

Israel Today: Giving Thanks Amid the Darkness

More than 160 years ago, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation that all Americans should “observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens.” And so was born the cherished American holiday, Thanksgiving.

It has always been one of my favorite holidays, and I have many fond memories of our Thanksgiving table growing up in America. While Thanksgiving isn’t observed in Israel, the theme of giving thanks is intricately woven throughout Jewish life and holidays—which has paradoxically been felt exceptionally intensely during this past year of heartbreak and war.

But what strikes me most about Lincoln’s proclamation for a day of Thanksgiving was *when* it was issued. In 1863, the nation Lincoln led was involved in the Civil War, the bloodiest conflict in U.S. history. Yet in the midst of this struggle which pitted brother against brother, Lincoln called upon his countrymen to set aside time to give thanks to God—in effect, declaring to the nation: even in the toughest of times, we must appreciate our blessings.

This message particularly resonates with me this year as we in Israel recently marked the somber one-year anniversary of the horrific Oct. 7, 2023, terrorist attacks. More than 1,200 lives were lost—sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers and friends brutally murdered, some in their own homes—in the greatest loss of Jewish lives in a single day since the Holocaust.

More than 200 innocent Israelis were taken as hostage. As I write this, nearly 100 Israelis *remain* hostages, somewhere in

the Hamas terror tunnels deep beneath Gaza. For over a year, families have lived with the anxiety of not knowing whether they will see the faces of their loved ones ever again.

Today, over 400 days later, the fight continues as our enemies wage war on tiny Israel, from seven different fronts. We are fighting for our right to live and for the survival of our beloved Jewish homeland.

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For all of us here in the Holy Land, this war is personal. There is not a household in Israel that hasn't been impacted by this fight.

Nearly everyone has or knows of loved ones who are bravely serving on the front lines, whose safe return is not a given. Nearly everyone knows a family who has made the ultimate sacrifice and lost a daughter, son, father, mother, relative or friend. Nearly everyone has run to the bomb shelter countless times as the "incoming rocket" sirens sounded and prayed with all of their hearts as rockets exploded nearby.

And yet, as Lincoln reminded his war-torn country, even in the midst of such darkness, we must appreciate our blessings. We must practice gratitude and find ways to give thanks. As I look around my own situation and circle of family and friends, I see so much thanksgiving woven into every facet of daily life in Israel, which is even stronger than the fear.

I think of my youngest cousin, with whom I grew up in Chicago and share so many happy childhood memories. When he turned 18, he surprised many in the family when he decided to move to Israel and help defend his biblical homeland.

At that time, no one imagined that at age 35, with four young children at home, he would be called to defend his country once again. No one could have foreseen that he would be called

to join the Israeli Defense Forces fighting Hezbollah in Lebanon just days before Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish New Year, leaving his family and children behind to celebrate the High Holy Days without him.

Recently, we celebrated with the family when my cousin returned home. The tears of joy, the release from fear, was so overwhelming. Our hearts were filled with thanksgiving and gratitude to God. "I put my husband's life in the hands of God," his brave wife said. "I will never again take for granted the blessing of having my husband walk through the front door."

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I also think of my eldest son's high school principal. He's a well-known professional educator in Israel. He also happens to serve in the IDF as a paratrooper. At the very beginning of the war, he was called up to serve in Gaza and was injured while on the front lines. His students' response was amazing. They dropped everything to help the family and care for him. And now that he is fully recovered, he has gone back into Gaza again.

The entire country is in awe by our brave warriors. Mothers and children spend much of their days cooking food and delivering it to army bases, just to express how grateful they are for the service of men and women like him, who are willing to sacrifice everything to defend the country they love.

Every time the siren sounds, and my family and I have to run to the bomb shelter, I am grateful that we have one. I am grateful for the moments of normalcy—going out to coffee with friends, dancing with my children, taking care of our new pup.

Yes, there is hardship and sadness and heartbreak. But at the same time, we are sustained by our faith in the God of Israel,

who neither slumbers nor sleeps, and in the daily miracles that He continues to perform on our behalf. It's with hearts of thanksgiving, that we are able to leave our bomb shelters and go straight to the ice cream store to enjoy life. We take nothing as a given and everything as a gift.

I am so grateful that in these moments of darkness, the people of Israel have been able to see the light shine even brighter than ever. For the first time in its history, Israel is not alone. As antisemitism is on a terrifying rise, the Jewish people are more grateful than ever that to see how we are joined in this fight by millions of Christians in America and around the world, who have steadfastly stood with Israel and the Jewish people and have remained committed to Israel's right to exist. So many Christians have learned from history, have read their Scriptures and have committed to pray for the peace of Jerusalem.

So, as you prepare to celebrate Thanksgiving this year, my hope and prayer is that even in the darkness, you will see the light. During these difficult times, I know that you join with thousands of Israelis and me in thanking God for the abundant blessings he has sent our way. When we praise Him for the small things, the big problems seem to lose their power. Gratefulness is the weapon God gave us to combat the evil that surrounds us.

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