Thoughts for Thanksgiving

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By
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President George Washington proclaimed Thursday November 26, 1789 as a day of national thanksgiving to God "for His kind care and protection of the people of this country previous to their becoming a nation; for the signal and manifold mercies, and the favorable interpositions of His providence in the course and conclusion of the late war; for the great degreee of tranquility, union, and plenty which we have since enjoyed; for the peaceable and rational manner in which we have been enabled to establish constitutions of government for our safety and happiness, and particularly the national one now lately instituted; for the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed, and the means we have of acquiring and diffusing useful knowledge; and, in general, for all the great and various favors which He has been pleased to confer upon us."

The Jewish communities in the United States of that time rejoiced in the role they played in establishing this new country. Already in 1784, leaders of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York City (founded 1654) had sent a letter to Governor George Clinton on behalf of "the ancient congregation of Israelites" in which they said: "Though the society we belong to is but small, when compared with other religious societies, yet we flatter ourselves that none has manifested a more zealous attachment to the sacred cause of America in the late war with Great Britain....And we now look forward with pleasure to the happy days we expect to enjoy under a constitution wisely framed to preserve the inestimable blessings of civil and religious liberty."

A new country was born, and the Jews had participated in its formation. They were equal citizens in the United States. This was not true of

Jews in any country in Europe or in the Muslim world. American Jews were the first in the history of the diaspora to be citizens on an equal footing with their non-Jewish neighbors, and to have actually participated in fighting for the independence of a new nation.

When President Washington called for a day of Thanksgiving, Jews observed this day with joy and pride. At Shearith Israel in New York, the Rev. Gershom Mendes Seixas arranged a suitable service of prayer, and delivered an address in which he called upon Jews "to support that government which is founded upon the strictest principles of equal liberty and justice."

In subsequent years, days of Thanksgiving were similarly celebrated at Shearith Israel and the other early Jewish congregations. These days were invariably proclaimed in the name of the American people, and were meant to be observed by each citizen according to his or her own faith. In 1817, New York State established an annual observance of Thanksgiving Day. Shearith Israel held services on each subsequent year--except 1849 and 1854. In those two years, the Governor of the State had addressed his proclamation specifically to "a Christian people" instead of to Americans of all faiths. Other than these two years, Thanksgiving has been proclaimed for all Americans, each according to his and her own faith.

It is sometimes heard in Orthodox Jewish circles that Thanksgiving Day is a "non-Jewish holiday" and should not be observed by religious Jews. This view is historically wrong and morally dubious. Thanksgiving Day is a national American holiday for all residents of the United States, of all religions. Jews participated in Thanksgiving from the very beginning of the United States' history. This national holiday belongs to Jews as to all other Americans. It is altogether fitting that Jews join fellow Americans in observing a day of Thanksgiving to the Almighty for all the blessings He has bestowed upon this country. Jews, in particular, have much reason to thank God for the opportunities and freedoms granted to us in the United States.

In his famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport in 1790, President Washington wrote: "May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants--while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid." These

are words, expressive of the American spirit at its best, for which we can be thankful.

Happy Thanksgiving.

Angel for Shabbat