



This Month in Our Reform Jewish Heritage - November 2017

THANKSGIVING AND THE JEWISH TRADITION: We are all Mayflower Descendants

Rabbi Howard A. Berman



Pilgrims Going to Church, 1867 by George Henry Boughton

A core principle of Reform Judaism in America has been the embrace of our identity as American Jews, fully participating in the open, free and pluralistic society of the United States, and recognizing the distinctive role that our faith and people have played in the founding and building of our Nation. In turn, Thanksgiving Day has been observed in our homes and temples as an affirmation of our shared spiritual heritage as Americans.

One of the most important aspects of the observance of Thanksgiving Day in our nation is the fact that Americans from many different religious traditions and cultural backgrounds can claim historic ties to the Pilgrim legacy. All of us, of whatever faith, race or ethnic background, share a common kinship with that small courageous band. Contrary to the pre-tenses of some of their



family descendants, the Pilgrims them-selves were lowly, humble people, from remote country villages – poor and powerless. They were disenfranchised outsiders in England, despised and persecuted. And they uprooted themselves from their homes, all for a spiritual ideal - seeking freedom of mind and heart, for themselves and their families. They left tiny, impoverished towns in the English countryside, that were very much like the Irish and Italian hamlets, the Russian and Polish ghettos and shtetls, the rural African, Asian, Central American and Middle eastern villages, that most of our families came from...searching for the same new world of liberty and opportunity.

Of course, we must confront the dark stains on our national heritage – the displacement and decimation of the native peoples, primarily by those colonists who came decades after the original Plymouth settlers, as well as the reality that those who came to these shores from Africa were brought here against their will. They were excluded from that spirit of freedom and liberty for far too long - until their descendants claimed their rightful place in the continuing struggle to achieve the American dream. This is the Pilgrim legacy that all of us can lay claim to... and this is why *all* Americans are Mayflower descendants! As the Pilgrims themselves - devoted students of the Bible, who closely identified with Jewish history, fervently believed - the hard and dangerous journey that led to Plymouth Rock, in a very real sense began with that earlier migration from Egyptian slavery toward Mount Sinai... and led onward toward Ellis Island, and every other landing place that later generations of pilgrims arrived at on these shores...

The journey continues... for each of us, in our own lives - and for all the people of our country. The Pilgrims were the first to sense that America had a unique destiny in human history... as Governor Bradford wrote, “just as one small candle may light a thousand others, and lose none of its own light, so too will we - but few in number - become a beacon for all people!” At this point in our history, we stand at a critical crossroad in our nation’s life.

The challenge of civil rights for all Americans, freedom and justice for all people, and our yearning for a world of security and peace, are dreams still unrealized – even after the almost four centuries years since the Mayflower found its way to a safe harbor. Our nation stands dangerously polarized – politically, socially and economically – at this dawn of the 21st century. We too, may well have some dangerous seas and painful trials ahead of us, before we can gather with all our neighbors of the human family in a global celebration of Thanksgiving. But the example of our Pilgrim ancestors can continue to inspire and guide us... as we reaffirm the noblest ideals they stood for at their best: freedom of conscience... independence of spirit...and the continuing quest for peace...



Kol Nefesh ("Every Soul")

Family Prayers for Thanksgiving Day from the Union Prayer Book

God of the universe, from You come our blessings from day to day and from year to year. The towering mountains and the shaded forests, the abundant streams and the fruitful earth tell of Your endless bounty. For this land so richly blessed, we raise our voices in joyful thanks. As Pilgrims to these shores, people came from many lands to seek liberty and new hope. Some did not always practice the justice they sought, especially toward those who were here long before us. And there were many others who were



brought here against their will. Yet together they all found renewed purpose, increased strength, and the opportunity to outgrow old fears and superstitions. For our country, for its freedom – promised, attained, and yet to be fulfilled; and for the richness of its natural blessing, we offer our humble thanks. For the vision of greater harmony and unity among all of our citizens, we offer fervent hope.

O God of justice and right, inspire all who dwell in our beloved land with loyalty to the noblest ideals of its founders. Give us wisdom and strength to labor for its well-being, on the firm foundation of justice and truth. Fill us with the spirit of kindness and generosity, cooperation and peace, that this land may continue to be a beacon of light to many people.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם הַמוֹצִיא לָכֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

**Ba-ruch A-ta Adonai, E-lo-hei-nu me-lech ha-o-lam,
ha-mo-tzi le-chem min ha-a-retz.**

Let us praise the Eternal God, Ruler of the Universe, Who brings forth bread from the earth.

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם שֶׁהֵחֵינּוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעֵנוּ לְזֶמַן הַזֶּה.

Ba-ruch A-ta Adonai E-lo-hei-nu me-lech ha-o-lam she-he-chi-ya-nu, v'ki-y'ma-nu, v'hi-gi-a-nu, la-z'man ha-zeh.