

A Seder for Thanksgiving

Compiled by Rabbi Phyllis A. Sommer

America

My country tis of thee,
Sweet land of liberty
Of thee I sing:
Land where my fathers died,
Land of the Pilgrims' pride,
From every mountainside
Let freedom ring!

Our father's God to Thee,
Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright,
With freedom's holy light,
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our King.

Written by Samuel Francis Smith in 1831, this song served as a de facto national anthem of the United States for much of the 19th century.

Lighting the Festival Lights

May it be your will, God of our ancestors, that You grant our family and all humankind a good and long life. Remember us with blessings and kindness, fill our home with your Divine Presence. Give us the opportunity to be truly wise, lovers of God, people of truth, who illuminate the world with Torah, good deeds, and the work of the Creator. Please hear our prayer at this time of thanksgiving. Let the light of Your face shine upon us, Amen.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יי, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם,
שְׁהַחֲיֵנוּ וְקִיַּמְנוּ וְהִגִּיעָנוּ לְזִמְן הַזֶּה.

*Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam,
shehecheyanu v'kiyimanu v'higiyanu lazman hazeh.*

Blessed are You, O Eternal, our God, Ruler of the Universe
who has sustained us and brought us to this season of joy.

In the days of the Pilgrims, the Puritans, when they arrived at these safe shores, suffered hunger and cold. They sang and prayed to the Rock of their Salvation. And You, standing by them, roused the caring of the Natives for them: who fed them, turkey and corn and other delights. Thus saved You them from starvation, and they learned the ways of peace with the inhabitants of the land. Therefore, feeling grateful, they dedicated a day of Thanksgiving each year as a remembrance for future generations, feeding unfortunates feasts of thanks. Thus do we thank You for all the good in our lives, God of kindness, Lord of Peace; thus do we thank You.

Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

Blessing the Wine

As we prepare to bless the Thanksgiving wine, we pass the communal cup. Each of us gives to the cup some of our own wine, a sharing of our happiness and gratefulness.

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, בּוֹרֵא פְּרֵי הַגֶּפֶן.
Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam borei p'ri hagafen.

Blessed are You, O Eternal, our God, Ruler of the Universe, Creator of the fruit of the vine.

We are in a truly unique and wonderful country, a land in which our very foundational documents speak of liberty and freedom, equality and truth.

ALL: When in the Course of human events,

Reader: it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another

Reader: and to assume among the powers of the earth,

Reader: the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them,

Reader: a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

ALL: We hold these truths to be self-evident

Reader: that all men are created equal

Reader: that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights

Reader: that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Reader: That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

Reader: it is the Right of the People to... institute new Government...

Reader: And for the support of this Declaration

Reader: with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence

ALL: we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

From the Declaration of Independence, written by Thomas Jefferson and signed on July 4, 1776

When the Pilgrims came together, they signed a document known as the Mayflower Compact, which became the first governing document of the Plymouth County.

We whose names are underwritten...do...solemnly...combine ourselves into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation...to enact, constitute, and frame, [such] just and equal laws, ordinances, acts, constitutions, and offices...for the general use of the colony, unto which we promise all due submission and obedience.

The Mayflower Compact, 1620

Asking questions is a sign of freedom.

Tonight we demonstrate our freedom as we ask and answer questions.

The Five Questions

questions for thought, for discussion, for action...

What are we personally thankful for?

What are we thankful for as American Jews?

What do we wish to contribute to this country?

What do we believe are the highest ideals and best values of the United States?

Have we, as a nation, lived up to those ideals and values in the past year?

Psalm 100: A Psalm of Thanksgiving

Sing unto God in thanksgiving
Acclaim Adonai with joy, all the earth.

Serve God with gladness;

Come before the

Divine Presence with singing.

Know that Adonai is Adonai;

God made us, and we are God's;

We are God's people,

the flock that God shepherds.

Enter into the gates of Adonai
with thanksgiving,

and into God's courts with praise;

Give thanks unto Adonai,

and bless the holy name.

