

AMERICA'S TABLE

A THANKSGIVING READER

A program of AJC's

COMMUNITY *of* CONSCIENCE



CELEBRATING OUR DIVERSE ROOTS
AND SHARED VALUES

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Introduction

I have always loved Thanksgiving. Taking a day to give thanks for all of our blessings and sharing special time with family and friends is truly a gift. I am especially grateful this year to embark on this exciting journey as AJC's new CEO and to share with all of you this annual edition of *America's Table* to reflect on the life of our nation and the tremendous importance of understanding one another's stories in order to build bridges between us. As we celebrate Thanksgiving, I hope everyone is able to safely share holiday traditions with loved ones and reflect on the moments of joy and happiness this year.

The first edition of *America's Table* was produced at a fraught time in our nation's history—shortly after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Its verses invited all Americans to grieve the loss of innocent lives, express empathy with the families and friends who ache for them, but also celebrate our unity in diversity as a nation created by immigrants of all faiths searching for a better life.

Now, 21 years after our first *America's Table*, we return to the table, wounded and weary from a global pandemic, a devastating war in Ukraine, and reckoning with dangerous polarization in our country. But we also return to the table grateful—grateful for the gift of life, grateful for the blessing of each other, and grateful for the democracy and freedoms our nation bestows on its citizens, even as we work to perfect those freedoms.

We invite you to join us in reading *America's Table* at your Thanksgiving gathering and recommitting ourselves to the celebration of the diverse tapestry that is America.

—Ted Deutch, CEO, American Jewish Committee (AJC)

Welcome!

We join together as a Community of Conscience, people dedicated to building a world based on love, rooted in understanding the unique value that each one of us brings to the table of our nation.

Take a breath.

Be in the moment.

Make this Thanksgiving season a sacred time.

“*You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.*”

INDIRA GANDHI



Unity Prayer

Rabbi Noam E. Marans, AJC Director of
Interreligious and Intergroup Relations

God, Creator of all, we pray for an America of the people, by the people, for the people, in all its religious, racial, and ethnic diversity, coming together in unity.

Our struggles to be free, inspired by the Exodus—at Plymouth Rock, toward Independence, for Civil Rights and enfranchisement—continue to inspire us.

We are heirs of many proud traditions that have known oppression and labored for liberation. We will not desist until all are redeemed.

Our religious traditions call upon us to emulate our God as healer, love our neighbor, do unto others as you would have them do unto you, and strive together towards good works.

At a time when hate is rising, we commit to modeling love.

When racism and antisemitism rear their ugly heads, we will show the better way, how light overcomes darkness and justice defeats evil.

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny.

Yet there are those who would divide us, but we will not allow them to prevail.

We cherish and defend democracy and pluralism as bedrock foundations for America's future.

We reject denigration and exclusion and embrace elevation and inclusion.

We pray that You, God, will be with us, as we join together in fixing the broken and fulfilling the promise of a healed world.

Turn us toward you, God, and we will return to You; renew us on this day of Thanksgiving. Amen.

Over these last two years, as we have spent more time at home because of the coronavirus pandemic, many of us came to understand in ways we may not have before the power of sharing a meal with loved ones.

Some of us found ourselves joyfully eating dinner as a family far more than we had before.

Some of us found ourselves eating alone for weeks, even months on end.

Some of us took up baking and cooking as a way to soothe our anxious minds and hearts.

Some of us who feared going to grocery stores to shop found ourselves wondering how we would get food at all.

One thing is for certain: the pandemic has made all of us think a lot more about food and meals and the importance that they hold in our lives. As we share our Thanksgiving feast, let us take a moment to appreciate what it means to have both food to eat and company with whom to eat it. Let us recognize the power of coming together to break bread as a community.

“*All great change in America begins at the dinner table.*”

RONALD REAGAN



As members of a diverse community, what do we each bring to the table?

We are each on a journey

For some it began here. Others arrived from across the seas, centuries ago and yesterday. Today there are more than 330 million of us.

It has not always been a righteous journey

In 1621, when the Pilgrims celebrated their first harvest with the Wampanoag, at least 40 other Native American tribes inhabited the Northeast of what we now know as the United States. In the following decades and centuries, those tribes, along with hundreds of others throughout the United States, would be displaced and destroyed through both aggression and the spread of disease by the new settlers of the land.



