Torah and Western Thought: Jewish and Western Texts in Conversation

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Gratitude In Challenging Times

"Thanksgiving Was Born From America's Struggles"

BY RABBI DR. MEIR SOLOVEICHIK

Adapted from an article that was previously published in The Wall Street Journal, *November 22 2022.*

Norman Rockwell's painting "Freedom From Want" is perhaps the most famous artistic depiction of an American Thanksgiving, showing a family joyfully gathered round an enormous turkey. For Rockwell, the abundance of the meal was the point, reflecting the ideal Franklin Roosevelt named in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech. Equally notable is the tranquility of the family gathering. There seems nary a disagreement among them; political divisions appear entirely absent.

This year, it's easy to wonder if Rockwell's Thanksgiving has any relevance to our own. Soaring inflation has made big dinners less easy to afford, and many family gatherings will feature acrimonious discussions about the state of the country. This year, can we still gather together in simple gratitude?

In fact, these challenges don't make our moment unique. The Thanksgiving we celebrate today evolved during periods of material struggle, political division and terrible loss. The lesson of American history is that national difficulties don't detract from the meaning of Thanksgiving; they are the very grounding of gratitude.

The Thanksgiving story begins, of course, with the Pilgrims. The English Protestants who arrived at Provincetown in 1620 were obsessed with the Hebrew Bible, seeing themselves as another Israel journeying to a promised land. In his book "Making Haste From Babylon," historian Nick Bunker describes how when the Pilgrims came ashore they recited passages from Psalm 107, which "speaks about the wilderness of the Sinai, about danger and deliverance, about the journey of the Israelites across the Red Sea, and about the duty to give thanks when the exodus is complete."

But the Pilgrims, as Mr. Bunker notes, were aware that Israel's journey was not easy, and neither was their own. Half of the people on board the Mayflower died during their first winter in America, victims of malnutrition, disease and exposure. In the Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, Mass., many artifacts from that time "have sorrowful stories associated with them—the cradle that rocked a fatherless child, the cooking pot that often would have been empty for lack of food to put in it," writes Melanie Kirkpatrick in her history of Thanksgiving.

Yet in the face of this suffering, Ms. Kirkpatrick writes, the Pilgrims were "world class practitioners of the virtue of gratitude." A year after their arrival they held a Thanksgiving feast to celebrate their survival, their freedom, and the peace temporarily achieved with their Wampanoag neighbors. They knew that one of scripture's central teachings is that life's fragility makes it precious, never to be taken for granted. That is why, during the biblical harvest celebration of Sukkot, the Israelites in the Holy Land were commanded to leave the security of their own homes and spend seven days in ramshackle huts, in remembrance of their ancestors' difficult desert journey. The essence of biblical gratitude, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, is "to know that life is full of risk and yet to affirm it, to sense the full insecurity of the human situation and yet to rejoice."

The next turning-point in the history of Thanksgiving came in 1789, the year George Washington was sworn in as the first president of the United States. Given Americans' unanimous esteem for the man they called the "Father of Our Country," it is easy to look back on that age as one of political unity. In fact, the leading members of Washington's cabinet, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, hated each other bitterly, and their followers in the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties followed suit.

The Constitution had been ratified only two years earlier, and many Americans still did not trust or accept it. Some of the heroes of the Revolution believed that the new federal government, with its centralized legislature and powerful presidency, was as bad as the British monarchy they had fought against. During the debates over ratification, Virginia's Patrick Henry insisted that the Constitution "squints toward monarchy." Rhode Island refused to ratify the new system of government and held out from joining the union for a year. Today we still debate how to interpret the Constitution, but in 1789 Americans debated whether it should even exist.

Thanksgiving got swept up in the controversy. In September 1789, a member of the House of Representatives proposed that President Washington establish a national day of Thanksgiving, to give gratitude to God for the "opportunity peaceably to establish a Constitution of government for their safety and happiness." The motion was bitterly opposed by those who saw it as mimicking European monarchical customs, raising the president to the rank of a king. In response to these critics, Rep. Roger Sherman of Connecticut insisted that the ritual of thanksgiving was biblical, rather than European. King Solomon, he noted, celebrated a festival of gratitude following the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Sherman's argument carried the day and Washington proclaimed Nov. 26 the first national Thanksgiving celebration, asking Americans to give gratitude to God for "the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed." Washington's point was that Americans weren't celebrating their unanimity but their ability to resolve differences democratically, allowing room for dissent on some of the most sensitive political and religious questions. For Americans to disagree profoundly about politics, and yet be able to gather together, was itself a reason for gratitude.

