

A Thanksgiving Reflection

Delivered from the pulpit of the Union Church of Pocantico Hills, New York

Thanksgiving Eve, 2006.

My parents were first-generation Americans. My father came from Syria and Lebanon. My mother came from Canada. He was an Arab. She was a Russian. Both were Jewish.

Some people naively think that “Jewish Arab” is a contradiction in terms, since many Arabs and Jews are involved in prolonged hostilities. But there have been Jewish Arabs since the dawn of Judaism – people who speak Arabic, live in an Arabic culture, and who are faithful Jews in every respect of the religion.

Thanksgiving was very important to my parents, partly because it did not represent any conflict of devotion, like Christmas or Easter might. It was a completely American celebration.

I was nine or ten and I had an older sister and a baby brother. I knew it was important too. At school there was even a large illustration of Pilgrims and Indians seated around a long outdoor dining table. I could almost hear an Indian saying to a Pilgrim, "Excuse me. Could you please pass the maize?"

We lived at 92 Woodrow Avenue on the second floor of a three family house – or a triple-decker as we called them – in the Dorchester section of Boston. One end of the avenue led to Saint Matthews Roman Catholic Church, and most of the residents at that end of the street were Catholic. At least the ones who chased me home were. Two large Jewish temples dominated the other end of the avenue, and everyone who lived near them was Jewish. I’m not sure if Protestants were even allowed in the neighborhood.

My father at birth was named Moussa, which is Arabic for Moses, but he was known in America as Morris. My mother was Norma.

"Morris," my mother said, "let’s make this Thanksgiving extra special. I’ll go to Harry the Butcher and pick out his very best kosher turkey.”

"All right," he said. "And I’ll take Herbie and we’ll go to the Syrian market in the South End for the fixings."

I loved both my parents, but I was relieved that I would be going with my father. I didn't like going to Harry the Butcher. For one thing, he had disgusting cow tongues hanging in the window, and in the refrigerator case he displayed slabs of equally disgusting liver that seemed to wiggle before your eyes. The one attractive thing – to a ten year old – about Harry's was his eternal gas flame on the wall. It was not a symbol of faith. He used it to singe the pinfeathers off his poultry.

Dad and I drove to the Syrian market, where he chatted gleefully in his native language with the brothers who ran it. The store smelled of spices and olives and sweets. They gave me a piece of wrapped candy and called me "Honey." When we had three or four shopping bags full, Dad wished the brothers peace and we headed home. It would be two days till Thanksgiving.

But on Thanksgiving Eve, the warmth and happiness of the household was interrupted. There were raised voices and angry words. My parents were fighting over the menu. I think Mother felt it was too Syrian. Father felt his heritage was being slighted.

It was a sad moment, but it was a funny one too.

Because when they had harsh words for each other, he would start to stammer in English and would then switch to Arabic, which she could not understand. She in turn would start to sputter in Yiddish, which he could not understand. As a result, the fights were usually very brief. The house soon became serene.

While Mother fussed over the bird, Dad showed me how to roast the eggplant and then carve out the insides and mash it and mix it with tahina, a ground sesame paste, and lemon juice and olive oil and a touch of garlic.

We also soaked chickpeas over night, mashed them the next day, and added the same ingredients we'd used with the eggplant. Dad then sprinkled chopped parsley and paprika over the dishes.

Thanksgiving Day, Dad placed his specialties on the table. His gold tooth glistened when he smiled. There was the eggplant dish, which is called baba ghanouj, and the chickpea mixture, hummus bi tahina, and a bowl of purple olives, and wedges of lemon, and a basket of warmed round loaves we called Syrian bread. He added a plate of stuffed grape leaves and sliced tomatoes.

We waited for Mother to lift her turkey onto the serving platter and ceremoniously deliver it to the table. It was brown and crisp and beautiful. It smelled great.

She also brought out bowls of mashed potatoes and green beans. While we already had bread, she insisted on making room on the table for a loaf of braided challah. The bread was her way of getting in the last word from the argument of the night before. She was radiant, aglow with satisfaction. She was a young version of the woman serving dinner in Norman Rockwell's painting, Freedom from Want.

We were allowed a sip of red wine. "I know the prayer in Hebrew," I said. My sister frowned as I began. It wasn't my fault. I hadn't dared to say no to attending Hebrew School. She hadn't been as diligent. This was my reward.

"Baruch ahta Adenoy, elahainu melach hu-u-lum, boraih pree hagafen." Both parents smiled with pride. We raised our glasses and sipped.

My father wanted to say a prayer for the meal and our health and for the good fortune to live in this country. He began with, "Insha'Allah, Alhumdu Lillah..." and concluded with "shukran jazeelan, shukran katheeran, Allahu-akbah." He had said, God willing, we will enjoy our food and good health and the protection of America, thank you, (Great) God, thank you very much.

My mother, who loved music, then asked if anyone knew a Thanksgiving song. No one did, but I thought of a song we'd practiced at the Roger Wolcott Elementary School that seemed to fit the spirit of the day.

"Bless this house O Lord we pray, Make it safe by night and day

Bless these walls so firm and stout, keeping want and trouble out..."

Two hours later, my mother served warm apple pie. "Here in New England," she said, "they put a piece of cheddar cheese on top." We protested that we only wanted the pie, so she held back on the cheese. The thick wedges of pie smelled of cinnamon and apples and fresh pastry.

It was a wonderful meal and a wonderful day. We felt very Jewish. We felt very Arabic. We felt All-American.