

Love on the Table
Interfaith Thanksgiving Service
November 21, 2022

Friends: at this Interfaith Thanksgiving Service, I open with personal words of thanks. Thank you to your invitation to me, to share these thoughts with you. I am so new to this area that this is my first time in this sacred space, and first time meeting most of you. I feel blessed by this fellowship, and look forward to an ongoing and meaningful connection in the days to come.

Some time ago, in a discussion about theology with a Confirmation class, one 10th grade student indicated that he had no idea if he believed in God. “But,” he added... “I believe in food.”

This was not just some wise-crack comment. To that student, he saw sustenance not only as mere survival, but as a deep expression of culture, creativity, diversity, and distinct identity. Then, and now, as we approach the American moment when God and food are both on the table, I get what he meant.

I submit, for your momentary consideration, my own family. Gathered into one microcosm of the world around us, we have a kosher home – which means no combination of meat and dairy in a meal or on our dishes. We have one child who is a vegetarian, which means we need a main course in addition to the

preeminently holiday associated poultry. We have another child who has celiac, which means a gluten-free meal, or at least careful separation of anything with a trace of gluten in it. (Our third child, raised in a kosher home, is now experimenting with eating anything she wants to. So from this point of view, she's not the issue here. Except for being very picky about what kind of dessert she wants!)

I bear in mind the old adage about polite conversation in refined company avoiding religion and politics. One member of my family is a full-time activist. And I am rabbi. Add in the eating restrictions, and we represent our Emily Post-loving neighbor's worst nightmare as dinner companions.

Think now, if you will, about all of your guests – or those who are hosting you. If you will be alone this year, think of such meals in the past.

Juggling the needs of all who come can be a challenge. There are times when it can feel like a burden.

I submit to you that this is one of the great blessings of the season. For putting food on the table for all to share... that is nothing less than an act of love. As is whatever we do, in this or any season, to share with those beyond our own home table.

This past Saturday night I was asked, for the first time in a long time, about the topic of my thesis when I was in rabbinical school. I had not thought about that thesis in some time. But what I wrote on was the Jewish tradition of saying a blessing before a pleasurable experience. In particular, I focused on the tradition of reciting blessings over food.

Many of you remember the opening scene in *Fiddler on the Roof*. A group of followers in an impoverished and downtrodden Russian shtetl approach the Rebbe, the revered rabbi, and ask “Is there a blessing for the tzar?” And the rebbe says: “Of course. There is a blessing for everything. May God bless and keep the tzar... far away from us!”

Humor aside, the sentiment is thoroughly Jewish. There is a blessing for everything.

To say a blessing before we eat may seem obvious to us now. But, interestingly enough, it is not clearly commanded in Scripture! We read that the blessing *after* the meal is Biblically ordained. In Deuteronomy it says “when you have eaten, and are satisfied, you bless God for the good land that God has given to you.”

But blessings before we eat? The rabbis of the Talmud spend pages trying to show where in the Torah this is commanded. And they actually give up! They throw up their metaphorical hands and say: “Look, it’s just logical – if you say a blessing after you eat, *al echat kama vakama*, how much the more so we should do this before we eat!”

But what blessing do we say? Bread is a catch-all, and cover-all, so that many people know only to recite that one blessing... and do not delve into the nuance of learning about others.

But there is a great lesson in the numerous other traditions around food. One example: over an orange one says “Blessed are You... creator of the fruit of the tree.” But over orange JUICE one says the more generic blessing, one recited over meat, fish, or eggs, if not accompanied by bread: “Blessed are You... by whose word all things come to be.”

We are commanded, in other words, to not only give thanks FOR food, but to think about what the food is – and how it came to us. The more natural, the closer to its original state, leads to one kind of blessing. The more it is processed, the more it changes form along the way... that is a different blessing.

The same passage in the Talmud asks what a blessing is, what it does, what it accomplishes. It contrasts two verses in Psalms. One proclaims that “the earth is the Lord’s, and the fullness thereof.” But the other promises: the heavens are the heavens of God, but the Earth God gave to human beings.”

So, nu? Which is it? Is the earth ours? Or is it Divine?

The rabbis resolve this made-up, set-up conundrum in the following way. Everything belongs to God. The whole world is holy. Before we recite a blessing. But once we do... then the earth, the material world, the focus of our awareness passes into our hands.

What, then, does a blessing do? It is a kind of opening the eyes. It is an awareness of origin. It is like *asking permission*, and being granted access to the energy of the world... to sustain our lives.

“I don’t know if I believe in God,” said a student, some time ago. “But I believe in food.”

This season, this time of year... when we give thought to who we host, and what we put on the table... when we are aware of the needs of others, and the content of our courses, the process of production, the journey taken by our guests and our meal... well, when we open our homes and our hearts and our eyes... I believe that love is on the table. And God is all around us.

May this be a happy, healthy and meaningful Thanksgiving, for you, for us, and for all the world.