

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Gratitude Now

Thanksgiving is not a Jewish holiday. Yet, I have heard many Jewish people say that Thanksgiving is their favorite holiday. There are many things about Thanksgiving that are consistent with Judaism. Of course, a holiday that is focused on food certainly seems Jewish. But the Jewishness of Thanksgiving is rooted in key values that go far deeper than turkey and sweet potatoes.

The very word “Jewish” comes from the word for gratitude. Judah (or *Yehudah* in Hebrew) was Jacob and Leah’s fourth son, and his name comes from the word *hoda-ah*, which means, “to thank.” According to the Torah, by naming her son Judah, Leah was the first person to actually express thanks to God in words. Leah was grateful to have another child after the first three. On his deathbed, Jacob praised his son, Judah, above all his other children. While our people were often called Hebrews or Israelites in the Torah, our continued relationship with the word Jewish, or *Yehudim* helps emphasize that gratitude is a core value of Judaism.

Mussar, the Jewish concept of cultivating inner virtues, teaches that gratitude is the ability to appreciate blessings in any situation. It is easy to be grateful when everything is going the way we want it to go. But true gratitude means embracing the challenging task of accepting difficult times with an open heart. It is interesting to note that President Abraham Lincoln established Thanksgiving for the first time in 1863, in the middle of the Civil War. Lincoln, perhaps, wanted Americans to express gratitude even during a time of war and tragedy, acknowledging that no matter how harsh the world seems, we still have reasons to be thankful.

During the Passover seder, we sing the joyous song, *Dayeinu*. We repeat the wondrous feats that God performed for us, each time expressing “it would have been sufficient,” if God had done one thing but not another. We cheerfully sing, “*If God had split the sea for us, and not brought us to dry land, it would have been enough...*” Our tendency is to want everything to be perfect and complete. The strength of our survival has been to accept the hard times and find the brightest spots.

We are now about to celebrate a second Thanksgiving during a pandemic. While things have gotten much better, we still have to be careful. We’ll take great care to stay safe and healthy. Let’s also take care to feel grateful for all of our blessings and all of our challenges. Even when the challenges seem great, we are blessed. Shortly after Thanksgiving, we’ll be celebrating Hanukkah, a joyous festival comes at the darkest time of the year. Watch the light brighten the darkness, and celebrate every spark of joy!

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon