

Like most members of other faith communities in our country, we Jews celebrate two sets of holidays. We have our own holiday calendar; complete with Rosh HaShannah, Yom Kippur, Chanukah, Passover and quite a few others that might only be familiar to those non-Jews who have to worry about alternate side of the street parking in New York City. In addition, we also have the so called secular holidays. Some of these holidays we eagerly embrace: like Labor day and the fourth of July. Others, like Halloween and Valentine 's Day, are more problematic for some. But there is one holiday we feel a special connection to: Thanksgiving.

According to tradition, the Pilgrims based their Thanksgiving celebration on the Biblical harvest holiday of Sukkot. Because of Thanksgiving's origins in ancient Israel, almost every Jewish preschool and day school holds a big Thanksgiving program. When I served as a rabbi in California, our preschool had a schoolwide Thanksgiving feast. Half of our four year olds came to feast dressed as Pilgrims and half as Native Americans. We taught our kids that the Pilgrims and Native Americans shared the first Thanksgiving feast as a celebration of the cooperation between them.

It was very important to us that Native Americans received equal billing at the Thanksgiving feast; especially since so many of us had grown up in a time when the Pilgrims were the focus of Thanksgiving. Our Thanksgiving feast tried to redress the imbalance by giving the Native Americans an equal role. But it turns out, though, that even we did not go far enough in telling our kids the real story of that first Thanksgiving.

The Pilgrims arrived in Plymouth, Massachusetts in the fall of 1620. The winter that followed brought hunger, disease and death to the colony. Only half those who arrived in Plymouth the year before survived. That spring, two Native Americans, Squanto and Samoset, discovered the colony in desperate straits. Along with other members of the Wampanoag tribe, Squanto and Samoset taught the Pilgrims how to grow crops, build shelters, hunt and fish in their new home.

The Pilgrims learned their lessons well. By the fall of 1621, they had had a successful harvest and laid up stores of food for the winter. They invited the Wampanoags to a three day Thanksgiving celebration. However, the Pilgrims badly underestimated the amount of food they would need for the celebration—everyone's Thanksgiving nightmare. Fortunately, the Wampanoag's had plenty of food. Chief Massasoit dispatched members of the tribe to bring food from their village. And so it was that the Native Americans supplied most of the food for the first Thanksgiving feast.

Later on, this first Thanksgiving feast inspired our founding fathers and mothers to make Thanksgiving an annual holiday. They set aside the fourth Thursday in November as a holiday devoted to giving thanks to God for the bounty God grants us; very much like the holiday of Sukkot. And it is this

common appreciation of the need to acknowledge God for our blessings that makes Thanksgiving a holiday we can all so easily share.

But I wonder whether, when we think about the story of the first Thanksgiving, our founding fathers and mothers may have grasped one important lesson, while missing another one entirely. To be sure God is the ultimate author of all blessings. And in many of our religious traditions, we acknowledge God's goodness every day in prayer. Yet, in the story of the first Thanksgiving, it is the Native Americans who are the agents of God's beneficence. Without the Wampanoags reaching out to help the colonists at Plymouth Rock, there would have been no Thanksgiving feast. There might not even have been a Plymouth Colony. The generosity of the Wampanoags played a pivotal role in the first Thanksgiving. We could even argue that the Native Americans in the story really play the starring role; that maybe we should have more four year olds in feathered headdresses and fewer wearing Pilgrim bonnets.

My point here goes far beyond political correctness. I am really talking about the spirit of Thanksgiving. It seems to me that no Thanksgiving celebration can really be complete without acknowledging not only God, but also all those people who provide us with help, support and encouragement in our own lives. Thanksgiving, I believe, should also be a time when we give thanks for, and to, our spouses, our children, our parents, our friends, and all those people in our lives who give of themselves to us.

In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses warns the people against falling into the trap of believing that all blessings come from our own efforts. Do not think for one minute, that "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." While Moses intends this warning to remind us of our duty to God, it could also serve as a reminder that none of us can make it in this world by ourselves.

All along the way, we need help from those closest to us. We rely on them for, even the most independent minded, for all kinds of physical and emotional support. Where would we be without our parents, who sacrificed so much to give us life, an education and a safe and loving home? Where would we be without our spouses, who reach out to us in love dozens of times each day? Where would we be without our devoted friends and close family members, who are there for us when we need them, even though they could easily absent themselves.

As we sit around the Thanksgiving table on Thursday, let's take a few minutes out to thank not only God, but also all those who are there with us who have given us so much help and support. Let's take a few minutes to give thanks for the important relationships in our lives. Because these relationships, along with God's beneficence, are what sustain us day to day, month to month year to

year. These relationships are among the greatest gifts we ever receive; the greatest blessings we enjoy each day.

Even as we are thinking about those closest to us on Thanksgiving, we might also take a minute to think about the many other people who have helped us over the years. Most of us, I am sure have benefited from the kindness of complete strangers, casual acquaintances and people who have since disappeared from our lives. Maybe we were inspired by a caring teacher, given a chance by a kind-hearted employer, helped out of a jam at just the right time by a complete stranger. We might never be able to acknowledge these people directly. But we should take the time to remember just how much difference an act of caring can make. Most of our lives, I imagine, would be much different if the people we encountered were indifferent to us all the time. Thank God for all those people in our lives who cared even when they didn't have to.

There is of course, a very appropriate way to show our gratitude to those who have helped us in this way. We can do the same for others. And on this Thanksgiving, in particular, that kind of caring and generosity is sorely needed in our community. There are many, like the Pilgrims in the spring of 1621, who are desperate and in need of help this year. And there are lots of reasons to help. But especially on this Thanksgiving, let's remember that none of us makes it in this life alone. We need the help of God, and we need the help of others. For those of us who do still have plenty, let us be inspired by the true heroes of the Thanksgiving story, the Wampanoag tribe, who gave so willingly to a people very different from them, out of sheer kindness and compassion for human suffering. Let's honor the spirit of that first Thanksgiving not only by thanking God, and those in our lives who have offered us support, but also by reaching out to those in need and sharing the blessings we have received.