Thoughts for Thanksgiving 2023

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By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

Israel is at war. Anti-Jewish words and deeds have skyrocketed throughout the world. In the United States, we witness anti-Israel and anti-Semitic hatred on the streets, on college campuses, and in the media.

Yes, there are many things that concern us. The “American Dream” isn’t as peaceful and optimistic as it was last year.

But we are thankful for America. We are thankful to the Almighty for the many blessings showered upon our country.

We are thankful that the nation’s President has stood with Israel and the Jewish People at this time of crisis. We are grateful for the overwhelming support of Israel and American Jewry by the American Congress and political leaders on all levels of government. We are grateful for the many millions of Americans who stand with Israel and the Jewish People.

For Jews, as for so many others, America has been—and continues to be—a land of opportunity and freedom. The ideas and ideals of America continue to inspire and to give hope. Without ignoring or belittling the many problems facing the country, we must be grateful for its positive values, its commitment to democracy, and its strong opposition to tyrannical nations.

It is difficult to get into a celebratory mood this Thanksgiving. Our hearts are heavy with so many losses, with so much pain, with so much needless suffering.

We pray that those who hate Israel and the Jewish People will overcome their hatred…and reach out sincerely for peaceful co-existence. We pray that Israel and the Jewish People will remain strong, idealistic and humane. We pray for peace in Israel, throughout the Middle East and throughout the world. We pray that all good people everywhere will foster love, not hatred; mutual respect, not enmity; kindness, not cruelty.

Realism demands that we see things as they are. Idealism demands that we see things as they can and should be. We must never let realism block out our idealism. We dream of—and work for—better days.

There are worrying trends in American life. Yet we celebrate Thanksgiving with the faith that the American Dream has the power to maintain our country as a bastion of freedom and democracy. The American Jewish community has made—and continues to make—monumental contributions to American life in so many areas. We are grateful for the blessings of America.

In his famous letter to the Jewish community of Newport in 1790, President George 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 everyone 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.

On April 17, 1818, Mordecai Manuel Noah--one of the great American Jews of his time--delivered an address at the dedication ceremony of Shearith Israel's second synagogue building on Mill Street in lower Manhattan. He closed his talk with a prayer that we invoke this Thanksgiving: "May we prove ever worthy of God's blessing; may He look down from His heavenly abode, and send us peace and comfort; may He instill in our minds a love of country, of friends, and of all mankind. Be just, therefore, and fear not. That God who brought us out of the land of Egypt, who walked before us like 'a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,' will never desert His people Israel."

Happy Thanksgiving.