For Adonai our God is good;

God's lovingkindness endures forever;

God's faithfulness is unto all generations.

Blessing the Bread

בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ, אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, הַמוֹצִיא לֶחֶם מִן הָאָרֶץ.

Baruch Ata Adonai Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz.

Blessed are You, O Eternal, our God, Ruler of the Universe,
who brings forth bread from the earth.

O God, Source of life, compassion, and justice, grant us wisdom and strength that we may lift our lamps for freedom, justice, and compassion.

Amen.

God Bless America

God bless America, land that I love
Stand beside her and guide her
Through the night with the light from above
From the mountains to the prairies,
To the ocean white with foam
God bless America,
My home sweet home.
God bless America,
My home sweet home.

Jewish-American Irving Berlin wrote “God Bless America” in 1938.

The Festive Meal

As you eat the meal, share your own stories of your families’ journeys to this country. What brought you here today? What are some of the ways your Thanksgiving celebration is different from others that you know of or have attended? What are some of the ways it is similar? Share family customs and values together as you share food and drink. After the meal, share in some family songs, some “American” songs or some of your favorite Hebrew songs!

Grace After Meals

To be thanks giving, because we can.
To be thanks giving, because of what we have been given.
To be thanks giving, because in giving we are given.

לשנה הבאה ביחד!

L’shana haba’ah b’yachad!

Next year together!

If I Had a Hammer

Words & music by L. Hays & P. Seeger, 1958

If I had a hammer,
I’d hammer in the morning
I’d hammer in the evening,
All over this land.
I’d hammer out danger,
I’d hammer out a warning,
I’d hammer out love
between my brothers and my sisters,
All over this land.

If I had a bell...

If I had a song...

Well, I’ve got a hammer & a bell & a song...

This Land Is Your Land

Words by Woody Guthrie, 1940

This land is your land, this land is my land
From California to the New York Island
From the Redwood Forest
to the Gulf Stream Water
This land was made for you and me.
When I went walking
That ribbon of highway
I saw above me
The endless skyway.
I saw below me
The golden valley
This land was made for you and me.
This land is your land...

Notes on Usage

Thanksgiving is truly an American holiday. Whether your family came to this country 200 years ago, 20 years ago, or 2 years ago, it's a celebration that's easy to embrace. Sharing a meal and a feeling of gratitude transcends racial, ethnic and social boundaries. We may all eat different foods, we may speak a multitude of dialects and languages, but on this day, we share in the best that is America.

To that end, I offer this Thanksgiving Seder. For American Jews, it is another opportunity to share in a meal similar to the Passover Seder. And similar to that Seder, in which we tell the story of our people's journey out of slavery in Egypt, on this night we tell the story of our own journeys to this country. Because of its lack of religious particularity, this is an excellent opportunity to share the feast with both Jewish and non-Jewish family and friends.

Incorporate "traditional" Jewish foods into your thanksgiving meal. Serve a kugel or challah, or whatever is traditional in your family. Consider different kinds of foods as well. Perhaps this year you will honor the various contributions of different ethnic groups to our country and serve tortillas, nan, or pita. Bringing our own cultural heritage into an American custom opens the door for conversations about your own family's journey to America.

Consider spending some time during the day visiting a soup kitchen or sorting toys to give away. Visit a nursing home or a hospital. There are many opportunities for Thanksgiving mitzvah projects.

Welcome guests to your Thanksgiving table. Much like Passover, this is a chance to welcome someone to our homes who may not have a place to go. Teach your family about the mitzvah of welcoming guests.

This Seder can be just a starting place for a family conversation about thanks and giving. Don't feel that these words are set in stone. Each year consider adding in new and different elements to keep the focus on gratitude and helping others. There are a number of excellent resources, including freedomfeast.us, from which ideas for this Seder were adapted as well.

May your celebration be full and enriching.

Happy Thanksgiving!

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I would love to hear your family's Thanksgiving traditions and ideas.
Feel free to share with me your ideas and how you used this Seder.
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