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Built From Our Book

◇ URIEL ZEHAVI

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IN THIS EDITION

Built From Our Book 3
Executive Summary 4
The First Thanksgiving Was Not a Thanksgiving 5
They Threw Out the Christian Calendar and Kept Deuteronomy's Terms 6
They Were Not Philosemites, and the Argument Is Better for It 8
Washington's Proclamation Reads Like Deuteronomy 8 10
The Holiday Americans Keep Was Made in 1863 12
American Jews Recognize the Shape Because It Happens at a Table . 13
The Confidence Ran on the Grammar 15
The Same Tool Is Pointed at America and at Zion 17
References 19

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Built From Our Book

The Puritans wrote an American civic grammar out of the Hebrew Bible and expected the Jews to be baptized into it. Three centuries later it turned out to have a room we fit better than they did.

Edward Winslow's letter of 11 December 1621 is the only eyewitness account anyone has of the Plymouth harvest gathering, and the word "thanksgiving" isn't in it. The governor sent four men out fowling so the company might "after a more speciall manner reioyce together," and they shot enough in a day to feed everyone for almost a week. Massasoit arrived with some ninety men and stayed three days. That's the whole account. Bradford gives the autumn one paragraph, never uses the word either, and leaves the Wampanoag out entirely. They were grateful, though, and Winslow says so himself — he sends the news home so that "you might on our behalf give God thanks who hath dealt so favorably with us."

In Plymouth the word had a job. A thanksgiving was something the government did. The colony's law of November 1636 gave the Governor and Assistants the power to "comand solemn daies of humiliacon by fasting &c, and also for thankesgiving," "as occasion shall be offered." When Massachusetts appointed a day, the order went out in writing, was read from every pulpit, and banned "all Servile work on that day." John Cotton set out the arithmetic in 1645: a notable judgment gets you a day of humiliation, a special mercy gets you a day of thanksgiving. In February 1631 the Bay had a fast on the books when the *Lyon* came in with provisions, so they turned it into a thanksgiving. Plymouth did none of that in the autumn of 1621. No order, no single day, no work stopped, and nobody there calling it one.

The name arrived in 1841, in a footnote. Alexander Young, reprinting Winslow, wrote at the foot of page 231: "This was the first Thanksgiving, the harvest festival of New England. On this occasion they no doubt feasted on the wild turkey as well as venison." Winslow had written fowl. Bradford does mention wild turkeys that autumn, so the bird was a fair guess, but the name was Young's. He put THE FIRST THANKSGIVING in the running head and the index, and it took. Until then Plymouth's own commemoration had been Forefathers' Day, 22 December, for the landing. The name is the last thing anyone gives up. Give it up anyway — what's underneath is better.

A harvest supper is a nice story about a good year, and it tells you nothing about why a country still stops on a Thursday in November. New England had already thrown out the Christian year — no Christmas, no Easter, no saints' days, and from 1659 a Massachusetts law fining five shillings for keeping Christmas, down to taking the day off — and what they put in its place ran on Deuteronomy's terms. A government had to name a particular mercy in writing, stop the work, and put a whole colony in one room to answer for what it had been given. They got that from us.

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The New England mainstream expected the Jews back in the land of Israel, and expected them to stop being Jews first, so none of it was a favor to us. The grammar got written anyway, and American Jews have been living inside it for two centuries without saying so. That matters now, because the American founding is being retold as conquest and nothing more, and the return to Zion in the same vocabulary.

Executive Summary

The holiday Americans keep was made in 1863, out of a habit the Puritans built from the Hebrew Bible two centuries earlier. Sarah Josepha Hale campaigned for it for fifteen years by her own count. The thirty-six years you'll often see is arithmetic counted from her 1827 novel. What she asked Lincoln for was a date. Her letter mentions no meal and no table, and neither does Washington's proclamation of 1789.

The Puritans were no philosemites. The New England mainstream wanted the Jews back in the land of Israel, baptized on the way, and Harvard's first permanent Hebrew instructor was baptized in College Hall a month before they let him teach. Hebrew was never nearly made America's official language either. The whole story rests on one French traveler's 1787 anecdote about people he never identifies, and he says himself the project went nowhere.

