

Giving Thanks

Rabbi Steven Morgen, Congregation Beth Yeshurun, November 14, 2014

Thanksgiving is a Jewish holiday. Alright, I admit it is based on the Pilgrim experience in America centuries before most Jews immigrated to this country. But the Pilgrims were religious people who studied the Bible, and they were almost certainly basing *their* Thanksgiving on the Biblical harvest festival in the autumn – that is, Sukkot.

Perhaps more importantly, the Jewish tradition is filled with opportunities to give thanks. My favorite pun at this time of year explains the Jewishness of Thanksgiving by pointing out that the Hebrew word for Turkey is Hodu. And “Hodu” is also the plural command to “give thanks.” (As in: *Hodu l’Adonai ki tov, ki l’olam hasdo* – “Give thanks to God for He is good; for His kindness is everlasting.”)

In Deuteronomy (8:7-10) our ancestors were instructed that when they would enter the Land of Israel, “a land of streams and springs and fountains ... a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing ... When you have eaten your fill [they were told], *give thanks to the LORD your God for the good land which He has given you.*” This passage in Deuteronomy is the source for our Grace after the meal – *birkat hamazon* – in which we thank and praise God for all of the bounty He has provided us.

Embracing a sense of gratitude for all the wonders in our lives is one very healthy way to have a more positive attitude about life itself. Instead of focusing on the problems, the difficulties, the obstacles in our lives, we are able to see the countless blessings that are constantly showered upon us: having a roof over our head, having food to eat, clothes to wear, and friends and family who love us. This attitude of gratitude is not only healthy for us as parents (when we sometimes want to pull out our hair because of the stresses of parenting), but it is also a very healthy approach to life that we can give our children.

But our expressions of gratitude should not be limited only toward our Creator. We should strive to convey our appreciation to all of the people who make our lives more pleasant – whether they are the check-out clerk at the supermarket, the person who cleans our homes, the people who work for us, or just someone who has done us a favor, big or small. Each person the Bible tells us, is created in the image of God. And each person who helps make the world a better place is an angel (“messenger”) of God. Just as we should be grateful to God for the gift of life and all of the marvelous gifts in our world, so too we should be grateful to God’s messengers in our lives.

This Thanksgiving, let’s be sure to remember the meaning of this holiday, and as we sit down to enjoy our delicious meal with family and friends, let us take a moment to give thanks to God and to the wonderful people in our lives.