



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## GENESIS > Mikeitz

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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November 30, 2013

Mikeitz

**Eight Legs Of Turkey**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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## ABSTRACT

This is the story of a feast feeding a famine, oil igniting a soul, turkey preening as a heritage bird.

This is Thanksgiving bumping up against Chanukah. And, for a Jew, if this is not an identity crisis, what is?

Spraying whipped cream on your menorah and lighting the pumpkin pie; spinning your turkey and carving your dreidel; handing out stuffing to all the children and stuffing the gobbling gobbler with Chanukah gelt; and concluding it all with golden donuts filled with cranberry sauce and topped with gravy for desert, while sitting back to watch a game of sizzling latke-ball while the footballs are being deep-fried back in the kitchen. Yikes!

This is a clash of cultures – and it is best understood in the clash of two other cultures. The first is the Jewish and Egyptian clash described in this week’s Torah reading. The second is the Jewish and Greek, from the story of Chanukah.

This week *Parshat Mikeitz* relates the first ever confrontation between cultures, and its lessons are as relevant today as they are astonishing. They also reveal for us the true historical root of Thanksgiving.

Today, within the confluence of Chanukah, Shabbat Mikeitz, and Thanksgiving, the secret to maintaining our Jewish identity is discovered, despite the challenges presented to us by our existing cultures.

Hint: it has to do with NOT maintaining it.

## EIGHT LEGS OF TURKEY & OTHER IDENTITY CRISES

A tale of spinning dreidels & galloping gobblers

### 1. An Identity Crisis (Humor)

This year, providentially, the ingredients for a perfect identity storm coalesce together in one big boiling cauldron of culture and heritage, mixing and mingling, cooking and producing a dish of far-reaching proportions. Some have named this dish “Chanksgiving,” others, “Thanksgivinkah,” and still others, “Conukafusing.”

The following is an extreme case of “Conukafusingkah.” A respected member of our community shared with me this extreme case, which occurred at his uncle’s home this past Thursday evening.

It was in the home of my uncle this past Thursday evening, the second night of Chanukah and Thanksgiving eve, that this crossing of wires took place. As the sun was setting, my beloved uncle walked into the living room, wearing his favorite sweater, and proceeded to spray whipped cream on his menorah and light the pumpkin pie. After watching the pumpkin pie burn for what seemed like an eternity, he continued on into the kitchen to spin his turkey and carve his dreidel. Finally, after we had all sat down to eat, my uncle handed out stuffing to all the children and stuffed the gobbling gobbler with Chanukah gelt. We concluded our meal with golden donuts filled with cranberry sauce and topped with gravy. My uncle then sat back to watch a game of sizzling latke-ball while the footballs were being deep-fried back in the kitchen.

“Rabbi,” he concluded, “please help me, I am utterly confused!”

Admittedly, this is an extreme case. But, my fellow Jews, this could happen to anyone. When the Festival of Lights converges with Turkey Day – complete and utter chaos ensues.

‘Tis a dish of identity crisis like no other, served up and ready to eat.

## 2. Making Sense of Confusion

As a rabbi, it is allegedly my job to make some sense out of this confusing convergence of a holiday that celebrates our beating the Greeks and an American icon that celebrates the pilgrims' first harvest in this great country.

But first, an important disclaimer: With all the hype about this historical convergence – let us not lose focus and forget that the American holiday of Thanksgiving, as important as it may be (and as steep as the sales are on Black Friday following the holiday), is still only four hundred years old (at most), while Chanukah goes back two thousand years (at least)!

Yet, we still can derive important lessons from their convergence, for there is a principle in the Torah that when you have two seemingly unrelated elements, a third element can be introduced to bridge them. So perhaps this week's Torah reading can be that bridge between Thanksgiving and Chanukah.

As we know, nothing is random, and a lesson may be learned from every event, so perhaps this confluence of these celebrations has a purpose – to teach us something about our Jewish identity.

