

On That Day God Will Be One

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Our Thanksgiving celebration today originates in 1620, when a group of Puritan Christians, known as Pilgrims, escaping persecution in Europe set sail for the New World in a ship called the Mayflower. After reaching the eastern seaboard of what would eventually become the United States of America, the Pilgrims established a settlement called Plymouth Rock. Their first winter in the New World was treacherous and many in their community died from the cold and starvation. But when the winter thawed they were greeted by Squanto, a leader of a local Native American tribe. Speaking in English he learned from other settlers, Squanto conversed with the Pilgrims, eventually signing a treaty with them. That Spring and Summer, Squanto and his tribe trained the Pilgrims to hunt, fish, and grow food in the New World. Using their newfound skills, the Pilgrims had a successful harvest and towards the end of Autumn of their first year in the New World, they invited the Native

Americans to join them in a spirit of fellowship and of unity for the very first Thanksgiving celebration in America.

Or not.

See every time I read or hear this story, there's always some note – whether it's a comment on a web page or a disclaimer in the story itself – that perhaps this is not the origin story for the Thanksgiving we celebrate today. Yes, the Pilgrims were escaping religious intolerance in Europe, but as Puritans who wanted to purify worship they saw as being done the wrong way, would they have been willing to stand here shoulder to shoulder in worship with other sects of Christianity let alone non-Christian faith communities? Yes, there may have been a shared feast between the Pilgrims and their allied Native American tribe, but does that fact assuage the bitterness of the conflict between Native Americans and European settlers that dominated the headlines of early American history? Ironically, over 60 years after the Pilgrims landed in Plymouth Rock, the town council of Charleston Massachusetts opened their Thanksgiving Proclamation on June 20 1676 by thanking God for being

on their side in “the present War with the *Heathen Natives* of this land.” How quickly a Thanksgiving feast with equals turns to war with heathens. Perhaps it should not be surprising then that every year since 1970, the United American Indians of New England hold a National Day of Mourning in Plymouth, to protest the glorification of a story built on the beaten backs of their ancestors. It strikes me how in so many of the great culture battles around the world, a day of thanksgiving and joy for one side can also be a day of sadness and pain for the other.

As we sit here together, the larger, diverse Huntington community, on this Sunday before Thanksgiving Day, I’m thinking to myself, this story is so problematic to the spirit that we are trying to cultivate in this room and throughout this country tonight – of ecumenical fellowship, of unity through diversity, of a shared American spirit – why do we continue to tell it? Why do our preschoolers walk home telling us how the Native Americans and the European settlers made peace when really they were at war? Really, what will we lose if we stop telling this story?

The first thing I think we'll lose by not retelling the story to our kids, is that we'll forget the part of the story we intentionally leave out. At one time or another, we've all suffered from being decried as heathens – people who are mocked, bullied, and persecuted because we are seen as a danger to the rest of society. And at the same time, though it may be difficult to admit, we've all acted at times as conquering European settlers, forcing others to assimilate to our culture, speak our language, and conform to our way of life. The painful history of an America divided between the conquerors and the conquered is not just historical, it is present in our reality today played out on our streets, in our schools, and at our borders, as different visions for what it means to be an American fight for supremacy.

In thinking about how different visions for what it means to be an American are fighting for supremacy, I'm drawn to Zechariah 14:9, ביום ההוא יהיה ה' אחד ושמו אחד – On that day God will be One and God's name will be One. If you look at the context of this verse, you'll notice that Zechariah is predicting a future in which the God of Israel will reign

supreme. God's Oneness will be achieved by the sword, in which all peoples will ultimately submit to the God of Israel. It's a verse that speaks to monotheism's crusader impulse to convince the world of one truth at the expense of all other shades of truth. It's a verse that would motivate European Pilgrims to view themselves as pure and view the natives as heathens thus supporting their war against them.

But that's not the only way to read this verse because Jewish liturgy removes this verse from its biblical context and places it in a new one, at the conclusion of one of our final prayers of the service called *Aleinu*. In this context, Zechariah's verse on God's Oneness is surrounded by three other prayers that all end with a call for *Shalom*, a call for the many tribes of humankind to come together in peace. And that's interesting, because according to one interpretation of the verse in Zechariah by the great medieval Spanish biblical commentator Abraham Ibn Ezra, the notion that God's name will be One does not mean that God will force others to proclaim God by the specific name Israel calls God. No, it means that God's name will be One when it is pronounced in all of its forms. That is

what the prayer for *Shalom*, for peace, really means, a hope for the day when the kaleidoscopic beauty of humanity comes together to call the Source of our Creation by its many names, and in so doing unifies us and God together as One. That is why we continue to mythologize the Thanksgiving meal between the Pilgrims and the Native Americans, because in that story – removed from its historical context but placed in a theological and spiritual one – it speaks to the hope that we can, despite our differences, come together in Shalom, in peace, and in unity. That is the blessing of this day and that is a blessing that is special to our sense of being American.

In 1951, a Methodist minister, John Paul Williams, and a Reconstructionist rabbi, Mordecai Kaplan, published a book called *The Faith of America*. In this book they offer interfaith liturgical options for Americans of all faiths to come together to celebrate and commemorate American holidays, including Thanksgiving. As Kaplan and Williams say about Thanksgiving, “this is a day devoted to a grateful awareness of the blessings of American life. A blessing not appreciated is easily lost.” Yes,

we are a nation of warring factions among religious, racial, gender, socio-economic, tribal, and political lines. But we are also a nation that sees itself as a promised land, in which anyone can be whoever they want to be and they don't have to sacrifice the story of where they came from in order to get where they want to go. We are the blessing of unity through diversity, of e-pluribus-unum, of from the many, one. Our Thanksgiving myth reminds us of the hope fueling that goal, while acknowledging our very real failures in achieving it. But we must never lose that hope of America's blessing because the fabric of our country is sown by the threads of hope, hope that we do not have to war with one another, hope that our love for our country is predicated on our freedom to express ourselves as fully and richly as possible while respecting the rights of others to express themselves as fully and richly as possible as well, just as we're doing here tonight; hope that in the glory of our diversity, we are on our way to forming a more perfect union and that one day – ביום ההוא – we will get there.