THANKSGIVING: The Sephardic Perspective

Yesterday, Thursday, was Thanksgiving in the United States. It is a national holiday: people do not work, families get together and celebrate… by eating turkey. And every year around this time I hear the same question: may a Jew celebrate Thanksgiving?

The Sephardic rabbis of this country always gave the same answer: yes. To understand why, we need to start with what halakha, Jewish law, says about non-Jewish celebrations.

WHAT DOES HALAKHA SAY?

The Torah forbids us to take part in the celebrations of other religions and to adopt customs that come from idolatry. That is why a Jew does not celebrate Halloween, whose pagan origin is beyond dispute: it was born from the ancient Celtic cult of the dead, and many of those elements are still present today. And that is why a Jew does not celebrate Christmas, which is a Christian religious holiday.

But Thanksgiving is different. It has no pagan origin or ritual, like Halloween. It has no Christian religious meaning, like Christmas. It is something special and unique to the United States: a national celebration, like Independence Day, but with a spiritual and universal purpose: to thank God.

That is how President George Washington presented it in 1789, when he proclaimed the first national Thanksgiving. Washington asked that Thursday, November 26 of that year (the same date as this year!) be devoted *"to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be."* Thanksgiving, in other words, means giving thanks to God. And it is worth noting that Washington and the founders of this country did not invoke

Yeshu, but God directly, the God of the Hebrew Bible.

THE SEPHARDIC RABBIS

The Sephardic rabbis of the past were well aware of all this. And so they never saw a problem with celebrating Thanksgiving. Quite the opposite. Sephardim were the first Jews to arrive in this country, in 1654. In 1789, the rabbi of Congregation Shearith Israel in New York, "the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue," was Rabbi Gershom Mendes Seixas, the first American-born rabbi. When Washington proclaimed Thanksgiving, Rabbi Seixas gathered his community in the synagogue and reminded them that they shared in *"every benefit that results from this good government," for which "we cannot sufficiently adore the God of our fathers."* Remember that the Jews of this country were already citizens with the same rights as everyone else, something that at the time existed nowhere else in the world.

In 1851, Rabbi Sabato Morais, born in Livorno, Italy, and rabbi of Congregation Mikveh Israel in Philadelphia, said in his Thanksgiving sermon: "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." Rabbi Morais knew perfectly well that this was not a Jewish holiday. He said so himself: the congregation was not gathering to commemorate an event of its own. But a Jew who lives in a country that treats him with respect and lets him practice his religion in freedom has much to be thankful for.

RABBI PEREIRA MENDES

But the most important Sephardic rabbi of this country was, in my view, Rabbi Hayim Pereira Mendes (1852-1937). He was born in England, into a distinguished family of Sephardic rabbis, and at twenty-five he was called to New York to serve as rabbi of Shearith Israel. He served there for sixty years. He founded the Orthodox Union (the OU, which we all know today

for its kashrut certification) and was its first president. And he fought like no one else for Shabbat observance, at a time when a Jewish worker who did not show up on Saturday was fired on Monday.

Rabbi Pereira Mendes fought assimilation and devoted his life to combating it. And yet he never saw a contradiction between the Torah and Thanksgiving. The year 1905 marked 250 years since the arrival of the first Jews in this country. The idea of commemorating it was born at Shearith Israel, Rabbi Pereira Mendes's synagogue, and the date chosen was Thanksgiving week. For the preceding Shabbat, a committee of seven rabbis prepared a special service: Psalm 107, part of the Hallel, and a prayer of thanksgiving. The committee was chaired by Rabbi Pereira Mendes. He himself wrote a Tefila of thanksgiving for the occasion. The text spans our entire history. It thanks God for taking Israel out of Egypt and for accompanying it in every exile, from nation to nation. And it thanks Him for having guided, 250 years earlier, a small group of Jews seeking freedom to serve Him, to a land, [the United States], that became a haven of freedom and justice for the oppressed of all peoples. It then prays for the country: that it preserve its freedom and the justice on which it was founded, and that its citizens remember that freedom depends on respect for the law, and prosperity on trust in God. And it ends by asking that America be a light to all peoples. That Shabbat, in his sermon, Rabbi Pereira Mendes asked Jews not to abandon their Judaism in the midst of so much acceptance. **Thank America, yes. Assimilate into America, no.**

In 1945, his successor, Rabbi David de Sola Pool, composed for Shearith Israel a Minchat Toda, an order of Psalms and prayers of thanksgiving for this day. And to this day, on Thanksgiving morning, that synagogue recites Psalms from the Hallel and the prayer for the governments of the United States and Israel.

AND THE ASHKENAZI RABBIS?

In the Ashkenazi world, by contrast, the matter was debated. Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner forbade taking part in this celebration. Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik considered it a secular holiday and permitted it. And Rabbi Moshe Feinstein permitted eating turkey, but no other form of celebration. It should be said that this is not an issue that divides the Jewish community: many Orthodox Jews celebrate Thanksgiving and others do not.

THANKSGIVING AND MAIMONIDES

But the most surprising part of this story was uncovered by a non-Jewish historian, Nick Bunker, in his book Making Haste from Babylon.

The Pilgrims of the famous ship Mayflower arrived in America in November 1620, fleeing religious persecution in England. Their leader, William Bradford, carried a Bible with the annotations of a Puritan scholar, Henry Ainsworth. As soon as they reached land, Bradford called on everyone to thank God for surviving the dangerous voyage. What did they recite? Psalm 107, the same one we recite on Pesach!

And what did Ainsworth's note on that Psalm say? *That "the Hebrews" learn a law from it: four people must thank God in public, in the presence of ten men. The sick person who was healed, the prisoner who was freed, the one who crossed the sea, and the one who crossed the desert. And Ainsworth cites his source: "Maimonides, Mishne Torah, Laws of Blessings, chapter 10."*

In other words, Ainsworth translated into English Maimonides' halakha on Birkat HaGomel, the berakha we say to this day when we come safely out of danger. And Bunker argues that this prayer of the Pilgrims, who had crossed the sea, was the original Thanksgiving.

America's first Thanksgiving was inspired by a halakha of Maimonides, the greatest of the Sephardic rabbis. Perhaps that is why the Sephardim of this country never felt it was a

foreign holiday.