## 3. Parshat Mikeitz: Egyptian Thanksgiving

Allow me, for a moment, to briefly sum up the picture painted in this week's Torah reading – *Parshat Mikeitz*.

Joseph is a prisoner, sitting in a dark dungeon in a foreign land. Not so long ago, this young man had been sold into slavery by his own brothers, his own flesh and blood, and now he resides in a country that is antithetical to everything in which he believes.

Remember, Joseph is not sitting in a cushy US Federal Penitentiary (thought that too is hell I'm sure). This is Egypt we are talking about, the Egypt that would, in but a few short years, come to murder Jewish children and use their little bodies as filler for the walls of their great architectural endeavors. Not a Godly place at all, and here is Joseph imprisoned, seemingly devoid of his dignity, seemingly broken.

From his dungeon (after a change of clothes and a haircut), Joseph is summoned to the palace of Pharaoh. What does Pharaoh want? For Joseph to interpret his dream.

*And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I have dreamed a dream, and there is no interpreter for it, but I have heard it said, you understand a dream, to interpret it."<sup>1</sup>*

A normal person, standing in Joseph's shoes, would readily acknowledge Pharaoh's compliment and proceed to interpret his dream. I know that's what I would do.

But not Joseph. No prison, no dungeon could ever confine Joseph's integrity and core essence. Instead of jumping at Pharaoh's invitation, Joseph says:

*"Not I; God will respond with peace to Pharaoh."<sup>2</sup>*

Rashi explains that with the words "Not I," Joseph was saying: "God will answer. He will put an answer into my mouth that will bring peace to Pharaoh."<sup>3</sup>

This, my fellow kindred spirits, is the first clash of civilizations described in the Torah. Throughout history we Jews would come up against many different cultures – (going backwards) the American, the European, the Middle Eastern, the Roman, the Greek, the Persian, the Babylonian... but the first, as is documented in the Torah, was the Egyptian.

And the dialogue between Joseph and Pharaoh is, in effect, the first conversation between these two cultures, and the way it unfolded offers us a lesson for all of us here today that is as relevant as it is astonishing.

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<sup>1</sup>Genesis 41:15.

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 41:16.

<sup>3</sup>See Targum Onkelos.

## 4. Joseph's Interpretation: Thanksgiving Feast... Or Famine?

Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream as follows:

*It is this matter that I have spoken to Pharaoh; what God is about to do He has shown Pharaoh. Behold, seven years are coming, great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. And seven years of famine will arise after them, and all the plenty will be forgotten in the land of Egypt, and the famine will destroy the land.<sup>4</sup>*

Now just to be clear – Pharaoh wasn't merely beckoning Joseph from prison to interpret his personal dream. Pharaoh was superstitious: he believed in the spiritual and in the spirits of things. So, Pharaoh called upon Joseph to learn what type of global meaning his dreams held for greater Egypt.

And Joseph told him that these dreams show that there will be seven years of plenty – basically an elongated Thanksgiving feast – followed by seven years of famine. There will be extreme excess, but that will be succeeded by an extreme recession. Beware!

Pharaoh then asked Joseph for his advice, "In light of this, what do you think we should do?"

And Joseph said: "You have heard of Thanksgiving dinner, right? Now, have you also heard of leftovers? Well, God has shown me that you should send wise and prudent men to store leftover provisions from the seven years of plenty, so that you will have warehouses with stocked shelves for the seven years of famine."

And thus the entire investment market, 401k, and long-term financial planning industry was born.

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<sup>4</sup>Genesis 28-30.

## 5. CEO

After Joseph's advice, Pharaoh said to his servants, "Will we find [anyone] like this, a man in whom there is the spirit of God?"<sup>5</sup> And, because they couldn't, they appointed Joseph to the position of Chief Executive Officer and second in command of the entire Egypt, viceroy answerable to only Pharaoh himself.

