

## Were the Pilgrims Celebrating Sukkot?

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There is plenty of evidence that the Pilgrims, devoutly familiar with the Bible, were imitating the Jewish celebration of Sukkot during the first celebration that became Thanksgiving. The Puritans fled England in 1620 on the Mayflower. As Bruce Feiler noted in his book, *America's Prophet: Moses and the American Story*, the Puritans saw themselves as the New Israelites in the New Israel. The European refugee members of the North American continent read the Bible in its original Hebrew. There was even a proposal to make Hebrew the official language of the colonies!

The Continental community that defined the Puritans was taken directly from the Jewish concept of the Covenant at Mount Sinai. The Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was John Winthrop. He said, "We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and a glory, that men shall say of succeeding plantations, 'The Lord make it likely that of New England.'" Winthrop borrowed heavily from the Hebrew Bible.

Sukkot is known to the Christian world as the Feast of Tabernacles. Rejoicing in the Festival of Sukkot was, and still is for Jews, a high point in celebration of the holidays beginning with Rosh Hashanah.

The commandment on Sukkot is to be happy. The Pilgrims were inspired by this and by the Jewish concept of gratitude. The first words of a Jew when awakening in the morning are to thank G-d for restoration of the soul. The Jewish silent devotion said three times a day is about gratitude for health, peace, wisdom and the ability to earn one's bread.

Thanksgiving is so much a part of the Jewish prayer service that it is recited each day, three times a day. Psalm 100, the Psalm of Thanksgiving, is a part of the daily weekday liturgy.

A key component of Jewish Thanksgiving is the belief in free will. Gratitude, a core value of Judaism, does not reside in isolation, but rather is enhanced by the ability of the individual to control his or her own destiny. Among those of a more spiritual point of view, mankind was created solely to be able to exercise human free will. G-d is not to blame for mankind's bad decisions.

It has been debated for millennia as to why G-d would let human kind make such bad decisions. Why do we pray if we simply have free will to do the right or the wrong thing? Free will, in the Jewish context, is not the slightest bit inconsistent with the belief that G-d controls the growth of every blade of grass. To the contrary, making decisions and giving thanks are a unitary defining principle of the Jewish faith.

Perhaps no one has explained the great partnership between G-d, Thanksgiving and free will than Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of England.

This Thanksgiving it is just and appropriate that we recognize our free will to do good or evil and to be grateful for the beneficence bestowed upon us and our great nation.

We live in challenging times where the extremes of left and right wing philosophy merge as a common culprit in opposition to a tolerant society.

A little known incident occurred recently to passengers on an airline flight headed from New York to Israel. The Israel National Airline, El Al, realized that it was not going to be able to get to Israel before the onset of the Sabbath. More than 150 passengers elected to get off at Athens with nothing more than the clothes on their back so they would not be traveling on the Sabbath. One of the people on that flight who recently wrote about it in a blog, was one of my daughter's teachers. The man wrote that for the first time in his life he realized what the Sabbath really was supposed to be like. He spent the 25 hour period with strangers, sharing a room, but with a beautiful meal supplied by the Chabad of Athens in cooperation with the hotel and El Al Airlines.

The Shabbat in Athens was like one huge Thanksgiving celebration that took place Friday night and through most of the day on Saturday. Strangers and people of differing denominations and religious views sang together, prayed together and enjoyed a difficult time away from family and friends.

My daughter's teacher wrote in his blog that the desk clerk at the hotel in Athens asked how these people could be so seemingly happy, dancing and singing, when they were so terribly inconvenienced. The waylaid passengers did not have so much as a toothbrush or a change of shirt. The teacher tried to explain what it meant to enjoy G-d's grace in difficult circumstances. The people who got off that El Al flight to Israel to keep Shabot were living the covenant with gratitude and based upon their own free will. Those components do co-exist and were clearly understood by our Pilgrim ancestors.

For everyone regardless of race, religion, color, creed all the best for good health, happiness, peace, and above all a gracious Thanksgiving filled with gratitude, good friends and family.

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