If the white man wants to live in peace with the Indian, he can live in peace.....Treat all men alike. Give them all the same law. Give them all an even chance to live and grow. All men were made by the same Great Spirit Chief. They are all brothers. The Earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it.

CHIEF JOSEPH, NEZ PERCE (1840-1904)

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. How can we honor the history of Native Americans at our Thanksgiving tables?
2. How can we appropriately acknowledge that our popular narrative of Thanksgiving cooperation between Native Americans and settlers is in fact a tiny part of a much more difficult and painful story?

It has not always been a voluntary journey

In 1619, one year before the Mayflower carried the Pilgrims to freedom in Plymouth, a Dutch ship delivered North America's first Africans to slavery in Jamestown. By 1790, America's first census recorded 697,624 African slaves, nearly 20 percent of the population. By 1860, the number reached almost 4 million.

The specter of slavery even in its modern form continues to plague society to this day. Let us read these hopeful words by Amanda Gorman:

The Hill We Climb

Amanda Gorman

We are striving to forge our union with purpose.

To compose a country committed to all cultures,
colors, characters, and conditions of man.

And so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us,
but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know to put our future first,
we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.

We seek harm to none and harmony for all.

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true.

That even as we grieved, we grew.

That even as we hurt, we hoped.

That even as we tired, we tried.

That we'll forever be tied together, victorious.

“

***America, you great unfinished
symphony, you sent for me.***

***You let me make a difference, a place
where even orphan immigrants
can leave their fingerprints and rise up***”

HAMILTON: AN AMERICAN MUSICAL
(LYRICS BY LIN-MANUEL MIRANDA)

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. In the poem, Gorman writes about America's past as well as her hope for the country's future. As she depicts, things don't change overnight and we need to "forge our union with purpose" to close the divide. Can you think of examples in your life that highlight the importance of working with interfaith and intergroup partners for the greater good?
2. How has the dialogue in America about race changed in the last few years?
3. What should our next steps be in our journey to create a more just and equitable society?



Asian Americans inhabit a purgatorial status: neither white enough nor black enough, unmentioned in most conversations about racial identity. In the popular imagination, Asian Americans are all high-achieving professionals. But in reality, this is the most economically divided group in the country, a tenuous alliance of people with roots from South Asia to East Asia to the Pacific Islands, from tech millionaires to service industry laborers. How do we speak honestly about the Asian American condition—if such a thing exists?”

CATHY PARK HONG

It has not always been an easy journey

Since the mid-1800s, immigrants and refugees fleeing poverty and oppression in Europe, Asia, and Latin America often traveled to America fortified with little more than hope and tenacity. They were drawn by America's promise.

Let us read together the immortal words of poet Emma Lazarus, which are imprinted upon the base of the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. A Sephardic Jew born in America in 1849, Lazarus was the descendant of Jews who were forcibly expelled from Spain in 1492. She understood more than many the importance of a safe harbor.

The New Colossus

Emma Lazarus (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame,
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. Emma Lazarus' poem opens with a reference to the Colossus of Rhodes, which reputedly stood across the harbor entrance at the island of Rhodes, and was a statue of the Sun god Helios, a symbol of freedom. Why is the new colossus called “Mother of Exiles” and why does the poem open by saying the statue is “Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame”?
2. Why are liberty and freedom considered core American values?

“*I’m one of the millions of immigrant children, children of loneliness, wandering between worlds that are at once too old and too new to live in.*”

ANZIA YEZIERSKA

We are each part of America's journey.

As we listen to each other's stories, each one of us is enriched. As we share our stories, we understand that our nation is a beautiful tapestry of stories of American journeys. Hearing each other's stories helps us understand one another better and helps defeat the hatred that comes from ignorance.

“*It is time for parents to teach young people early on that in diversity there is beauty and there is strength.*”

MAYA ANGELOU

“*We are all that nameless foreigner, that homeless refugee, that hungry boy, that illiterate immigrant and that lynched Black body. All of us, from the first Adams to the last Filipino, native born or alien, educated or illiterate—We are America!*”

CARLOS BULOSAN



What is your American journey?

We encourage everyone to take a few moments to share something about your American journey with others at the table. You may use the questions below to help you.