I believe I once heard Lord Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks put this point as eloquently as anyone, and I paraphrase:

When Jews are proud and representative of their Judaism, when they are standing up in the name God, they are proudly respected for their identities and the world respects and honors them for who they are; when, however, Jews are meek, apologetic, and insecure with their heritage and identity, they are disrespected and shunned, giving root to anti-Semitism.

In this first clash of Jewish culture with a foreign culture, Joseph did not meekly blend in or apologize for being a Jew, a stranger in a strange land. Oh no, on the contrary:

Joseph said "I am a servant of God! I am a proud Jew, proud of my identity and connection to the Divine."

And that identity never shone brighter as it did around a thousand years after Egypt, in another Middle Eastern land - Israel - as it clashed with another foreign culture - the culture of the Greeks known as Hellenism.

## 6. The Greek Squad

A little more than a thousand years after Joseph's rise in Egypt, the Jewish people were happily (more or less - less than more) living in the Promised Land, the Land of Israel.

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<sup>5</sup>Genesis 41:38.

At this time, Israel, after the conquest of Alexander the Great, was under Greek rule. At first, things were very peaceful and pleasant, but then, the harsh winter began to descend and it started getting cold and dark.

The Greeks had an issue – not with the Jewish people per se, but with the Jewish people's identity.

The *Al HaNissim* prayer recited only on the holiday of Chanukah, describes the threat to the Jews:

*In the days of Matityahu, the son of Yochanan the High Priest, the Hasmonean and his sons, when the wicked Hellenic government rose up against Your people Israel to make them forget Your Torah and violate the decrees of Your will.*

If you read the text carefully, the Hellenic Greeks did not rise up to remove the people, the Torah, or the decrees from the Jewish experience; they *rose up against **Your** people Israel to make them forget **Your** Torah and violate the decrees of **Your** will*. The Greeks wished to remove **God** from the Jewish people.

Meaning: they had no beef with learning Torah as a secular, purely intellectual and philosophical endeavor, or doing *mitzvot* as purely ethical acts, but with the whole connection to God. They could not bear the Jews believing the Torah was God's Torah; they could not harbor the Jews as God's people Israel; they could not fathom the Jews keeping God's decrees.

They did not like the Godly element of the Jew – the spirit, the light, the divine sanctity that is part of Jewish scholarship and practice.

The Greeks did not threaten Jewish bodies (as did Haman in the Purim story). As a matter of fact, they wished for the Jews to prioritize their bodies and ignore their souls, building gymnasiums and body temples (little did they know the Jew enjoys exercising his mind and abhors exercising his body, but that's another sermon). The Greeks threatened the soul of the Jew,<sup>6</sup> for they did not want the Jew to be divinely inspired

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<sup>6</sup>See Levush, Orach Chaim 670:2.



or in touch with heaven. They wanted the Jewish experience to begin and end with the material, physical, Hellenistic elements of life and delete the soulful, spiritual, divine facets of Jewish experience.

For Jews this concept was anathema. It was like telling an artist he can have an easel, palate and brushes but he can't paint; like telling an musician he can study the motions of the violin but he better not play any music; like telling a writer he can touch the letters of the alphabet but he dare not combine them into anything literal and meaningful.

Yes, it is ludicrous – telling the Jew you can study Torah but the Torah better not be Godly. It's like telling the Ferrari owner you can drive in circles but you better not arrive at any destination.

In other words: The Greeks wished for the Jews to find their bodies and lose their souls, their very identities.

When the Jews did not acquiesce do this request, the Greeks outlawed whatever defined Jewish identity, namely: 1) Torah study, 2) Shabbat, 3) the Jewish calendar, 4) circumcision,<sup>7</sup> and 5) laws of marital sanctity.<sup>8</sup>

Similar to what happened in Egypt, the Greek attack was on the Jewish identity, and yet, miraculously, the Jewish spirit survived and flourished.

The miracle was, that even in this darkness, amid utter destruction, they dug deep and discovered a nucleus, a single cruse of pure, refined, unsullied, holy olive oil.

