THANKSGIVING: A perspective from the 19th Century

Rabbi Sabato Morais (1823–1897), one of the major Orthodox figures of nineteenth-century America, saw the United States as a place where Jewish life could flourish with dignity and confidence. Born in Livorno, Italy, and raised in the proud tradition of the Portuguese-Sephardic community, the Rabbi arrived in Philadelphia in 1851 to lead Congregation Mikveh Israel, the historic synagogue founded in the colonial era. From his very first year in America, the Rabbi understood something profound: Thanksgiving was not only an American custom—it was also a deeply Jewish moment.

For Rabbi Morais, Thanksgiving represented an American celebration that invited Jews to stand proudly beside their fellow Americans and thank God for the blessings of freedom, peace, and opportunity. He described it as "*a national holiday which connects the Jewish people to their country and to their fellow Americans, irrespective of their creed.*"

On November 27, 1851, shortly after beginning his long career at Mikveh Israel, the Rabbi delivered a Thanksgiving Day sermon that was later published in *The Asmonean* (□□□□□□□□), one of the earliest American-Jewish newspapers. The selections below show how naturally Rabbi Morais integrated Jewish faith with American civic gratitude:

"…On the day which the inhabitants of this land have set apart to the Lord, let not Israel be found reluctant in responding to the religious call. True, we do not assemble to commemorate an event peculiar to us, yet, even as members of the house of Jacob, the present occasion must call forth our deepest feelings of gratitude toward God our benefactor… Everything around us beams with joy… The invaluable blessing of plenty has been showered on us and we and our children reap the

benefits thereof…”

The Rabbi then turns to the American Jewish experience, describing it with conviction and hope:

“A century has nearly elapsed since the scattered children of Judah here found a home of security and peace; here they have thriven and acquired wealth; no internal adversary has ever molested them, nor has the rod of tyranny reached these shores… here they have but to prove themselves worthy and they will rise as high as any free man can aspire… the boundless field of knowledge is unclosed to you… unimpeded in the exercise of your religious duties… you are not merely tolerated, but regarded with respect; for you also form part of the glorious whole that constitutes the American Republic.”

For Rabbi Morais, this was the core message: Jewish identity and American identity are not in conflict. A Jew can be fully committed to the Tora, fully committed to the community of Israel, and fully committed to the United States—without contradiction. The Rabbi believed that the freedoms of America were not only political gifts but also religious opportunities.

In the final section of the sermon, the Rabbi offered a prayer to the God of the Universe, “□□□□ □□ □□□□□,” the Sovereign of all ages:

“Bless this country, this people, their homes, their fields, their commerce… maintain among them harmony of feelings, indissoluble brotherhood, and unity of power… Bless all of them, of whatever nation or creed, who have this day like us gathered to thank thy abundant goodness… Over their old and young… over their schools and teachers, unfold, Oh God, the pavilion of thy peace…”

This prayer captures the Rabbi’s entire vision: America should remain united, peaceful, morally strong, and grateful to God. Jews should contribute to that national mission, not from the

margins, but from within—openly, proudly, and faithfully.

For Rabbi Morais, since the earliest generations of American Jewish life, Jews have found in this country not only safety, but a home where they can lift their voices in thanks to God alongside their fellow citizens.

The surviving copy of the sermon is especially precious. Rabbi Morais clipped it from the newspaper and placed it in his personal ledger. There, in pencil, he corrected and refined the text—revealing how carefully the Rabbi shaped his words and how much he valued this message of Jewish-American gratitude.

Read the full Thanksgiving Sermon of RabbiSabato Morais here