

# AMERICA'S TABLE

## A Thanksgiving Haggadah

This Thanksgiving is different.

Our joy is mixed with profound sorrow  
because there are more than  
5,000 empty places at America's table.

We are grieved. We are angry. We are united.  
As family. As Jews. As Americans.

We want to understand. We struggle to respond.  
While words may elude us, rituals comfort us.

## Why is this Thanksgiving different?

## What have we lost?

Let us light one candle in memory of the innocents and the heroes of September 11th, and in empathy with the families and friends who ache for them.

And let us light a second candle to symbolize hope. Hope for the safety of America and Israel, of Jews everywhere, indeed, of the entire world. In the warmth of these two flames, let us pray for peace.

Thanksgiving links American and Jewish values that enrich our lives. This holiday commemorates the Pilgrims' first New World harvest. Its inspiration comes from the Hebrew Bible and the festival of Sukkot.

Echoes of Sukkot resonate this year. Simple, temporary huts, open to the sky, recall the shelters that protected desert wanderers. They remind us how fragile is even the sturdiest building, indeed, life itself.

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**Spread over us the shelter of Your peace...  
Remove the adversary from before us and  
from behind us, and in the shadow  
of Your wings shelter us.**

*The Metsudah Siddur*

Protected under God's canopy, the *sukkat shalom*, and inspired by acts of courage and glimpses of our common humanity, we are prepared to face the future's uncertainty with renewed confidence.

**The story of Jews fleeing persecution** and seeking religious freedom is an American story. No country in history has so enabled us to flourish, create, and contribute to the national life as citizens and as Jews.

This autumn of memorials and obituaries has sharpened our appreciation for the blessings of our lives and connected us to the lives of others:

... to the aspiring actress whose passions were caring for animals and teaching children through theater;

... to the 28-year-old rookie firefighter who was covering for someone else at his ladder company;

... to the stock trader whose last moments on earth were spent calling home to say, "I love you and tell the kids I love them, too."

These are but a few of the people we honor now as we pause in silence.

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**Strange is our situation here upon earth.  
Each of us comes for a short visit, not knowing why,  
yet sometimes seeming to divine a purpose.  
From the standpoint of daily life, however,  
there is one thing we do know:  
that we are here for the sake of each other,  
above all, for those upon whose smile and  
well-being our own happiness depends,  
and also for the countless unknown souls  
with whose fate we are connected  
by a bond of sympathy.**

Albert Einstein

## What have we learned?

## What do we tell our children?

Night fell suddenly on that warm September morning, obliterating the azure blue sky in turbulent clouds of dust and ash.

Our landscape dimmed. Sturdy columns of steel, which seemed as solid and invincible as America itself, were destroyed. Stunned, we mourn the loss of people and place.

New York, Washington, Pennsylvania. Not here. Not in America! This is the promised land of our pilgrim fathers and mothers. Terror, long endured in Jerusalem, has invaded our shores. All the landmarks of our lives seemed to collapse, and in this flattened terrain we felt again like wanderers.

The nation mobilized quickly. Americans of all backgrounds and from every region showed the way forward with acts of bravery, acts of lovingkindness, acts of charity, and with voices of compassion and clarity.

**“This was not just an attack on the City of New York or on the United States of America. It was an attack on the very idea of a free, inclusive and civil society.... We’re of every race, we’re of every religion, we’re of every ethnicity. And our diversity has been our greatest source of strength. It’s the thing that renews us and revives us in every generation.”**

New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani (United Nations, October 1)

**Life has changed.** Our openness is moderated by caution. Hope struggles with fear. Nothing is routine. Yet we resist returning to normal because in this intensity everyday events, like a phone call from an old friend or the unexpected courtesy of a stranger, are experienced as miracles. We understand that every moment is sanctified.

**“All the world is a narrow bridge. But the essential principle is to fear nothing at all.”**

Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav

We are thankful that we live in this American community, which derives its awesome creativity and energy from the diversity of its people, the freedoms they enjoy, and their fervent pursuit of justice.

