

Why Thanksgiving is a Jewish Holiday
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What's the difference between Shabbat and Thanksgiving? For they share so much in common: each of these days is highly anticipated. There's no work. No school. Things slow down. Lots of good food, maybe a nice wine. Friends and family around the table. Gratitude for the blessings in our life.

So what's the difference between Shabbat and Thanksgiving? No Musaf on Thanksgiving!

Thanksgiving often feels like a Jewish holiday to me. Part of this is the packaging: the look and feel of Thanksgiving dinner is so similar to Shabbat dinner, minus the rituals. But even when you remove the packaging, the two days share a core message: gratitude. In fact, gratitude is so important to the Jewish tradition that we try to practice it every day in our Brachot and Tfillot, blessings and prayers. Gratitude is even encoded into our name, Jews - Yehudim. More on that soon.

To be a Jew is to be part of a grateful people, despite all the tragedies our people has endured. This is true historically since we have needed countless blessings in order to survive and thrive as we do today. And it's true linguistically as well. The Jews are Yehudim, or those descended from the tribe of Judah. Our ancestor Judah is given this packed-with-meaning name by his mother Leah.

In two more Parshiyot, Vayetze, Leah gives birth to three sons. Aside from the obvious physical pain, the arrival of new children should be a moment of joy and bliss. That's not what Leah experiences. With piercing pain she watches her sister Rachel capture the heart of their shared husband Jacob. Leah is empty of Jacob's love, which crushes her. This torrential emotion spills out into the names of her first three children. The first son is named Reuven because "G-d has seen my affliction." Next is Shimon, for "G-d heard that I was unloved and gave me this one too." Then follows Levi, because "This time my husband will become attached to me for I have borne him three sons" (Gn. 29:32-34).

It is nothing short of shocking, then, when Leah names her fourth son Judah. She names him Yehuda as she affirms, "This time I will *thank* G-d." (Gn. 29:35). From the depths of pain bursts forth this rush of gratitude.

The Rabbis ask, Why? Why does Leah thank G-d only after this fourth son of hers? Was she not grateful for sons one through three? The Midrash says that Leah was a prophet who could foresee that there would be 12 sons born to four women: Leah, Rachel, along with their maidservants Bilhah and Zilpah. This meant that, in fairness, each mother should be allotted three. Her fourth son, therefore, was above and beyond, more than she deserved. I know this is a stretch, but I think it articulates a specific feeling of having more than one ever imagined - and that can be universal.

She acknowledges this unexpected blessing with gratitude. “This time I will *thank* G-d.” *Odeh* is the same root as *Modeh Ani*, I am grateful. As *Todah Rabbah*, thank you. As *Modim Anachnu Lach*, we are grateful to You. As *Yehudi*, Jew.

The Iturei Torah says that Leah’s expression of gratitude, of recognizing she had more than she deserved, is why Jews are called *Yehudim*. We too should aim for lives filled with praise and gratefulness, with the realization that in many ways we each have more than we deserve.

Like Leah, our people experienced seemingly unending bouts of bitter anguish and disappointment throughout our history. But we emerged as the people who are grateful. We read that verse about naming Judah from the Torah in Parashat VaYetze, which just so happens to be the Torah reading for the week of Thanksgiving. Coincidence? I think so. But I love it!

Thanksgiving is wonderful for so many reasons. I really believe that the annual reminder to be grateful, to say Thank You, makes people better and more empathetic. And it’s precisely because of this self-betterment that we should be aware of our blessings far more than once a year. For Jews, giving thanks - expressing gratitude to G-d for the blessings in our lives - is a daily practice. It’s why blessings and prayers are meant to be recited every day.

I’m aware that most of us don’t say Brachot, Hebrew blessings, during the course of the day. When I was growing up, I knew this was one thing Orthodox Jews did that Conservative Jews didn’t, and that was fine. For me, saying blessings before and after food was in a category like the Mechitza in shul separating the men from women. For them but not for me.

I’ve since changed my mind. Now I say Brachot during the day. When I started, I discovered that the more blessings I made, the more aware I was of the blessings in my life. People say “Count your blessings.” But how can you count your blessings if you don’t make them? I also see that my awareness of G-d is much stronger because I’m thanking G-d more than just when I pick up the Siddur to pray. In short, blessings are amazing. Saying Brachot during the day enriches my spirituality and makes me feel closer to G-d, benefactor of Brachot. Because blessings raise awareness.

Today I want to make a case that we all say a particular blessing at certain times, the *She’hehiyanu*. You know this one already, which ends *She’hehiyanu VKiymanu VHigiyanu LaZman HaZeh* - thank you God for giving us life, sustaining us, and enabling us to reach this moment. And you know some times when we all say this joy-and-gratitude Bracha: at the beginning of many holidays, like Yom Kippur; as we perform certain Mitzvot for the first time that year, like lighting Hanukkah candles; before eating a new fruit, like on the 2nd day of Rosh HaShanah. We are also supposed to say this blessing when we wear a piece of new clothing of significance. Some say the Bracha when they see a friend they haven’t seen in a month.

Those are the details, and here’s the big picture: whenever you experience a moment when you feel, “Thank You, G-d, for letting me reach this momentous day,” say the *She’hehiyanu*. Like a birthday. No matter how young or old you are, adding another candle to the cake is a blessing. Or like an anniversary. No matter how long you’ve been married, reaching another year together is something to be grateful for. Things may not be perfect in either case, but making this Bracha

focuses us on the good parts. Here at shul when congregants have a Simcha, like a birthday or anniversary, they take an Aliyah and then say She'hehyanu for this reason. But we can say it anywhere at any time. Don't worry, you won't turn into a rabbi!

Consider saying the She'hehyanu when you experience or witness a meaningful accomplishment. The other day, my baby crawled for the first time at home. I made a She'hehyanu in front of his brother. It was a really amazing thing to watch. Once in a while we experience a taste of life that takes our breath away and makes us say, "Wow! I can't believe I got to see that beautiful moment." Judaism takes that inward emotion, gives it language, and encourages us to express that joy outwardly.

I saw my baby Oren crawl and I froze with joy. She'hehyanu. Two seconds later, I was onto "Honey, where are our baby gates?"

I don't make a She'hehyanu on Thanksgiving. I mean, there's not even Musaf that day! But I do think that the Jewish tradition really dovetails with the American holiday's emphasis on gratitude.

In the spirit of thankfulness, I want to take a moment to say Thank You to you, the wonderful congregants of Beth El. Thank you for welcoming me and my family with open arms. Thank you for going out of your way to make me feel comfortable here and at home. Thank you for being patient as I've tried to learn your names. Thank you for inspiring me with your commitments to this community, prayer, Torah study, Israel and the Jewish People. Thank you for being a place where I truly want my kids to grow up. Thank you.

Before eating dinner next Thursday night, many American families will go around the table saying, "I am grateful for X." This is a wonderful thing. The Jewish reflex, I believe, is to go one step further and say, "Thank you, G-d, for X." And when a special day comes somewhere down the line, to say She'hehyanu.

We say our blessings to count our blessings. And we count our blessings to make our blessings count.

Shabbat Shalom.