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REASONS FOR THANKSGIVING TODAY

BY

RABBI ZEV GOLDSTEIN

New York, N. Y.

Once again, as the autumn winds signal the approach of another winter, Americans throughout the land are called upon to celebrate the national Thanksgiving holiday. This outstanding day is reminiscent of the many praises and thanks which the Pioneers offered to the Almighty in the early period of our national life. At this moment of world crisis and uncertainty its importance should be emphasized as a day of reflection of the sacrifices that the builders of our great Republic have made in order to create this glorious "land of the free and home of the brave."

There will be many, however, who will question the wisdom of such a holiday this year. "Look at the world, they will say, and see. Nation is arrayed against nation in mortal combat. Our brethern on the other side of the ocean are bleeding to death. Why then observe a Thanksgiving holiday this year?"

In a significant statement, the Rabbis of the Talmud declare: ארבעה צריכין להודות: יורדי הים, הולכי מדבריות, מי שהיה חולה ונרפא ומי שהיה חבוש בבית האסורים ויצא. "It is incumbent to offer praise and thanks to the Almighty for four distinct and specific reasons: for crossing the ocean

in safety, for completion of a journey through the wilderness, for recovery from serious illness, and for release from servitude.”¹ As we reflect upon the import of this statement of the Rabbis, we find still greater difficulty in celebrating this day of gratitude now. Well may we ask: “Thanksgiving for what?” As yet, we cannot utter acknowledgement of gratefulness for the *Yonde-ha-yam* for crossing the ocean in safety.” At this very moment, thousands upon thousands of our fighting men are being called upon to undertake the most dangerous voyage of their lives—a voyage across submarine infested oceans and seas. At this very moment millions of Americans are exposing themselves to unheard of risks and hazards in order to bring about a world of equality, security and peace.

No, my friends. It is still too early to offer thanks for those “who have crossed the ocean in safety.” That will have to wait for the successful culmination of the present conflict.

Again we ask: “Thanksgiving for what? Shall we express our gratitude *Al holche midborios*—for completing a journey through the wilderness?” Here, too, we do not have sufficient cause for joy. The world of our day and age is one vast wilderness. Nations as well as individuals are confused and are wandering aimlessly about without the spiritual waters to quench their great thirst. And so we are afflicted with the dreaded diseases of selfishness, greed and fratricide. “Every man for himself,” is our watchword; “May the strongest survive,” is the maxim inscribed upon our coat-of-arms. As long as humanity

1. Berachoth 54b.

continues to journey in such a delirious manner, it will remain lost in the wilderness and will be made to suffer the pangs of hunger and thirst as well as the fierce attacks of the ferocious beasts and the venomous serpents. We have yet to witness the end of such blundering and bestiality before we shall be able to thank G-d "for completing a journey through the wilderness."

If not for these, perhaps we should be thankful *Al mi shehoyo cholo v'nisrapo* — "for recovery from serious illness?" While it is true that the world is now slowly recovering from the dangerous Fascist and Nazi scourges which had almost destroyed all of mankind, I feel that it is still premature to celebrate a service of thanksgiving on that score. The United Nations have a long way to go before the world will recuperate from the malady which afflicts it to this day.

We now come to the last of the four causes for thanksgiving as outlined in the Talmud: *Chovush b'bais hoasurim v'yotzo* — "for release from servitude." Man is subjugated and enslaved today in a world he was destined to rule. He has yet to avail himself of the blessing which G-d has bestowed upon him at creation: פֶּרֹו וּרְבוּ וּמִלְאוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ וּכְבֹשׁוּהָ "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it."² Instead, civilization has created a mighty and hideous monster which now controls every utterance and thought of man.

While the machine has satisfied certain needs and wants of man, it has been misused by him when he employed it as an instrument of exploitation and tyranny.

2. Genesis I:28.



Thus the machine has become a molten *Moloch* which has devoured a great portion of humanity. At no time has the earth been enthralled in a more bitter bondage, and at no period in its history has the human race experienced greater misery, than in the present era of the machine. As long as the world is yet to be freed from this crushing burden of slavery, we cannot offer thanks "for release from servitude."

From all that has been said heretofore, it is evident, that none of the four causes for thanksgiving is ground for genuine gratitude today.

My friends, Israel has always been a peculiar people. In moments of distress he offered praises and sang psalms unto the Lord; in his hour of strife, of torment and adversity, the Jew looked upon his sorrow as a blessing in disguise.

The Talmud relates the following significant tale about the great sage Rabbi Akiba. Driven out of his native land through violent persecution, he journeyed to a strange country. His sole possessions were a lamp for study, a rooster to announce the break of dawn, and a donkey on which he travelled. One night Rabbi Akiba arrived tired and hungry at a small village, and asked for a night's lodging, but no one would offer the exhausted wanderer any shelter. He was thus obliged to spend the night in a nearby forest. He sat down beneath a tree to study by the light of his lamp. A fierce storm soon extinguished his light, and not long afterwards a wolf killed his rooster and a lion devoured his donkey. In face of all these calamities, the spirit of the Rabbi remained unshaken. Stretching out upon the ground to rest his weary body,

he said: כל דעבד רחמנא לטב עבד "Whatsoever the Lord doeth is for the best!" In the morning he returned to the village to see whether he could procure for himself a donkey to continue his journey. To his amazement he could not find a single soul alive in the town. During the night a band of robbers entered the village, killed the inhabitants and plundered their homes. Rabbi Akiba then understood, that what at first had seemed to be a tragic experience was in reality his great fortune. As a token of thanksgiving, Rabbi Akiba lifted his eyes towards the heavens and offered the following words of Thanksgiving: "Great G-d of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Now I understand that mortal man is shortsighted and blind. Thou alone art just and kind and merciful. Had not the hard-hearted people driven me from the village, I, too, would have shared their fate. Had not the storm extinguished the light, it would have been seen by the robbers and they would have murdered me too. Had not the rooster and donkey been killed, their noises might have attracted the robbers to my retreat in the forest. Praised then, be Thy name forever and ever!"³