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**Alas!**

**Lonely sits the city  
Once great with people!  
She that was great among nations  
Is become like a widow.  
...But this I do call to mind,  
Therefore I have hope:  
The kindness of God has not ended,  
God’s mercies are not spent.  
They are renewed every morning...**

Selections from *Lamentations* (New JPS translation)

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**Teach me my God, a blessing, a prayer  
On the mystery of a withered leaf  
On ripened fruit so fair  
On the freedom to see, to sense,  
To breathe, to know, to hope, to despair.  
Teach my lips a blessing, a hymn of praise  
As each morning and night  
You renew Your days,  
Lest my days be as the one before  
Lest routine set my ways.**

Leah Goldberg (translated by Pnina Peli)

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**כל העולם כולו גשר צר מאד והעקר לא לפחד כלל.**

*Kol ha-olam kulo gesher tzar me'od  
v'ha-ikar lo lefakhed klal.*

**God cannot have sent us this terror.  
But we can see that God has given us a world  
that is a very narrow, precarious bridge—  
so narrow, so precarious, that one  
would logically... fear falling into the abyss  
and simply choose not to cross the bridge.  
But we must not fear to cross. We must believe  
that this bridge of life becomes ever wider and  
safer when thousands of us gather, across all  
the lines and definitions that divide us, to  
become the agents of God’s goodness.**

Rabbi Lester Bronstein (Riverside Church  
Healing Service, September 16)

Let us express our gratitude using these written words or our own.

**Our God and God of our ancestors: We ask Your blessing for our country, for its government, for its leaders and advisors, and for all who exercise just and rightful authority... May citizens of all races and creeds forge a common bond in true harmony to banish all hatred and bigotry and to safeguard the ideals and free institutions which are the pride and glory of our country.**

*Siddur Sim Shalom*

We are thankful for the freedom from hunger.

We are thankful for the freedom to worship.

We are thankful for the freedom to challenge our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to change our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to chart our lives.

We are thankful for the freedom to work for a better world.

We are thankful for the freedom to celebrate this day.

We pray for our country, for the men and women who today are protecting our freedom, and for the day when this nation and the entire world will know peace.

“ We cannot merely pray to God to end war;

For the world was made in such a way

That we must find our own path of peace

Within ourselves and with our neighbor...

Therefore we pray instead

For strength, determination, and will power,

To *do* instead of merely to pray

To *become* instead of merely to wish;

That our world may be safe,

And that our lives may be blessed.”

Rabbi Jack Riemer

עושה שלום במרומיו הוא יעשה שלום עלינו ועל כל ישראל ואמרו אמן.

*Oseh shalom bi-m'romav, hu ya'aseh shalom aleinu v'al kol yisrael, v'imru amen.*

God who brings peace to the universe will bring peace to us and to all the people Israel, and to all the inhabitants of the earth. And let us say, Amen.

We thank God for the bread on our table by sharing our good fortune with others.

ברוך אתה ה' אלהינו מלך העולם המוציא לחם מן הארץ.

*Barukh atah adonai elobeinu melekh ha-olam, ha-motzi lehem min ha-aretz.*

Praised are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who brings forth bread from the earth.

## FOR CHILDREN

### Four Questions:

What does Thanksgiving mean to you?

How do you think living in America is different from living in other countries?

Who are your heroes?

What would you like to be thankful for next year?

### Activity:

Think of ways to share our good fortune.

For additional copies of this Thanksgiving Haggadah and to learn more about the American Jewish Committee's ongoing efforts to counter intolerance and extremism, defend democratic values, advance human rights, and support Israel's right to peace and security, please visit [www.ajc.org](http://www.ajc.org).



The American Jewish Committee

The Jacob Blaustein Building  
165 East 56 Street  
New York, NY 10022-2746  
(212) 751-4000