Roger Sherman made the case in the House on 25 September 1789 by citing the thanksgivings "in the time of Solomon, after the building of the temple." Thirty-one years later Madison went after the practice in private, and tied the idea of a national religion behind it to "the Jewish nation under a theocracy." The man who argued for it and the man who wanted it undone both pointed at one book. Washington opens on "the duty of all Nations" and asks pardon for "our national and other transgressions." Lincoln goes further in 1863 — God "dealing with us in anger for our sins," and "humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience." And in the scripture texts of the fast and thanksgiving sermons catalogued in 1895, we count more than four from the Hebrew Bible for every one from the New Testament. Psalms alone outnumber the whole New Testament.

American Jews feel at home in the day because of where it happens — at a table, on a fixed date, giving thanks for a rescue and for a good land, with no creed to recite. Jewish law doesn't underwrite any of that. Its thanksgiving obligations fall on one person at a time, and the codes say so. The rabbis built something else out of the same verses the Puritans read.

Patrick Wolfe, the scholar most associated with the settler-colonial reading of America, ran the Jewish return to Israel through the same reading, and said so. When that reading took hold it pulled out a support American Jews had never inspected. No survey measures that. We checked AJC's 2025 report, Pew's 2020 study, and the 2024 ADL and Hillel campus survey, and none of them asks about belonging to America or to its founding story. So take this as my read: one of the supports had already gone before October 7 put weight

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on the floor. The people rewriting America's founding are cutting Jewish material out of it, and most of them have no idea.

THE FIRST THANKSGIVING WAS NOT A THANKSGIVING

Plymouth did it properly in the summer of 1623, and both eyewitnesses wrote it down. In Winslow's account, with a drought on, "a day was appointed by public authority, and set apart from all other employments." The rain came, and "another solemn day was set apart and appointed for that end" — a fast, then a thanksgiving, in that order. Outside the letters he copies in, Bradford uses the word "thanksgiveing" once in his whole history, here, and he had to reach back for it: "This being overslipt in its place, I thought meet here to inserte the same." He forgot to put it in, noticed, and went back. W. De-Loss Love, who catalogued New England's fast and thanksgiving days in 1895, found no earlier day appointed by authority. The date everyone repeats, 16 or 30 July 1623, is Love's own triangulation off Captain West's departure and Bradford's "about 14 days after." The event has two witnesses. The calendar has none.

The earliest order of service anyone has comes from Scituate, in Plymouth Colony, in 1636. The congregation sat in the meeting house from half an hour before nine until after twelve, on a day the clerk noted was very cold, and worked through prayer, psalm, prayer, psalm, the Word taught, prayer, and a psalm to close. Then came "makeing merry to the creatures, the poorer sort beeing invited of the richer." Three and a half hours before anybody ate. Scituate kept another on 12 October 1637 for two things at once, "Ffor the victory over the pequouts" and "Ffor Reconciliation betwixt Mr. Cotton and the other ministers." A war and a clerical quarrel, one day. When somebody tells you every November that the holiday really celebrates the Pequot massacre, this is the kind of day they mean, and it's grim enough on its own without hanging the harvest gathering on it too.

James and Patricia Deetz called 1621 a secular event in 2000, and Grace and Bruchac, writing with Plimoth a year later, called it "not a religious gathering but most likely a harvest celebration." Jeremy Bangs has spent years arguing against readings like theirs, and his answer is flat: "A thankless or secular harvest festival was unthinkable." The English harvest home these men grew up with wasn't secular either — the Book of Common Prayer carried a set thanksgiving for plenty — and Winslow's language all through the letter is scriptural. What 1621 lacks is a procedure.

The Pilgrims had a model for that autumn, too, from the city they had just left. Every 3 October Leiden kept a general day of prayer and thanksgiving for the lifting of the 1574 siege. Jan Orlers, Leiden's mayor and a friend of Brewster's, recorded the day, and Bangs describes it: prayers, feasting after them, days of games, militia reviews, and a free market fair. Winslow says that "amongst other Recreations, we exercised our Armes" — a militia review, in other words. Sukkot is the derivation people reach for instead, and there's nothing under it. Love called the supposition wholly without warrant in 1895, and neither Winslow nor Bradford mentions Tabernacles or Deuteronomy 16 — we went through both texts looking. The resemblance is real enough,

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an ingathering and a meal and thanks for a land, but two roads arrived at a similar shape and neither is the parent of the other.