## 7. O Live Oil

Olive oil is the most refined of products. It is the essence of the olive realized. The nature of olive oil is to rise to the occasion; it does not mix with other liquids – definitely not solids – and rises above them, separating itself from their attempt to water it down.

<sup>7</sup>Otzar Midrashim, Chanukah.

<sup>8</sup>The Greeks decreed that any betrothed Jewish maiden must be first brought to the Greek lord before being married (Rashi, Shabbos 23a. See Baal HaTurim, Genesis 26:22).

You cannot water olive oil down. It just rises above it, transcending any such attempt.

The result of the olive oil's nature is the pure, refined, unsullied, holy light it produces.

When we tap into the purest levels of who we are – the nucleus, the nuclear level of our identity – then we can light the world.

But the true miracle of this light is that it burns and illuminates for a lot longer than we think it will. You think it will only burn for one day? No, no, it will burn for eight.

This is the power of a strong, shining – and indomitable – Jewish identity. And for this greatest of gifts, we are supremely thankful to God, as exemplified in these two Chanukah prayers, singular to the holiday –

*We kindle these lights... in order to offer thanks and praise to Your great Name... – HaNeirot Hallolu*

*...and [we] instituted these eight days of Chanukah to give thanks and praise to Your great Name – Al HaNissim*

And this offering of thanks has been made for more than 3,000 years after Joseph in Egypt and more than 2,000 years after the Miracle of Chanukah. Now that's what I call Thanksgiving!

## 8. Glory, Glory

Pharaoh offered Joseph glory, and this is what the Greeks offered the Jews as well.

But Joseph replied, "It isn't me; it is God! Any solution I may provide comes from a much higher place, otherwise you don't need me. That's what I'm all about."

My identity is God and God is my identity. Without God the Jewish thing doesn't begin.

What, lox and bagels? Very delicious, but hardly the essential ingredient that carried us through the Egyptians, the Greeks, and every other so-called civilization that tried to erase who we are.

This, my friends, is what defines Jewish identity.

Jewish identity is the distilled pure olive oil, the divine essence that is imbued within us. Removing God from us is like removing the heart from a body, the hard drive from a computer, the engine from a car.

This is what we are thankful for. Imagine if Jewish identity consisted only of the food we eat, or the clothes we wear, or the names we bear. If that's all it was, we'd be a laughing stock indeed.

Removing, God forbid, the divine aspect of who we are, is removing the very essence of who we are. We can never compromise our core essence.

## 9. The Soul of Thanksgiving

And this vital message has been carried by Jews through the corridors of history. Until...

Until we reached the shores of the New World.

The Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock wanted to create a new identity for themselves. They left behind a corrupt church and a state of religious oppression to create a haven for all people.

The so-called "First Thanksgiving" was celebrated by the Pilgrims after their first harvest in the New World in 1621 at Plymouth Plantation. They then celebrated thanksgivings on and off over the next few years. A description by the Governor of Plymouth Plantation, of the Thanksgiving feast of 1623, bares uncanny resemblance to the feasts and famines of Egypt, of which the Torah speaks:

*And afterwards the Lord sent them such seasonable showers, with interchange of fair warm weather as, through His blessing, caused a fruitful and liberal harvest, to their no small comfort and rejoicing. For which mercy, in time convenient, they also set apart a day of thanksgiving...*

*By this time harvest was come, and instead of famine now God gave them plenty ... for which they blessed God. And the effect of their particular planting was well seen, for all had ... pretty well ... so as any general want or famine had not been amongst them since to this day.*<sup>9</sup>

Joseph told Pharaoh: If you want to prepare for famine, turn to God and pray to him and trust in him. God has sent you a dream to instruct you on how to turn a famine into a feast.

Some 3,000 years later the Pilgrims, who were running away from religious persecution in England, followed Joseph's instructions. It is principles like these upon which this great country was built. And these principles are Torah principles, thus these principle (unlike the Greek and Egyptian principles) do not clash, but conjoin into one nation under one God.

