

## TORAH STUDY FOR CHRISTIANS

*Villa Maria Education and Spirituality Center, November 16, 2016*

### THE BIBLICAL ROOTS OF THANKSGIVING?

Even a cursory web search reveals that both Christians and Jews want to claim that there is a direct link between Thanksgiving and Sukkot; for Christians who find the roots of their faith in the Hebrew Bible as well as in the New Testament, the connection between the holidays is affirming while for Jews, the connection provides further proof of Judaism's deep and essential contribution to America's "secular" faith.

However, there is some controversy as to whether the American holiday of Thanksgiving really has its roots in the Biblical holiday of Sukkot (the Feast of Tabernacles),<sup>i</sup> the Torah portions of which we studied when we met last month in my synagogue. Given that the Puritans who founded the Plymouth Bay Colony were certainly Biblical fundamentalists, it would be surprising if the holiday did not at least to some degree inform their decision to actualize at least some aspects of the festival in their own festival of thanksgiving. (Both, for instance, were multi-day holidays.) Also, this group lived among the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam for a decade before leaving for the New World – it is not unthinkable to imagine that they were influenced by their Jewish neighbors, whose ancestors had also faced religious persecution and exile.

However, the Puritan-Pilgrim-Separatist form of Christianity categorized "Old Testament" commandments – the moral ones were incumbent upon them for all time, while the ritual ones were temporal and only intended for the Israelites of ancient times and their descendants, the Jews. Additionally, there is some question as to whether the Puritans originated the holiday of Thanksgiving at all – their practice deemed set feasts and holidays of any sort as inappropriate, while special days of prayer should mark unusual events.

Additionally, as we can recall from last session, Sukkot features specific rituals that Thanksgiving does not share: the dwelling in booths (*sukkot*), and the taking of the four species (i.e., the *lulav* and *etrog*). So, in what ways are they similar?

Both Sukkot and Thanksgiving are fall harvest holidays whose essential theme is gratitude to G-d, both feature outdoor feasts, and both cherish hospitality as a central practice. However, according to author Bruce Feiler in his book *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story*,<sup>ii</sup> the stronger link between the two might be that of Moses, the quintessential prophet. According to the story told aboard the *Mayflower II*, the ship in Plymouth on Cape Cod that re-enacts and retells the Pilgrims' story, the expedition's leader, William Bradford, read from Exodus 14 in giving his charges courage and motivation to meet the challenges they would face after their crossing. It was the words of Moses that enlivened both holidays. Some Pilgrims even saw Bradford as a latter-day Moses.<sup>iii</sup>

#### *Todah: The Thanksgiving Sacrifice*

The Torah actually presents a ritual for giving thanks for such a crossing as that made by the Pilgrims: the *todah* sacrifice, one of the types of sacrifices of well-being:

יא וְזֹאת תִּזְבַּח הַשְּׁלָמִים אֲשֶׁר יִקְרִיב לַיהוָה: יב אִם עַל־תּוֹדָה יִקְרִיבֶנּוּ  
וְהִקְרִיב | עַל־זִבְחַת הַתּוֹדָה חֲלוֹת מִצּוֹת בְּלוּלֹת בַּשֶּׁמֶן וּרְקִיקֵי מִצּוֹת מְשֻׁחִים בַּשֶּׁמֶן  
וְסֻלֹת מֵרֶבֶבֶת חֲלוֹת בְּלוּלֹת בַּשֶּׁמֶן: יג עַל־חֲלוֹת לֶחֶם חֲמִיץ יִקְרִיב קֶרֶבְנוֹ עַל־זִבְחַת  
תּוֹדַת שְׁלָמָיו: יד וְהִקְרִיב מִמֶּנּוּ אֶחָד מִכָּל־קֶרְבָּן תְּרוּמָה לַיהוָה לְכַהֵן הַזֹּרֵק אֶת־גֵּזֶם  
הַשְּׁלָמִים לוֹ יְהִיָּה: טו וּבִשֶׂר זִבְחַת תּוֹדַת שְׁלָמָיו בַּיּוֹם קֶרֶבְנוֹ יֵאָכֵל לֹא־יִנָּח מִמֶּנּוּ  
עַד־בֹּקֶר:

*Leviticus 7:11-15*

- 7:11 This is the ritual of the sacrifice of well-being, that one may offer to the Lord.  
7:12 If he offers it for thanksgiving, he shall offer together with the sacrifice unleavened cakes with oil mixed in, unleavened wafers spread with oil, and cakes of choice flour with oil mixed in, well soaked.  
7:13 This offering, with cakes of leavened bread added, he shall offer along with his thanksgiving sacrifice of well being.  
7:14 Out of this, he shall offer one out of each kind as a gift to the Lord; it shall go to the priest who dashes the blood of the offering of well being.  
7:15 And the flesh of his thanksgiving sacrifice of well being shall be eaten on the day that it is offered; none of it shall be set aside until morning.

