# THANKSGIVING: A Sepharadic Approach

Sephardic Jews, the first Jews to arrive in America in the middle of the 17th century, first settled in New York, then known as New Amsterdam. In the United States, they developed a clear and consistent approach to Thanksgiving, viewing it as a civic day that could be celebrated through Jewish expressions of gratitude. From the beginning of American Jewish history, Sephardic leaders framed Thanksgiving as an opportunity for Hakarat HaTov, thanking God –and the American government–for the freedoms and protections of the United States.

This story begins in 1789, when President George Washington proclaimed the first national Day of Thanksgiving. Rabbi Gershom Mendes Seixas–the first American-born rabbi and the Rabbi and Hazan of Congregation Shearith Israel, "The Spanish & Portuguese Synagogue," founded in 1654–encouraged his community to participate. Jews gathered in synagogue on Thanksgiving morning to offer prayers of thanks, establishing a precedent for integrating the holiday into Jewish life.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, prominent Sephardic rabbis strengthened this path. Rabbi Sabato Morais (see here) and Rabbi Henry Pereira Mendes (1852-1937) –founder and later president of the OU or Orthodox Union, and among the early teachers at Yeshiva University –publicly supported the observance of Thanksgiving within a Jewish framework. Later, Rabbi David de Sola Pool (1885-1970) continued the celebration of Thanksgiving. Serving for nearly half a century, Rabbi de Sola Pool formalized this practice by composing a Minchat Todah–a structured liturgy of praise and gratitude–using traditional Jewish texts without creating a new religious holiday.

In recent decades, Modern Orthodox Jews celebrate Thanksgiving

at home. Sephardic families gather with relatives, share a festive meal, and express gratitude for the freedoms and opportunities of the United States.

Congregation Shearith Israel, where many of these practices were shaped, continues this historical tradition up until today.

As their website records:

“Congregation Shearith Israel has been conducting Thanksgiving services since President George Washington first declared this holiday in 1789. Jews participated side by side with other Americans in fighting for and establishing the United States as an independent country. At our services on Thanksgiving Day morning, we chant several chapters of Psalms—parts of the Hallel—at the conclusion of the morning prayers. We also recite the prayers for the governments of America and Israel. ”