



Is Thanksgiving a Jewish Holiday?

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What does it mean to celebrate Thanksgiving as a Jew? In some sense, the question is a cipher for a larger one: What does it mean to take our identities as American and as Jewish both seriously? We regularly speak of Moroccan Jews or Polish Jews, German Jews or Algerian Jews; we understand that each of these Jewish communities represents a meaningful expression of Judaism, reflecting both the enduring wisdom of Torah as well as specific cultural settings. In my experience, we less often think of “American Judaism” in this sense. America might be where we find ourselves, but we tend not to relate to it as our “kind” of Judaism. What does it mean to take seriously our Judaism as a uniquely American variety?¹

Thanksgiving is a useful test case: a distinctly American holiday that has been the subject of halakhic debate. Modern American rabbis have disagreed about the permissibility of Jews’ observing Thanksgiving.² Specifically, these authorities debate whether a Jew observing

¹ As an American married to a Canadian, I feel obliged to note that all of this applies as well to Canadians, or perhaps better, “North American Jews” writ large, even if the impetus for this particular *dvar Torah* is American Thanksgiving.

² See, for example, Iggerot Moshe Orah Hayyim 5:20; Yoreh De’ah: 4:11-12; Even ha-Ezer 2:13; Mishneh Halakhot 10:116.



Thanksgiving is violating the prohibition on “walking in their ways,” that is, imitating non-Jewish customs.³

These questions are dear to my heart because I love Thanksgiving and I feel deeply connected to it as both a Jew and an American. I am therefore not interested in this *dvar Torah* in rehashing these debates and offering a halakhic opinion on the permissibility of celebrating Thanksgiving. Rather, I want to think about how the different concerns and ways of thinking about “walking in their ways” might shed light on what it means to take Thanksgiving seriously, not simply as a holiday celebrated by Jews, but in some real sense as a Jewish holiday. How can I acknowledge both the very real ways in which I am, at my core, American, as well as the equally real ways in which my American identity challenges my Jewish one?

There are, broadly speaking, two competing positions in classical halakhic sources about when practices from the dominant culture are forbidden. The more lenient opinion, which is followed by the Rema in the Shulḥan Arukh, takes logical legibility as the standard for what is allowed.⁴ In the words of the Ran, “The Torah forbade only those ordinances that are idolatrous, i.e., things of vanity and emptiness, provided that they are needed for their idolatry. But sensible things are permitted.”⁵

The definition of “walking in their ways,” then, is precisely doing things that are otherwise insensible. That is a somewhat perplexing definition, though. There might not be any deep meaning to eating turkey on the fourth Thursday in November, but why should that make it forbidden? We can answer this question with another: If an act makes no sense, why would I

³ See Leviticus 18:3. For the reception of this verse in both classical Rabbinic texts and throughout halakhic history, see Beth Berkowitz, *Defining Jewish Difference: From Antiquity to the Present* (2012).

⁴ Shulḥan Arukh Yoreh De'ah 178:1. The Rema (R. Moshe Isserles) was a 16th century Polish rabbi most famous for his contributions to the Shulḥan Arukh.

⁵ שלא אסרה תורה אלא חוקות של עבודת כוכבים אלו דברים של הבל ובטלה וכולן יש בהם צורך עבודת כוכבים אבל דברים של טעם שר (Ran on the Rif, Avodah Zarah 2b). The Ran (Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona) was a 14th century Spanish commentator.



do it? In the context of being a minority culture, adopting otherwise meaningless practices of the majority might indicate internal ambivalence about the relative worth of my own tradition. Why would I eat turkey specifically on the fourth Thursday in November? Perhaps because I want to be like my neighbors, implying an insecurity in my own identity.

In the Rema's interpretation of "walking in their ways," for Thanksgiving to be a holiday that embraces my Judaism rather than an expression of assimilationism, it must be meaningful. Indulging in turkey and stuffing and sweet potatoes with marshmallows on top, just because it's a quaint practice, is a failure to observe Thanksgiving as a Jew and instead reflects cultural envy and insecurity. By contrast, when I take the day seriously, marking it as a day of gratitude, it is no longer a reflection of my Jewish ambivalence, but rather an understandable expression of my thanks—a completely sensible practice even in the context of Jewish tradition.

There is another, more stringent view about "walking in their ways," and it too is instructive. For Tosafot, even a practice that makes sense is threatening if it comes from another culture. Indeed, its legibility through a universal human lens might make it more threatening.⁶

What would the Tosafot think if they could see American Thanksgiving? I imagine that they would see a celebration of gratitude, timed to the local harvest, and perceive this as profoundly reasonable, meritorious even—and for that reason: threatening. Precisely because this holiday makes sense, it challenges my commitment to Judaism. If I express my annual gratitude at harvest-time through Thanksgiving—a holiday that benefits from the

⁶ See Tosafot, Avodah Zarah 11a, s.v. *ve-i*, where they distinguish between practices that are a part of that dominant culture's religious practice (לשם חוק לעבודת כוכבים), and those that are, for lack of a better term, part of their secular culture (ואחד שעושין לשם דעת הבל ושטות שלהם). Both are forbidden, but the latter case ("vanity and nonsense") is treated more leniently.



cultural reinforcement of its ubiquitous presence on media and in the grocery store aisles—then why do I need Sukkot?

I think, however, that there is something deeper about Thanksgiving in particular that might lead even the Tosafot to think of it as something nonthreatening for Jewish identity. R. Avraham Yitzhak Sperling of Levov explains why, uniquely among the Amidah's 19 blessings, the congregation recites an alternative version of the thanksgiving blessing (Modim) during the repetition of the Amidah:

ספר טעמי המנהגים ומקורי הדינים, קו

מפני שאין דרך העבד להודות לרבו... ע"י שליח. אלא כל אדם צריך לקבל בפיו עול מלכות שמים.

Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim u-Mekorei ha-Dinim, #106

Because it is not the way of a servant to thank their master... by means of a messenger.

Rather, each person must, with their own mouth, accept the sovereignty of Heaven.⁷

In R. Sperling's view, how can I let the prayer leader utter words of thanks to God while I stand numbly by, unmoved by the call to gratitude?

Likewise, when I dwell in a culture expressing its thanks in near unison, for me not to do so is not merely a missed opportunity—it is a kind of spiritual degradation, an act that could lead to a growing callousness and insensitivity to the good that God has done for us.

To observe Thanksgiving as a Jew, then, means to take it seriously as a day of gratitude. It means to recognize that while my core practices are those bequeathed to me by the Torah, my spiritual life must reflect the cultural realities in which I live. In a very real sense, to observe

⁷ I am grateful to my colleague R. Dena Weiss, both for this reference as well as for the insight into how it relates to our observance of Thanksgiving.



Thanksgiving as a Jew means to treat it seriously as a religious holiday, even if its functionally “secular” nature is precisely what makes it halakhically permissible in the first place.

May we all be blessed to have a day of true gratitude, reflecting our inheritance as both Americans and as Jews.