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LIFE & WORKIDEAS

Thanksgiving Was Born From America's Struggles

The history of the Pilgrims, the early Republic and the Civil War shaped a holiday that calls for gratitude in the face of challenges.



Doris Lee, 'Thanksgiving' (ca. 1935).

PHOTO: THE ESTATE OF DORIS LEE/D. WIGMORE FINE ART, INC.

By Meir Soloveichik

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Norman Rockwell's painting "Freedom From Want" is perhaps the most famous artistic depiction of an American Thanksgiving, showing a family joyfully gathered round an enormous turkey. For Rockwell, the abundance of the meal was the point, reflecting the ideal Franklin Roosevelt named in his famous "Four Freedoms" speech. Equally notable is the tranquility of the family gathering. There seems nary a disagreement among them; political divisions appear entirely absent.

In 2022, can we still gather together in simple gratitude?

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This year, it's easy to wonder if Rockwell's Thanksgiving has any relevance to our own. Soaring inflation has made big dinners less easy to afford, and many family gatherings will feature acrimonious discussions about the state of the country. In 2022, can we still gather

In fact, these challenges don't make our moment unique. The Thanksgiving we celebrate today evolved during periods of material struggle, political division and terrible loss. The lesson of American history is that national difficulties don't detract from the meaning of Thanksgiving; they are the very grounding of gratitude.

The Thanksgiving story begins, of course, with the Pilgrims. The English Protestants who arrived at Provincetown in 1620 were obsessed with the Hebrew Bible, seeing themselves as another Israel journeying to a promised land. In his book "Making Haste From Babylon," historian Nick Bunker describes how when the Pilgrims came ashore they recited passages from Psalm 107, which "speaks about the wilderness of the Sinai, about danger and deliverance, about the journey of the Israelites across the Red Sea, and about the duty to give thanks when the exodus is complete."



Antonio Gisbert, 'The Arrival of the Pilgrim Fathers' (ca. 1864).

PHOTO: BRIDGEMAN IMAGES

But the Pilgrims, as Mr. Bunker notes, were aware that Israel's journey was not easy, and neither was their own. Half of the people on board the Mayflower died during their first winter in America, victims of malnutrition, disease and exposure. In the Pilgrim Hall Museum in Plymouth, Mass., many artifacts from that time "have sorrowful stories associated with them—the cradle that rocked a fatherless child, the cooking pot that often would have been empty for lack of food to put in it," writes Melanie Kirkpatrick in her history of Thanksgiving.

Yet in the face of this suffering, Ms. Kirkpatrick writes, the Pilgrims were "world class practitioners of the virtue of gratitude." A year after their arrival they held a Thanksgiving feast to celebrate their survival, their freedom, and the peace temporarily achieved with their Wampanoag neighbors. They knew that one of scripture's central teachings is that life's fragility makes it precious, never to be taken for granted. That is why, during the biblical harvest celebration of Sukkot, the Israelites in the Holy Land were commanded to leave the security of their

own homes and spend seven days in ramshackle huts, in remembrance of their ancestors' difficult desert journey. The essence of biblical gratitude, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks has written, is "to know that life is full of risk and yet to affirm it, to sense the full insecurity of the human situation and yet to rejoice."

The next turning-point in the history of Thanksgiving came in 1789, the year George Washington was sworn in as the first president of the United States. Given Americans' unanimous esteem for the man they called the "Father of Our Country," it is easy to look back on that age as one of political unity. In fact, the leading members of Washington's cabinet, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, hated each other bitterly, and their followers in the Federalist and Democratic-Republican parties followed suit.

The Constitution had been ratified only two years earlier, and many Americans still did not trust or accept it. Some of the heroes of the Revolution believed that the new federal government, with its centralized legislature and powerful presidency, was as bad as the British monarchy they had fought against. During the debates over ratification, Virginia's Patrick Henry insisted that the Constitution "squints toward monarchy." Rhode Island refused to ratify the new system of government and held out from joining the union for a year. Today we still debate how to interpret the Constitution, but in 1789 Americans debated whether it should even exist.

The motion to establish a holiday was bitterly opposed by those who saw it as mimicking European monarchical customs.

opposed by those who saw it as mimicking European monarchical customs, raising the president to the rank of a king. In response to these critics, Rep. Roger Sherman of Connecticut insisted that the ritual of thanksgiving was biblical, rather than European. King Solomon, he noted, celebrated a festival of gratitude following the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

Sherman's argument carried the day and Washington proclaimed Nov. 26 the first national Thanksgiving celebration, asking Americans to give gratitude to God for "the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed." Washington's point was that Americans weren't celebrating their unanimity but their ability to resolve differences democratically, allowing room for dissent on some of the

Thanksgiving got swept up in the controversy. In September 1789, a member of the House of Representatives proposed that President Washington establish a national day of Thanksgiving, to give gratitude to God for the "opportunity peaceably to establish a Constitution of government for their safety and happiness." The motion was bitterly

most sensitive political and religious questions. For Americans to disagree profoundly about politics, and yet be able to gather together, was itself a reason for gratitude.



An engraving of Sarah Josepha Hale, ca. 1850.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

It was the Civil War that led to the creation of Thanksgiving as we know it today. The impetus came from Sarah Josepha Hale, a New Hampshire-born writer who was familiar with sickness and death throughout her life. As a young woman she lost her mother and siblings; later her husband David died of pneumonia, and she mourned him by wearing black for the rest of her life. She supported her family as a novelist, the editor of a women's magazine, and an author of children's poems, including "Mary Had a Little

Lamb." Her novels made the case for the abolition of slavery and for the Thanksgiving traditions of her New England ancestors.

Hale called on president after president to create an annual Thanksgiving holiday, but Millard Fillmore, Franklin Pierce and James Buchanan all ignored her pleas. Finally, as historian Denise Kiernan writes in her book "We Gather Together," Hale found her man in Abraham Lincoln. When she wrote to him in 1863, the timing might have seemed especially bad: Give gratitude to God after the battles of Shiloh, Antietam and Gettysburg? Yet Hale's letter seems to have touched Lincoln, who was himself tormented by a sense of the fragility of life, amid the deaths of so many thousands of American soldiers and of his own young son Willie.

In a remarkable proclamation, Lincoln declared the last Thursday in November 1863 to be a national day of Thanksgiving. At a time when America was divided by war, Lincoln emphasized that "harmony has prevailed everywhere, except in the theater of military conflict." In the face of countless casualties, he gratefully reflected that "the terrible losses of the war, had not arrested the plow, the shuttle, or the ship; population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege, and the battlefield."

These blessings, he insisted, could only be "the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." The Civil War forced Americans to realize how fragile their

national existence was, but Lincoln believed that fragility made gratitude all the more important.

The same is true today. Despite political divisions, we can give thanks for living in the oldest continuous democracy in the world. Two years after a pandemic that suddenly cut us off from one another, we can give thanks for the chance to gather with family, no matter how much we may disagree. In Ms. Kiernan's words, "To take Thanksgiving back, to take it forward, we can choose to reflect the very spirit Hale embodied throughout her long life. We can exhibit the best of ourselves."

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