It was the Civil War that led to the creation of Thanksgiving as we know it today. The impetus came from Sarah Josepha Hale, a New Hampshire-born writer who was familiar with sickness and death throughout her life. As a young woman she lost her mother and siblings; later her husband David died of pneumonia, and she mourned him by wearing black for the rest of her life. She supported her family as a novelist, the editor of a women's magazine, and an author of children's poems, including "Mary Had a Little Lamb." Her novels made the case for the abolition of slavery and for the Thanksgiving traditions of her New England ancestors.

Hale called on president after president to create an annual Thanksgiving holiday, but Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan all ignored her pleas. Finally, as historian Denise Kiernan writes in her book "We Gather Together," Hale found her man in Abraham Lincoln. When she wrote to him in 1863, the timing might have seemed especially bad: Give gratitude to God after the battles of Shiloh, Antietam and Gettysburg? Yet Hale's letter seems to have touched Lincoln, who was himself tormented by a sense of the fragility of life, amid the deaths of so many thousands of American soldiers and of his own young son Willie.

In a remarkable proclamation, Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November 1863 to be a national day of Thanksgiving. At a time when America was divided by war, Lincoln emphasized that "harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict." In the face of countless casualties, he gratefully reflected that "the terrible losses of the war, had not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield."

These blessings, he insisted, could only be "the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." The Civil War forced Americans to realize how fragile their national existence was, but Lincoln believed that fragility made gratitude all the more important.

The same is true today. Despite political divisions, we can give thanks for living in the oldest continuous democracy in the world. Several years after a pandemic that suddenly cut us off from one another, we can give thanks for the chance to gather with family, no matter how much we may disagree. In Ms. Kiernan's words, "To take Thanksgiving back, to take it forward, we can choose to reflect the very spirit Hale embodied throughout her long life. We can exhibit the best of ourselves."

Rabbi Dr. Meir Soloveichik is Director of the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought.

"I Will Give Thee Thanks In the Great Congregation." (Ps. 35:18)

BY DR. SHAINA TRAPEDO

Adapted from a lecture delivered at the "Restoring the American Story" conference in March 2023.

In 2013, the world record price for a printed book sold at auction was set by the Bay Psalm Book, the first book printed in British North America in 1640, which went for $14.2 million. While the story of that Psalter—one of only 11 remaining of the 1700 originally produced—is fascinating, the Psalms of the Hebrew Bible are of inestimable value not only to Western literature and culture but also to America's founding in particular.

The experiences of ancient Israel encapsulated in the Psalms were especially resonant in 16th and 17th-century England. With the Psalms' consistent position that God never abandons the oppressed, it is little wonder that they appealed to persecuted Christian reformers and writers like Calvin, Milton, and the Puritans, who compared themselves to Israelites embarking through the wilderness toward a new promised land.

When the first printing press shipped from overseas finally arrived in Massachusetts in 1639, the colony's committee of thirty elders, including John Cotton and Richard Mather, knew they needed their first printed book to be both practical and theologically significant. It didn't take long for a work of singular import to emerge. As a sacred text, the Psalms were central to liturgical practice and Bible study, but issuing a new translation also offered a political opportunity. In the preface to *The whole booke of Psalmes faithfully translated into English metre* (quickly adopted by every congregation in the colony and colloquially known as the Bay Psalm Book), the compilers address the corrective path of their project; while expressing "cause to bless God in many respects" for earlier "endeavours," this new translation aimed to replicate the "native purity" of the original Hebrew's content and cadence. Beyond its religious significance, reprinting the Psalms was a material act of nonconformity, and its spiritual and intellectual influence extended far past Puritan pulpits.

Over the next century, the Bay Psalm Book was read and sung by the country's founders, including Samuel Adams, William Dawes, and a very young Benjamin Franklin. And it was from the Bay Psalm Book that some of the country's earliest thinkers first encountered the ideas that would inspire a nation:

"The statutes of the Lord, are right, & glad the heart" (Ps. 19:8)
"He loveth righteousness, and also equity... O blessed nation" (Ps. 33:5–16)
"How good and sweet to see, i'ts [sic] for brethren to dwell together in unitee" (Ps. 133:1).

By the time delegates gathered in Philadelphia for the First Continental Congress in 1774 to discuss a coordinated response to the British, they represented a variety of Christian communities, yet they were far from a monolithic whole. It was proposed that their meeting commence with prayer, and after much debate, episcopal clergyman Jacob Duché was invited to convene the assembly in Carpenter's Hall the next day. He recited Psalm 35, which summons divine force against foes and concludes with the assurance that one day all will rejoice in God favoring a "righteous cause," and then offered a spontaneous personal prayer for the success of their collective mission. In recounting the event in a letter to his wife, John Adams marvels, "It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning," having had "an excellent Effect upon every Body here," and then adds, "I must beg you to read that Psalm... it would be thought providential."

Yet the animating spirit of the Psalms extends far beyond the nation's nascence. If, as Percy Bysshe Shelley asserted, "poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world," then America's authors have both charted and challenged the country's sense of civic and moral virtue through their verses, often using Tehillim as a touchstone.

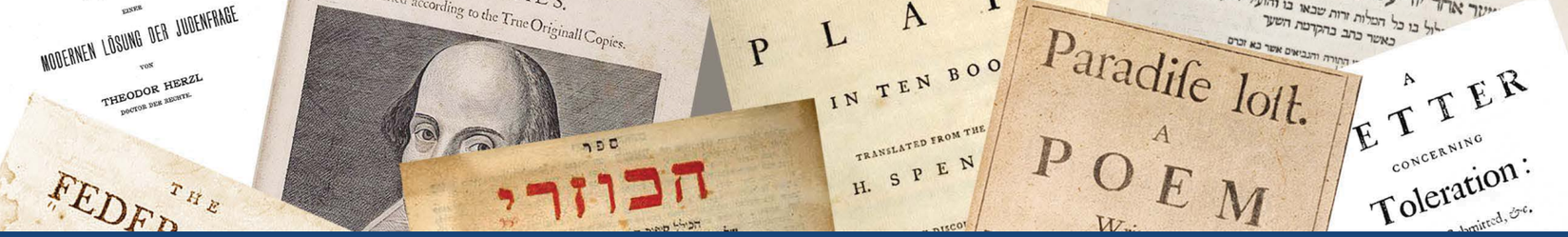
Keenly aware of poetry's spiritual and political dimensions, Ralph Waldo Emerson called for a voice that would rise to the occasion of a new nation in his 1844 essay "The Poet," and Walt Whitman's response still resounds today. While Whitman pioneered an essentially American free verse in Leaves of Grass (1855–1861), the perspective, imagery, parallelism, and irregular beats and line length characteristic of the Psalms pulse below the surface of his sonorous stanza:

And thou America, /Thy offspring towering e'er so high, yet higher Thee above all towering, /With Victory on thy left, and at thy right hand Law; /Thou Union holding all, fusing, absorbing, tolerating all, /Thee, ever thee, I sing.

Whitman offers us a complicated but unflappable faith in God and country that is at once expansive, inclusive, and life-affirming. American wordsmiths—from Longfellow to Langston Hughes, Anne Bradstreet to Amanda Gorman—have been stretched by the structural and spiritual elements of the Psalms and continue to engage with scripture even in an age when fewer Americans claim association with a religious group. Though the average reader (and even less attuned artists) might miss the biblical valences of such verses, the imprint of the Hebrew Bible is found on the strands of rhyme across American shores.

When the Psalmist wrote that God's words are "more to be desired than gold" (19:10), he was not anticipating the modern auction market, but the sentiment holds just the same. Thankfully, its priceless ancient wisdom is freely available to all, as it has been for millennia. From Revolutionary rhetoric to abolition chants to modern-day international diplomacy, the evocative imagery and moral inspiration of the Psalms have moved history forward, and it is my hope that the strings of David's harp continue to compel us toward the fullest expressions of national peace, prosperity, and purpose.

Dr. Shaina Trapedo is Resident Scholar and Recruitment Officer at the Straus Center for Torah and Western Thought, and an Assistant Professor of English at Stern College.



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500 West 185th Street ▪ New York, NY 10033

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