



When nations emerge from difficult times, such as war, their leaders may feel the need and desire to create and designate times and rituals for communal gratitude on a larger, national scale.

How do leaders institute national rituals of gratitude? In the following two texts, we will explore two examples of leaders (spiritual and political) who, using the tools and structures available to them, encouraged the creation of national rituals of gratitude.

In the first text, we will look at Rabbi Meshulam Roth's response to a question about reciting the traditional Hallel prayer of praise and the Shehechyanu blessing of gratitude for the Independence of the State of Israel. Then we will explore Abraham Lincoln's proclamation regarding Thanksgiving, in the midst of the Civil War.

"To my soul friend, my teacher, the honored Rabbi Yehuda Leib...

I'm hereby answering the dear letter I received from his honor, as to the question of whether we should say the blessing of Shehechyanu on Yom HaAtzmaut (Israeli Independence Day), that is, on the day the founding of the State of Israel was declared... The Chatam Sofer wrote that there is a custom in some Jewish communities and of many of their leaders... and at the end he wrote that it is a good custom for a community or an individual to determine a day of celebration for themselves, on a day that a miracle occurred to them....

And therefore it is simple that in our case, which refers to the entire people of Israel, at a time where there is redemption from slavery to freedom, as we have been freed from the subordination of other rulers, and we have become a free people and achieved national independence, and our lives have been saved from death, for we have been rescued from our enemies who sought to demolish us, of course it is a requirement to define a Yom Tov (a holiday). And our leaders did well to choose this day specifically, which entailed the main part of the miracle of redemption from slavery to freedom by the declaration of independence, and had we not had that declaration on that day, and it had been postponed to another day, we would have lost the chance and not received the recognition and acceptance of the great powers in the United Nations, as is known. And this miracle, brought about the second miracle of saving our lives during the war against the Arabs in the Land of Israel and the lives of the Jews in the Diaspora from their enemies in their various countries from which they moved to the land of Israel, thereby bringing about the third miracle, that of the ingathering of the nation...

Therefore, there is no question that the day (the fifth of Iyar), which was decided by the government and the members of parliament (who are chosen by the people) and many of the great rabbis, to be the day that should be celebrated throughout the land as a memory of the miracle of our redemption and freedom, and it is a mitzvah to make it a joyous day, and a Yom Tov and to say the prayer of Hallel... "

Rabbi Meshulam Roth on
"Should one recite Hallel and Shehechyanu on Yom HaAtzmaut?"
in Kol Mevaser Responsa, Part 1, Chapter 21

A PROCLAMATION

The year that is drawing towards its close, has been filled with the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies. To these bounties, which are so constantly enjoyed that we are prone to forget the source from which they come, others have been added, which are of so extraordinary a nature, that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften even the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever watchful providence of Almighty God. In the midst of a civil war of unequalled magnitude and severity, which has sometimes seemed to foreign States to invite and to provoke their aggression, peace has been preserved with all nations, order has been maintained, the laws have been respected and obeyed, and harmony has prevailed everywhere except in the theatre of military conflict; while that theatre has been greatly contracted by the advancing armies and navies of the Union. Needful diversions of wealth and of strength from the fields of peaceful industry to the national defence, have not arrested the plough, the shuttle or the ship; the axe has enlarged the borders of our settlements, and the mines, as well of iron and coal as of the precious metals, have yielded even more abundantly than heretofore. Population has steadily increased, notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field; and the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom. No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy. It has seemed

to me fit and proper that they should be solemnly, reverently and gratefully acknowledged as with one heart and one voice by the whole American People. I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

In testimony whereof, I have hereunto set my hand and caused the Seal of the United States to be affixed.

Done at the City of Washington, this Third day of October, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty-three, and of the Independence of the United States the Eighty-eighth.

By the President:

Abraham Lincoln
William H. Seward, Secretary of State

Reflection Questions:

- What do the two texts have in common?
- In what ways are they different?
- Note that the Lincoln proclamation took place in 1863, during the course of the Civil War (and an actual nationwide Thanksgiving celebration was not realized until Reconstruction was completed in the 1870s). The Rabbi Roth discussion comes a few years after the Israeli War of Independence. Considering today's current war between Israel and Hamas, which approach seems more relevant to you? Why?
- Both texts base their national gratitude celebrations on pre-existing rituals or traditions. What traditions or rituals do you think could be re-appropriated and adapted to express national gratitude for the miracles experienced by the survivors of the October 7th massacre? Of the Hamas-Israel war?