But it wasn't until 1782 that the proclamation for an annual Thanksgiving Day was made:<sup>10</sup>

(Optional)

By the United States in Congress assembled, PROCLAMATION.

It being the indispensable duty of all nations, not only to offer up their supplications to Almighty God, the giver of all good, for His gracious assistance in a time of distress, but also in a solemn and public manner, to give Him praise for His goodness in general, and especially for great and signal interpositions of His Providence in their behalf; therefore, the United States in Congress assembled, taking into their consideration the many instances of Divine goodness to these States in the course of the important conflict, in which they have been so long engaged, – the present happy and promising state of public affairs, and the events of the war in the course of the year now drawing to a close; particularly the harmony of the public Councils which is so necessary to the success of the public cause, –

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<sup>9</sup> William Bradford, "Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647," p. 132.

<sup>10</sup> Published in The Independent Gazetteer; or, the Chronicle of Freedom on November 5, 1782, the first being observed on November 28, 1782:

the perfect union and good understanding which has hitherto subsisted between them and their allies, notwithstanding the artful and unwearied attempts of the common enemy to divide them, – the success of the arms of the United States and those of their allies, – and the acknowledgment of their Independence by another European power, whose friendship and commerce must be of great and lasting advantage to these States; Do hereby recommend it to the inhabitants of these States in general, to observe and request the several states to interpose their authority, in appointing and commanding the observation of THURSDAY the TWENTY-EIGHTH DAY OF NOVEMBER next as a day of SOLEMN THANKSGIVING to GOD for all His mercies; and they do further recommend to all ranks to testify their gratitude to God for His goodness by a cheerful obedience to His laws and by promoting, each in his station, and by his influence, the practice of true and undefiled religion, which is the great foundation of public prosperity and national happiness.

Done in Congress at Philadelphia, the eleventh day of October, in the year one thousand seven hundred and eighty-two, and of our Sovereignty and Independence, the seventh.

JOHN HANSON, President.

CHARLES THOMSON, Secretary.

These words of thanksgiving are almost verbatim from the *Al HaNissim* prayer, and similar to those of the *HaNeirot Hallolu* prayer.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> See the New York Times on the roots of Thankgivukkah: <http://cityroom.blogs.ny-times.com/2013/11/25/new-york-today-the-local-roots-of-thanksgivukkah/>  
For your convenience here is the article:

You may know by now that Thanksgiving this year falls on the first day of Hanukkah, a once-in-many-lifetimes coincidence.

But the two holidays have more in common than you might think.

And perhaps the best place in the United States to explore their overlap is Shearith Israel, the oldest Jewish congregation in the city (and the continent, for that matter). In 1789, George Washington proclaimed “a day of public thanksgiving and prayer” across the fledgling nation.

At Shearith Israel, the rabbi responded by instructing his congregation to observe this new holiday.

His Thanksgiving sermon is on display at the synagogue, which is now on Central Park West.

So where does Hanukkah come in?

## 10. High Maintenance

And that brings us to a key question:

Although we are grateful to God that we are not faced with Egyptian or Greek oppressions, but – in these confusing times, where a turkey may seem like a menorah and vice-versa – how do we maintain our Jewish identity?

The answer is: We cannot, we cannot maintain our Jewish identity.

The only way to maintain our Jewish identity is by NOT maintaining it.

Let me explain what I mean:

The word “maintain” brings to mind con-artistry. Like when you buy a product at a sale price and then are told, “Oh, I almost forgot, the maintenance fee is twelve thousand dollars!”

This, my friends, is called a scam; no less a scam than a Nigerian prince offering to share his millions with you for the paltry sum of fifteen thousand dollars to help him pay the lawyers. Yes, I am such a dedicated rabbi I even read my Spam.

