

RABBI'S MESSAGE

Every Day Gratitude

It seems that a “holiday season” – whether we’re looking at the Jewish calendar or the secular one – is almost always upon us. January has the secular New Year and Tu B’ Shevat (Jewish Arbor Day), February has Valentine’s Day, March is Purim, April is Passover, May is Mother’s Day, June is Shavuot and Father’s Day and July or August is Tish B’ Av (commemorating the destruction of the Temple). By then we’re ready for Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Simchat Torah in September and October.

Now, we are up to November, with Thanksgiving leading the way toward Hanukkah....and the cycle continues.

Holiday seasons bring with them a blend of joy and tensions. The primary purpose of holidays often get lost between the cracks of planning and preparation. For some, there is significant stress around who will be present for the celebrations and who will be absent. Holiday time can be about fond memories with those who have passed away, or a mournful longing for those who we wish were still in our lives. Many put enormous efforts into making *this* year the *perfect* year...sometimes finding disappointment in remembering that nothing is perfect.

Thanksgiving, a purely American holiday, has become “all about the food.” While preparing the perfect meal, in which we are given license to over-indulge with gusto, we might just forget the two words that blend into the word that is now often just called “Turkey Day.”

THANKS is an expression of gratitude. GIVING is about what we offer others, rather than what we take for ourselves. It is simple enough to remember and easy enough to forget.

Jewish educator Joel Grishaver, in his book *40 Things You Can Do to Save the Jewish People* suggests that one way to remember the importance of being Jewish is to say the Hebrew prayers *Kiddish* and *Hamotzi* over wine and bread at the Thanksgiving table. Even though it isn’t a Jewish holiday, saying the Hebrew prayers reminds us of our identity and helps us take a moment of gratitude.

A story is told about Rabbi Yisrael Salanter, one of the leading 19th century teachers of Mussar, a Jewish ethical practice. He commented to a restaurant owner about the high price of a cup of coffee (what would he say today about Starbucks?). “Hot water costs you nothing, and mixing it with a few coffee beans can’t cost much,” said the rabbi. The restaurant owner acknowledged the out-of-pocket cost was low, and that for a few pennies, the rabbi could make his own coffee at home. “But here,” argued the owner, “we provide great service and a beautiful atmosphere where you can enjoy your coffee!” The rabbi was ecstatic hearing this. He said, “I now understand more fully the meaning of the blessing I say when I just drink a cup of water: ‘Blessed are You, God, who caused all to be created by His word.’ I used to think I was just thanking God for the water...but now, I realize I am also giving thanks for the atmosphere...the air I’m breathing, the birds I hear singing, the pleasing fragrance of the flowers. Every blessing of thanks is a blessing for ALL the gifts of our lives, and the wonderful way God has prepared it for us!”

Many have a tradition at Thanksgiving tables to take time to acknowledge what we are thankful for. It’s *not* “just about the food!” It’s about the world we share and the people who share it with us. It’s about what we have now, what we’ve enjoyed in the past and what we hope for in the future. Thanksgiving Day is a good time to pause for those kind of reminders. Whether or not we are feeling particularly grateful on the third Thursday of November, perhaps the day’s festivities can inspire us to show our gratitude every day, not just when the calendar suggests it. By focusing on what we *have* rather than what we *don’t have*, our lives are full and rich. Pirke Avot, the Ethics of our Ancestors, states, “Who is rich? Those who are happy with what they have.”

Happy to Give. Happy to Thank. And Grateful for the way one day on the calendar can remind us about living in gratitude every day.

L’shalom,

Rabbi Dan Gordon

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