Of this passage, the great Biblical commentator Rashi teaches us that the obligation to offer this token of gratitude in Jerusalem applies to anybody who “made a sea-voyage, or journeyed in the desert, or was imprisoned, or took ill,” and who emerged safely from his or her ordeal. The Pilgrims did not make such an offering, of course, but the festive meal of gratitude that might have taken place could certainly be seen as a substitute for the Biblically prescribed sacrifice.

### *The Passover Connection*

Does Thanksgiving link more directly, then, to Passover (Pesach)? We have not only Moses’ words, but the central theme of the holiday as well, that of leaving the harshness of persecution (the Israelites liberated from slavery in Egypt, and the Puritans leaving the religious persecution in England). Both Passover and Thanksgiving commemorate a perilous passage – that of the Israelites through the Sea of Reeds, with the water piled up on both sides, and that of the Pilgrims who survived the voyage over the Atlantic). Passover is commemorated by symbolic, ritualized feasting (the *seder*), while the Thanksgiving feast symbolizes the celebration of G-d’s bounty in the fall harvest of 1621 (according to our American myth). The *seder* is the ultimate expression of thanks for G-d’s redemption, marked by a willingness to place oneself into the ancient story, so as to believe that “we ourselves were liberated from Egypt.”

### *A Connection to Hanukah?*

Three years ago, there was a very rare event: Thanksgiving fell on Hanukah, opening up infinite opportunities for sermonizing on the junction between the two holidays (and for interesting cuisine fusion as well). Hanukah is known as a holiday on which the Jews celebrate the rebirth of religious freedom that followed the Hasmonean (the family of the Maccabees) victory over the Assyrian Greeks and the cleansing and rededication of the

Temple in Jerusalem. That rededication was an opportunity to celebrate Sukkot, which had been missed that year, so much of the symbolism of that holiday gets lumped onto Hanukkah as well, although the ritual practices are not the same (no one wants to try to dwell in booths during Hanukkah!) Like Sukkot and Thanksgiving, the key spiritual content of Hanukkah is gratitude for not merely the military victory but far more for G-d's protection, help, and sustenance.

*A Psalm of Thanksgiving:* Let us close with Psalm 100, the only psalm specifically named the Psalm of Thanksgiving:

- 1 A Psalm of thanksgiving. Shout unto the LORD, all the earth.
- 2 Serve the LORD with gladness; come before His presence with singing.
- 3 Know that the LORD is God; it is He that has made us, and we are His, His people, and the flock of His pasture.
- 4 Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise; give thanks unto Him, and bless His name.
- 5 For the LORD is good; His mercy endures forever; and His faithfulness is upon all generations.

א מְזִמּוֹר לְתוֹדָה הִרְעִיעוּ לַיהוָה כָּל־הָאָרֶץ: ב עֲבַדוּ אֶת־יְהוָה בְּשִׂמְחָה בָּאוּ לִפְנֵי  
בְּרִנָּה: ג דַּעוּ כִּי יְהוָה הוּא אֱלֹהִים הוּא עֲשֵׂנוּ וְלֹא [וְלוֹ] אֲנַחְנוּ עָמּוּ וְצִאֵן מֵרַעֲיָתוֹ:  
ד בָּאוּ שְׁעָרָיו | בְּתוֹדָה חֲצִרְתִּיו בְּתִהְלָה הוֹדוּ לוֹ כִּי־טוֹב יְהוָה לְעוֹלָם  
חֲסִדּוֹ וְעַד־נֶרְ וְזֶר אֲמוֹנָתוֹ:

#### QUESTIONS:

1. How important are our observances marked by gratitude and thanksgiving throughout the year? What other holidays or occasions celebrate our gratitude?
2. Why do you think this aspect of Thanksgiving – the gratitude part – has given way to shopping, sports, and mindless consumption?
3. What can we do as religious communities to revive the thanksgiving part of Thanksgiving?
4. What other inspiration might the Bible (either the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Bible) provide us in that effort?

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<sup>i</sup> D.M. Applebaum, writing in *Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, An American History*, makes a strong case for Sukkot not being the origin of Thanksgiving. This is also the opinion stated in *The Mayflower* by Nathaniel Philbrick. However, Rabbi Elias Lieberman of Falmouth Jewish Congregation thinks otherwise:  
([http://www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/shabbat\\_and\\_other\\_holidays/Thanksgiving\\_A\\_Harvest\\_Festival\\_with\\_Roots\\_in\\_Sukkot.shtml](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/shabbat_and_other_holidays/Thanksgiving_A_Harvest_Festival_with_Roots_in_Sukkot.shtml))

<sup>ii</sup> B. Feiler, *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story* (Wm. Morrow, NY, 2009) pg. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.ucg.org/the-good-news/is-thanksgiving-rooted-in-a-biblical-festival>