish holiday.

As a child, my family did not have any specific Thanksgiving get-togethers, though we always ended up having turkey on the Shabbat following Thanksgiving. According to mom, this was because, “That’s when turkey went on sale.”

More importantly, perhaps there is no one-day set aside as a day of thanksgiving in Judaism because gratitude is something that we should focus on **every day**. The human condition is to take everything for granted; we rarely stop to appreciate all that we have. We must make a conscious effort to acknowledge what we have in our lives that is simply amazing. We have been gifted such an incredible world, yet we rarely focus on all the good with which we have been blessed. We have come to expect it. Most of us don’t even really appreciate our own good health until it begins to slip away.

We must commit ourselves to recognizing the blessings in our lives – without waiting for Thanksgiving. Start today by making a list of everything in your life that you are grateful for. Then thank God and the people who are responsible for those special gifts. Internalize that these things were given to you because someone cares about you and you are beloved. Review that list often; you will internalize how loved you truly are and you will begin to have a greater appreciation for yourself!

I will end this column by further quoting Gershom Seixas who, when Thanksgiving became an official holiday that year, declared that Jews were “equal partakers of every benefit that results from this good government” and should try “to live as Jews ought to do – in brotherhood and amity, to seek peace and pursue it.” This was as true 233 years ago as it is today.

TORAH PORTION: Toldot, Genesis 25:19 - 28:9

Rebecca (Rivka) gives birth to Esau (Eisav) and Jacob (Yaakov). Esau sells the birthright to Jacob for a bowl of lentil soup. Isaac (Yitzchak) sojourns in Gerar with Avimelech, king of the Philistines. Esau marries two Hittite women bringing great pain to his parents (because they weren’t of the fold).

Jacob impersonates Esau on the counsel of his mother in order to receive the blessing for the oldest son from his blind father, Isaac. Esau, angry because of his brother’s deception caused him to lose the firstborn blessings, plans to kill Jacob, so Jacob flees to his uncle Lavan in Padan Aram – on the advice of his parents. They also advise him to marry Lavan’s daughter.

Esau understands that his Canaanite wives are displeasing to his parents, so he marries a third wife, Machlath, the daughter of Ishmael.

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 4:00 Miami 5:11 Cape Town 7:19 Guatemala 5:12 Hong Kong 5:21 Honolulu 5:30
Jo’Burg 6:23 LA 4:26 London 3:44 Melbourne 8:02 Mexico 5:38 Moscow 3:50 New York 4:13 Singapore 6:35 Toronto 4:26

“QUOTE OF THE WEEK”: Thanksgiving dinners take 18 hours to prepare and they are consumed in 12 minutes. Half-time takes about 12 minutes. This is not a coincidence.
— Erma Bombeck

Dedicated in Memory of
Marvin Barman
Moshe Leib ben Eliezer



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

Honor a Loved One! Dedicate an edition of the Shabbat Shalom Fax **ShabbatShalom.org** (IRS# 65-0389241)

Friend of the Fax \$54 Benefactor \$118 Patron \$252 Fax Dedication \$360 Partner \$1,000
Shabbat Shalom Fax ● PO Box 402666 ● Miami Beach, FL 33140

To be removed: Send the name & fax number to: rabbizweig@shabbatshalom.org — or ... fax/call: 815-301-1928