

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Of Thanks and Giving

Every November, when I sit down to write my monthly message, I think about gratitude. After all, November is the month Thanksgiving, which President Lincoln declared as a national holiday in 1863. As children, most of us learned about “the first Thanksgiving” as a sharing between Native Americans and the early Pilgrims. While some of the notions of gatherings in the 1600’s may be exaggerated, the concept of giving thanks for our abundance has endured. By the time President Lincoln gave it official prominence in the United States, his suggestions were not about the bountiful meal that has become the primary symbol of Thanksgiving, but about appreciation toward the Almighty and sensitivity to the less fortunate. Lincoln’s proclamation, in the midst of great political controversies, included a desire to unify a country divided by war and ideology. Lincoln said (edited for brevity):

I...invite my fellow citizens...to observe the last Thursday of November...as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up... blessings, they do also...commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers.

This is obviously not about a turkey dinner or even pre-holiday sales. As Thanksgiving has evolved over the generations, we can continue to focus on making gratitude a spotlight. It’s not as easy as a singular prayer before a Thursday gathering and a long weekend. Living with gratitude can be a challenge. It’s easy to be grateful when things are going the way we expect, but much harder when difficulties get in our way. *Mussar* is a Jewish spiritual practice of discipline that gives concrete instructions on how to live a meaningful and ethical life. 11th Century scholar, Rabbi ibn Pakuda, teaches in his *Mussar* classic *Duties of the Heart*, that there are three barriers that keep us from being grateful:

1. We become overly occupied with material things that we *don’t* have without appreciating what we already have. [this is reminiscent of the teaching from Pirke Avot: “Who is rich? Those who are happy with their lot.]
2. We take things for granted, without appreciating everyday blessings.
3. We focus on the negative, and let little things bother us without recognizing the many positive things in our lives.

Robert Emmons, a professor of psychology, notes that “*people who practice gratitude are viewed as more helpful, more outgoing, more optimistic, and more trustworthy.*” Perhaps the Thanksgiving message can be more about what we can offer the world than what the world provides for us. An ancient Sufi folk tale describes a woman who approaches a sage, saying she has so many troubles she doesn’t know how she can go on. The sage enthusiastically tells her that he has found the recipe for a potion that can remove all her troubles. He is just missing one ingredient: a mustard seed from a house that has seen no sorrow. He sends the woman on her mission to find that mustard seed; but, alas, while many homes can offer the ingredient, none can admit they have not seen sorrow. The woman hears many stories. At the last home she visits, she hears such a tale that she chooses to remain with the family and help them. In doing so, together, their sorrows are diminished.

As we celebrate a Thanksgiving to appreciate our many gifts, it is a good time to contemplate the special gifts each of us has that can help make the world a better place.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon