

Giving Thanks **by Debra Orenstein**

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The Thanksgiving Holiday is associated with Sukkot, the Festival of Booths. Having had a successful harvest (thanks to Squanto) in 1621, the Pilgrims harkened back to the biblical harvest festival and gave thanks for the fruit of the land (Lev. 23:33f, Deut. 16:13f, Ezra 3:4f). But the Jewish roots of Thanksgiving go deeper. The very word “Jew” means “thankful.” Leah named her son, Judah (thankful to God), saying, “This time I will give thanks to Adonai” (Genesis 29:35). Gratitude is an essential aspect of Jewish theology and practice.

Hakarat hatov (recognizing the good) is a habit of mind that both praises and produces what we seek. When we learn to see the good, we enjoy and create more of it. Jews traditionally recite prayers and blessings of gratitude 100 times each day to acknowledge God’s goodness and our many blessings. We are also enjoined to offer thanks and praise outside of our formal prayers.

The Jewish call to prayer, the *Barechu*, invites us: “Let us bless God who is blessed.” To some people, that prayer may seem redundant or even pointless. Why bless a God who is already blessed? Yet most of us have no trouble at all acknowledging and naming what is cursed. We routinely curse and complain about unfavorable circumstances, offenses, and inconveniences – and occasionally even about genuine evil. It takes mindfulness and holy intention to deliberately notice and bless what is blessed. Far from being redundant, the practice of “blessing the blessed” increases our awareness of and gratitude for the good. In short, it blesses our lives – and the lives of our neighbors – when we know our blessings.

The Israelites in the desert turned murmuring into a high art, so Jews can certainly lay claim to a cultural heritage of complaining as well as thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving holiday is a reminder that whatever our daily complaints – from petty grievances to

genuine sorrows – we have a great deal to be grateful for. By the time the Pilgrims sat down to their first American Thanksgiving feast, 46 of the original 102 who sailed on the Mayflower were dead. They certainly had reasons to mourn. They also had – and blessedly *realized* that they had – countless reasons to give thanks.

As a rabbi, I have witnessed people finding joy and gratitude in a hospice, as well as in a birthing center. I have prayed prayers of thanksgiving for the miracle of our bodies with people in the throes of pain, in the process of recovery, and in the full bloom of health. Circumstances do not dictate whether we will complain or give thanks. That is *our* choice.

We easily forget, but still we know: to be alive is sufficient reason for thanksgiving. In the words of Rav, "We give thanks to You, God, for the ability to give thanks."

I don't mean to say, "count your blessings." I am not even referring to all the gifts, pleasures, freedoms, abilities, and luxuries that we enjoy. I mean to say, "count yourself blessed." Regardless of circumstances or experiences, the mere fact of being alive, being human, being able to think these thoughts, makes you blessed.

May we celebrate thanksgiving on this treasured holiday -- and every day.