The relabeling stuck partly because the original was so hard to read. *Mourt's Relation* had one printing, London 1622, and then came apart. Purchas cut it to about half in 1625, the Massachusetts Historical Society reprinted his half in 1802, and the rest followed in 1822, in a later volume, from a manuscript copy made in Philadelphia. Young said that left "the reading of it extremely difficult and repulsive." His 1841 edition, set from Harvard's copy of the original, was, he wrote, "the only correct and legible reprint" since 1622, and the footnote that gave the holiday its name rode in on the same page. Then it got the people who should have known better.

Henry Martyn Dexter set the 1622 sheets in literal type-facsimile in 1865 to give a reader the text exactly as printed. At the foot of the page carrying Winslow's harvest paragraph he added footnote 417: "Here began that peculiar New-England festival, — the annual autumnal Thanksgiving." Outside his own index, that footnote is the only place in the volume the word appears. The editor put it there. Thirty years on came Love, whose own chapter heading reads "A Harvest Festival and not a Puritan Thanksgiving." At page 394 he wrote that the national harvest thanksgiving day "was consecrated at Plymouth in the autumn of 1621," with "our Pilgrim forefathers gathered in devout gratitude about their simple board." The man who proved it wasn't one wrote the greeting card anyway.

Plymouth kept an appointed day in 1623, Massachusetts Bay kept one in 1631, and the line runs on from there through every occasion a colony put in writing, stopped work for, and signed. You can date that. You can hold the men who signed it to what they said God had done for them. The harvest gathering has none of that behind it. It was a good three days, and somebody two hundred and twenty years later gave it a job it never applied for.

THEY THREW OUT THE CHRISTIAN CALENDAR AND KEPT DEUTERONOMY'S TERMS

Massachusetts kept one holy day, and it was Sunday. Christmas went, and Easter, and Lent, and every saint's day on the English calendar, and nothing permanent replaced them. Thomas Lechford, a lawyer with no love for the establishment there, put it in one line in 1642, in *Plain Dealing*: "There are dayes of fasting, thanksgiving and prayers upon occasions but no holy dayes, except the Sunday." Then he asked the obvious thing — "And why not set fasting dayes & times and set feasts?" — and the answer is that Scripture hadn't commanded any. The 1659 fine on Christmas-keeping is the statute everyone reaches for, and it's the weakest thing in the pile. Nobody has ever found a prosecution under it, it was repealed in 1681, and Increase Mather was still swinging at Christmas in 1687, in a tract whose title concedes the custom was "Now Practised by Some in New-England."

Occasional days weren't a New England invention, and Love says so himself: "To suppose, however, that they were peculiar to our fathers is a grave error. They prevailed throughout the Calvinistic countries of Europe." He footnotes

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it to the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Second Helvetic of 1566, the Savoy Symbol, and Westminster. England ran occasional days of its own and kept the Fifth of November from 1605, on top of a year it went on keeping. New England took the year away and left the days standing by themselves.

A day came out of "the action of a general court or a governor and council" — civil authority, no bishop anywhere near it. It went out as "a simple order, briefly stating the causes, which was in writing, and signed by the secretary of the colony," carried to the minister of every town, often by special messenger, and read from his pulpit. Servile work stopped. Connecticut wrote them by hand until 1709, when a new press at New London printed the fast-day proclamation of 29 June. One copy survives. And when the paper failed to arrive, somebody answered for it: Fairfield County missed the Connecticut fast of 18 April 1771 because the post-rider never delivered the proclamation, "on which account he was brought into court."

Both halves came up in one motion on 21 September 1694, when the Massachusetts House voted to propose a day in October "to be solemnized as a day of Giveing thanks to God for his Enumerated Mercys of the y[ear] past," and a separate day in November for "a Humble sence of his Awfull dispensations." Enumerated. Somebody had to itemize them, in writing, over a signature, and somebody else had to stand up in a town and read the list. The shape matches Deuteronomy 30, and Winthrop had ended his 1630 sermon on exactly that text — "Beloved there is now sett before us life and good, Death and evill," and should the colony break faith, "wee shall surely perishe out of the good land." Blessing for one kind of conduct, curse for the other, and a public reckoning either way.

The annual habit came later than the folklore allows, and unevenly. Connecticut's spring fast traces back to 1659. Massachusetts's can't be traced before the 1680s or 90s, and Love says plainly that his own calendar is incomplete and a missing record doesn't prove a day went unkept. Spencer Phips proclaimed in 1756 that he was continuing "the laudable and uninterrupted practice of the people of this government, from the first settlement," and Thomas Hutchinson's history said the same. Love, who had read the records, concluded Hutchinson "had never carefully examined the subject."