This self-same spirit of hope and faith has ever been the guiding light of Israel in his darkest hour of plight and misfortune. Despite the fact that he has always had to live in an unfriendly world, he believed that suffering was in reality a blessing in disguise. It is, therefore, not unusual for the Jew to sing psalms and to offer thanksgiving even at a time when there is no apparent cause for gratitude.

3. Berachot 60b (Rashi 61a).

From his earliest history he was imbued with this remarkable attitude towards suffering. He abided by the faith of the Talmudic Sages as expounded in the following phrase: — חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שמברך על הטובה
 "It is incumbent upon man to be thankful for misfortune, just as he expresses thanks for affluence and goodness."⁴

This sanguine expression of trust and confidence in G-d, the Jewish people derived from the patriarch Jacob of whom we read in the *Sedrah* of this week. Weary and disillusioned, tired in body and soul, Jacob treads the long road leading to his uncle Laban. With nothing save the staff in his hand, he finds himself alone in a vast and an unfriendly desert. As the bleak darkness of night surrounds him, he gathers a few stones about his head and prepares himself for sleep. Suddenly he beholds a glorious vision of a great ladder stretching from the earth unto the heavens, and angels of G-d are ascending and descending it. Then a divine voice calls out to him: אנכי עמך בכל אשר תלך "Behold I am with thee, and will keep thee in all places whither thou goest."⁵ Upon awaking at dawn, Jacob understands the vision, and so he vows: "If G-d will be with me and will give me bread to eat and raiment to put on, this stone which I have set up for a pillar shall be G-d's house and of all that Thou shalt give me I will surely give the tenth unto Thee."

Herein, do we find the basis of our beautiful and eternal religion. It is a faith which teaches its adherents to acknowledge thanks and to offer praises to the L-rd

4. Ibid 54a.

5. Genesis XXVIII:15.

even in moments of extreme stress and sorrow. It is a faith which remains firm and unshaken even in the blackest hour of defeat. It is because of such a Jacob-like faith, that the Jew is blessed with a vision—with an ideal so glorious that it fills him with confidence in the future. In spite of the ominous present the Jew never gives way to despair. The true Israelite regards his unfavorable state with optimistic courage; with undaunted spirit he declares: חייב אדם לברך על הרעה כשם שמברך על הטובה "One is obliged to praise G-d, and to offer thanks unto Him even in moments of sorrow."

At this precarious moment in the history of the world let us exhibit our adherence to this unique Jewish pattern of unflinching faith as exemplified by Jacob. We, too, are endowed with a vision, an ideal which seeks fulfillment. It is a task whose fruition is of greatest importance in a period of world crisis. Yea, even at the instance of Israel's greatest calamity and torment, must he realize the urgent necessity of alleviating the suffering of those less fortunate than himself, of his bludgeoned and bleeding brethern dying in the lands of tyranny and barbarism.

At crucial moments such as these, when the future looks dark and dreary let us fortify ourselves with our glorious faith and with cheerful countenance strive to fulfill the Divine Law, which we have envisioned, and which we have taught to the entire world.

Yes, my friends, we may offer hymns of gratitude and thanksgiving at the present moment, even though our hearts are heavy and our spirits are low. Our thanksgiving, however, is combined with a prayer. Confident in

the knowledge that Truth and Justice must eventually triumph, we pray for a future that will be brightly illuminated by the gleaming rays of a new dawn. With unshakable faith in the ultimate realization of our vision we gather into our Houses of Worship and we pray to G-d. We hope that soon we will be able to thank G-d *Al yorde ha-yam*, for the speedy victorious return in safety of our armed forces from their perilous journeys. We hope that soon we may praise G-d *al holche mid-baryos* for the speedy renunciation by all men of selfishness greed and hate. We pray that civilization may emerge safely from the present wilderness, and that we will be forever free from fear.

We pray to G-d, that the next Thanksgiving will be one of gratitude for *Mi she-hoyo chole v'nisrape* — that the world will be cured from the dread disease of war and that Fascism and inhumanity will be completely destroyed, so that we may soon witness the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophetic vision of eternal peace.⁶

And finally we look forward with confidence, that the day may come when we shall sing hymns of thanksgiving for the freedom of *chovush b'vais ha-asurim veyotzo*—for release of all who are held both physically and morally in servitude. We pray for the liberation of all minorities from cruel oppression and subjugation, and for the emancipation of mankind from moral, political and economic bondage.

In the words and in the spirit of the Psalms we truly pray:
זבח לאליהם תודה ושלם לעליון נדריך. וקראני ביום צרה אחלצך ותכבדני

6. Isaiah 11, 4.

"Offer unto G-d thanksgiving; and pay thy vows unto the Most High. And call upon Me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify me:"⁷