- What does being American/living in America mean to you?
- Can you remember a time that you were particularly proud of or grateful to America? Can you remember a time that you were ashamed to be associated with America?
- America's motto is *E Pluribus Unum*, which means "from many, one." What does that motto mean to you today? Is it still relevant? Why or why not?

I bring quadruple diversity to the Senate: I'm a woman; I'll be the first Asian woman ever to be elected to the U.S. Senate; I am an immigrant; I am a Buddhist. When I said this at one of my gatherings, they said, 'Yes, but are you gay?' and I said, 'Nobody's perfect.'

MAZIE HIRONO



On Thanksgiving, let's take the time to think about what we are grateful for.

Let us express our gratitude using these written words or our own.

We are thankful for freedom from hunger.

We are thankful for the freedom to worship.

We are thankful for the freedom to challenge our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to change our minds.

We are thankful for the freedom to chart our lives.

We are thankful for the freedom to work for a better world.

We are thankful for the freedom to celebrate this day.

We pray for our country, for the men and women who put their own lives on the line to heal our sick and protect our freedom. We pray for the day when this nation and the entire world will know health and peace.

“Rabbi Ben Zoma said: Who is rich? The one who appreciates what s/he has.”

PIRKEI AVOT (ETHICS OF THE FATHERS) 4:1

“We are genetically predisposed to pay more attention to the bad than the good. For sound biological reasons, we are hyper-alert to potential threats and dangers. It takes focused attention to become aware of how much we have to be grateful for.”

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

How on this day can we begin to build the America we want for the future?

We cannot merely pray to God to end war;
For the world was made in such a way
That we must find our own path of peace
Within ourselves and with our neighbor...
Therefore we pray instead
For strength, determination, and will power,
To do, instead of merely to pray
To become instead of merely to wish...
That our world may be safe,
And that our lives may be blessed.

Rabbi Jack Riemer

“*As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.*”

JOHN F. KENNEDY

“*Where you see wrong or inequality or injustice, speak out, because this is your country. This is your democracy. Make it. Protect it. Pass it on.*”

THURGOOD MARSHALL





Sometimes you have to get in the way. You have to make some noise by speaking up and speaking out against injustice and inaction.

JOHN LEWIS

When I liberate myself, I liberate others. If you don't speak out ain't nobody going to speak out for you.

FANNIE LOU HAMER

A dream doesn't become reality through magic; it takes sweat, determination, and hard work.

COLIN POWELL

**We end our Thanksgiving celebration
with our prayerful wish:**

***May we sit together next year
in health, unity, and peace!***



AJC's Community of Conscience

Join AJC in support of this statement of principles. Reaffirm that the values that unite us are stronger than those that divide us.

1. Join us, in the spirit of the American motto E Pluribus Unum, as we unite across differences, celebrate our diversity, contribute to a shared society, and resolve to advance the welfare of all.
2. Join us, in the spirit of patriotism, as we strive proudly and boldly to uphold American ideals of equality, of dignity, of opportunity for all.
3. Join us, in the spirit of civility, as we reject antisemitism and all forms of bigotry, incendiary partisanship whatever its sources, dehumanizing and demonizing rhetoric, and threats of violence.
4. Join us, in the spirit of democracy, as we reaffirm and reinforce our constitutional system, seek equal justice for all, and safeguard our fundamental freedoms.
5. Join us, in the spirit of American pluralism, as we promote mutual respect—not mere tolerance—as the standard for enlightened coexistence.
6. Join us, in the spirit of inclusiveness, as we reach out to and uplift the poorest among us, as we welcome the stranger in our midst, and as we fully enfranchise the disabled.
7. Join us, in the spirit of love, as we counter those who purvey hate, intolerance and incivility, especially those who legitimize their inappropriate practices based on “holy writ.”
8. Join us in seeking to fulfill the biblical teaching that we are all “b'Tzelem Elokim,” all created in the divine image, the very foundation of human equality.
9. And join us in pursuing the Prophet Isaiah's age-old vision that one day “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore”—that peace, love, and unity will reign.



AJC

**American Jewish
Committee**

AJC's mission is to enhance the well-being of the Jewish people and Israel, and to advance human rights and democratic values in the United States and around the world.

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