To maintain something implies two things:

1. That there is or will be something faulty with the product and it therefore needs maintaining or a maintenance contract to keep it viable;
2. That you are not creating. Maintaining means the product has already been developed and now you are merely asked to maintain the status of that product.

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When Congress debated a Thanksgiving proclamation in 1789, supporters likened the holiday to the celebrations after the building of the temple in Jerusalem in ancient times.

Shearith Israel’s new rabbi, Meir Soloveichik, who was installed on Sunday, pointed out that it is the rededication of the temple that forms the basis of Hanukkah.

In other words, way back when, Shearith Israel was embracing a national holiday that already had been connected in some way to Hanukkah.

“The jokes about ‘Thankgivukkah’ are funny,” said Rabbi Soloveichik, who teaches at Yeshiva University.

“But to truly appreciate the connection between the holidays, you have to understand the history.”

The title of Rabbi Soloveichik’s inaugural sermon on Sunday?

“Thanksgiving: America’s Hanukkah.”

In the light of the above, to maintain our Jewish identity is not a possibility:

1. There is nothing faulty with our identity that requires it to be tied into a maintenance contract;
2. More importantly: The very definition of our Jewish identity means that we never maintain any status quo but constantly create and innovate and grow *ad infinitum*. To maintain means to remain where you are and where you were, but Jewish identity means to constantly grow, to be illuminated more today than you were yesterday, and to be ignited more tomorrow than you are today! If you only maintain your Jewish identity, then your Jewish identity – and, inevitably, you – are fading.

And this is what Joseph knew. Joseph, in the very un-Jewish Egypt, was not trying to “maintain” his Godliness; Joseph was proclaiming his Godliness. Joseph said: “I am a man of God, and, as a man of God, it isn’t my identity that matters so much – it is God’s. God creates my identity, and my identity proclaims God as the interpreter of dreams.”

## 11. This is Chanukah

This is also the essence of Chanukah.

Chanukah is celebrating and being thankful for the light that we are, not just any light that is maintained, but a light that keeps on multiplying – with every day another candle added, with every night more light.

So, when Thanksgiving comes around (and, really, when any time of year comes around) and you ask yourself, “What am I thankful for?” if the answer is “I am (only) thankful for my turkey and my stuffing,” then there you have an identity crises. If, however, you see Thanksgiving as an American holiday that celebrates the same divine ideals the Torah celebrates, a day to thank God for making things grow and for being the light of this country, then, perhaps, spinning your turkey and carving your dreidel are two sides of the same proud, Godly, illuminated and illuminating identity.

At this confluence of events, which some say might not happen for

another 170,000 years or so (that is if our present calendar will be in existence then), the question we should be asking ourselves is not: “How do we maintain our Jewish identity in this chaotic world?” But: “How do we maintain this chaotic world with our Jewish identity?”

And the answer is clear – clear like pure olive oil:

By rising above any clash or challenge, as does oil, as did Joseph, as did the Maccabees, and, yes, as did the founders of this country, we burn bright and proud, proclaim even – nay, especially – in the darkest night: “I am a Menorah, I am a Jew that burns with the miracle of light. I can turn this world into *e pluribus unum*, ‘of many, one’ one nation under one God, a nation whose very money says it trusts in God – what is more divine than that?”

This is what we ought to always bear in mind as each of us face the challenges presented by our existing cultures.

Today is a day that we stand up and celebrate Jewish pride. A day to remind ourselves and our children who we are as Jews, both collectively and individually. Celebrating with our heads held high the pride of being a holy and divine nation that has borne witness to God’s miracles for thousands of years. A people that has brought light to the world and taught all its nations that the ultimate secret is to always remember and give thanks to God who gives us life and all its blessings.

And this is easily achieved when we acknowledge that we are always connected to the source of all light – the proverbial, ultimate Shamash – God!

Let us all burn bright!

Happy Chanukah, Happy Thanksgiving, and Shabbat Shalom...

...in other words: Happy Chanukivingalom!