

RABBI'S MESSAGE

In Appreciation of Gratitude

“Why” is a most challenging question. I am always curious about deeper meanings behind customs, and I am sometimes amused to find the out that the full meaning is much simpler than I suspected. Every year, we offer a day of thanks at the end of November. It is not hard to figure out the importance of saying thanks...but I wondered about the timing. I like to try figuring out my own solution before learning the “real” reason.

I guessed that November would be a good time because of the weather. Folklore teaches that Pilgrims and Native Americans enjoyed Thanksgiving together in Massachusetts. It's cold in Massachusetts in November, so perhaps the timing was chosen to bring some warmth to the community. Harvesting might have been completed in the previous months, so it might be a good time of abundance. Historically, Thanksgiving became a legal holiday established first by George Washington with various dates, and later by Abraham Lincoln, who declared the last Thursday of November to be Thanksgiving. In 1939, President Franklin Roosevelt tried to move Thanksgiving to the third Thursday of November to create a longer Christmas shopping season during the post-Depression years. The nation was not unified on this issue, so in 1941, Congress stepped in to finalize the fourth Thursday of the month. So much for deeper meanings!

It brings up the whole concept of offering thanks. We spend one day a year (Yom Kippur) on the Hebrew calendar focused on our transgressions, and one day a year on the secular calendar focused on appreciation. It is often about family, food and abundance. The ideal Thanksgivings include an ideal family, free from strife, economically prosperous, getting along with each other and sharing how much they appreciate God's gifts and how much they appreciate each other. Of course, rarely are our lives ideal. There are many who are lacking in one way or another, and a holiday like this can be a harsh reminder. Some don't have the means to put together the kind of meal they would like; others are estranged from their families, or just don't have family members around. Some may have plenty of family, but dread seeing them because of past altercations. For those who recently lost a loved one, the first Thanksgiving in their absence can be very difficult. It can be one of the most joyous times for some, and one of the most troubling times for others.

It's hard to be grateful when the challenges of life can be overwhelming. I'm reminded of a story of Rabbi Israel Salanter, a 19th Century Mussar scholar, who was shocked at the price of a cup of coffee in a fancy restaurant. When he asked the owner, he was told, basically, “You pay for the atmosphere!” The owner told him that the price of the cup of coffee includes all the other things that have nothing to do with hot water and coffee beans: fancy china, professional well-dressed waiters, background music, beautiful table cloths, etc. Rabbi Salanter was delighted. He decided that every blessing he says offers appreciation for more. A simple blessing over a piece of bread can encompass all the things that have nothing to do with the bread: the air we breathe, the beauty of nature around us, the music of the birds, our very lives!

On Thanksgiving, we tend to look at those things we have for which we are most grateful: health, family, nourishment, shelter, etc. There are many other things we might take for granted. This year, perhaps, we can look at the many things in our lives that we have yet to fully appreciate...and it will probably take all year (at least) to fully give our thanks.

L'shalom,,

Rabbi Dan Gordon