

RABBI'S COLUMN:

Rabbi Peggy Berman deProphetis



In ancient Israel, every seventh year was a *Shemithah* ("sabbatical") year. For an entire year, farmers gave their fields a rest. It was forbidden to sell food grown in this year so people had to plan ahead to have enough food and money to survive the year. The *Shemithah* year was a biblical mandate.

As the eighth year began, so did a new seven-year cycle. It started on the second day of the holiday of Sukkot, sixteen days into the new Jewish year. Men and women, infants and grandmothers, scholars, farmers, and carpenters, everyone assembled in Jerusalem on the Temple Mount.

Once the entire nation had gathered, the King of Israel, dressed in royal robes ascended to a platform, situated on a specially constructed platform for this occasion in the Temple's courtyard. He recited a blessing and then read aloud several portions from the Book of Deuteronomy, and then concluded with several more blessings.

This event which happened every seven years was known as *Hakhel*, "assemble." It was the only event that required every Jew to be present, reminding us of the historic moment when every member of our nation stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah.

Last year was a *shemithah* (sabbatical) year, so this year is a *hakhal* year for us. It began on Simchat Torah, a time we usually gather together to finish the annual cycle of Torah readings with Deuteronomy and start again with Genesis.

Although the mandate of *hakhal*, the gatherings of the entire Jewish people throughout the year to hear the Torah, is only in effect when all Jews reside in the Holy Land, nevertheless, in my opinion we should take advantage of it. In biblical times it was the king's not the High Priest's responsibility to arrange *hakhal* gatherings for an entire nation. In our time it is the responsibility of each community's leaders to gather its people. Every one of us can be a Jewish leader. We should be mindful of any opportunity that presents itself to gather some Jews and do Torah—whether that means actual Torah study sessions, or lay Jewish book clubs, building a sukkah, enjoying Shabbat dinner with friends and family, arranging a group trip to a Jewish cultural event, and even Thanksgiving dinner

this month. You can discuss how Thanksgiving is a Jewish holiday. (See a previous Rabbi's Column below for discussion points.) And don't only approach equally committed Jews. Let's share. There are plenty of "just Jews" around us.

More Torah, more life, and hopefully more engaged Jews.

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Thanksgiving, a Jewish Holiday

In July 1623, in New Salem, Massachusetts, pilgrims and native Americans sat down together to express gratitude for surviving the previous harsh winter, for the food that was sufficiently plenty, and for peace. This was the first Thanksgiving in America. There were no Jews at the table, although Thanksgiving was, at its origins, a Jewish holiday. It is not surprising that American Thanksgiving had a biblical model. The pilgrims of New Salem knew their Bible. And they thought of America as their Zion and New Salem as Jerusalem.

Jewish Thanksgiving was first celebrated by the Israelites after they had completed their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. After they settled in Canaan they were to make a pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, bringing with them the first fruits of their wheat and barley as a sacrifice of thanksgiving. Only after they had offered up these sacrifices in gratitude could they eat of the food they had grown.

Deuteronomy 26:1–11 describes the detailed procedures for offering of the first fruits, including the formula beginning, "My father was a fugitive Aramean..." which was to be recited.

This biblical holiday had two aspects--celebration of the agricultural harvest and the in-gathering of the Israelites who made their way to Jerusalem in order to offer their sacrifices. It was a family affair.

On American Thanksgiving we too gather with our families and friends to eat a bountiful meal together and express our gratitude. Did you know that the original Congressional resolution to make Thanksgiving a national holiday occurred in 1789. That same year the first known Jewish sermon--40 pages long--on the national Thanksgiving was delivered by Gershom Mendes Seixas, the chazzan of

the Spanish and Portuguese synagogue in New York City. There were no rabbis then in our country. The Congressional resolution recommended “a day of public Thanksgiving and prayer to be observed by acknowledging with grateful hearts the many and signal favors of the Almighty God...”Prayer is a form of thanksgiving and perhaps it would be good to add a little to our own celebrations.

Here’s a suggestion based on Sim Shalom (gray cover):

Psalm 100, p. 60 “Prayer for Thanksgiving” (based on Psalms, Isaiah, and Ben Sira, p. 819)

“America: Founded on Biblical Precepts,” pp. 821-823 Add to this a sharing time when each person states the things for which he/she is thankful.

The festive meal Birkat ha-mazon, (grace after meals)

And there you have it--A Jewish American Thanksgiving, one tied to its origins and reflecting its original intention. Enjoy your (הודו) hodoo--(turkey).

Happy Thanksgiving, שמח הודיה חג , chag hodaya sameach!

Rabbi Peggy