Love also printed a numbered list of every published fast and thanksgiving sermon he could find, nearly all of them New England's — 622 of them, from 1636-7 to 1815 — with the preacher's text in brackets after each title. We pulled every citation and sorted them by testament, twice, and the two passes came out within a few points of each other: more than four Hebrew Bible texts for every New Testament one, and Psalms alone ahead of the whole New Testament. The Hebrew Bible is about three-quarters of the Christian Bible's verses, so that is more than its share, and Psalms does most of the work. Love never gives a figure like this, so the counting is ours. The list covers printed sermons only, it leans toward big public occasions, and the OCR is nineteenth-century, so treat the numbers as approximate. Most appointed days never produced a printed sermon at all. What the list does carry is a

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hundred and seventy-nine years of ministers getting up on a day their government appointed and preaching, more than four times out of five, from our book.

The Hebrew under all of it was real, and none of it was about us. *New England's First Fruits*, the first public account of Harvard, printed in London in 1643, gives the fifth day, Thursday, to Hebrew "and the Easterne Tongues": grammar for the first-years, Chaldee for the second, Syriac for the third. The degree required a man to "read the Originalls of the Old and New Testament into the Latine tongue," and part of what the Governor and magistrates came to watch at commencement was "Hebrew Analysis, Grammaticall, Logicall and Rhetoricall, of the Psalme." Ezra Stiles made Hebrew Psalms a freshman requirement at Yale in 1778, and by 1790 he was down to volunteers. Yale read its own seal motto, Urim v'Tumim, as a title for Christ, and Eran Shalev has followed the vocabulary forward into the Revolution — Washington as Gideon, the states as the tribes — Hebrew in form and Christian in content the whole way. What crossed over was the procedure, and the procedure runs on Deuteronomy's terms. It was ours before it was theirs.

THEY WERE NOT PHILOSEMITES, AND THE ARGUMENT IS BETTER FOR IT

Richard Cogley's 2022 survey of Puritan New England calls the mainstream position Judeocentric millenarianism: the twelve tribes converted, repatriated, and inaugurating the kingdom in Jerusalem, with John Cotton, Increase Mather, and Cotton Mather all in its ranks (*Harvard Theological Review* 115:2). The older reading, call it supersessionism, has New England casting itself as the new chosen people with the New Jerusalem on its own shore. When T. Dwight Bozeman went back in 1988 to the texts it rested on — Winthrop's sermon, Cotton's *God's Promise to His Plantation*, Danforth's *Errand into the Wilderness* — he found "no clear references to the millennial kingdom, let alone to a kingdom beginning in America." Cogley records that reading as no longer the near-universal orthodoxy, though it "remains a staple in broad surveys." The specialists can have that fight. Neither side of it produces a philosemite.

Increase Mather published *The Mystery of Israel's Salvation... or, A Discourse Concerning the General Conversion of the Israelitish Nation* in London in 1669. The most learned Hebraist in New England, and that's the subject he picked. The restoration is real to him, and it runs through the font. His son Cotton's diary puts dates on the hope. 18 July 1696, from the dust where he lay prostrate: "For the conversion of the Jewish Nation, and for my own having the happiness, at some time or other, to baptize a Jew." April 1699, sending a book he wrote for the purpose to a Bostonian he calls "an infidel Jew in this Town." August 1717, twenty-one years in: "I hear of a Jew in this place. I would seek some conversation with him." Lee Friedman, writing it up in 1918 for the American Jewish Historical Society's journal, found that Mather's relationship with Jews "seems to have been wholly literary."

Harvard taught Hebrew from the 1640s on. Judah Monis, the college's first permanent instructor in it, was baptized in College Hall on 27 March 1722, Benjamin Colman preached at the ceremony, and Harvard appointed him a

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month later. Harvard gave him an M.A. in 1720 while he was still a Jew. It hired him to teach only once he'd stopped being one. Almost nobody sat on the other side of it, either. No congregation existed anywhere in New England until Newport's, and none at all in Massachusetts. A century of Hebrew scholarship, and hardly anyone to speak it to.

The 1691 Province Charter of Massachusetts Bay grants "a liberty of Conscience allowed in the Worshipp of God to all Christians (Except Papists)," and Jews sit outside that sentence by omission. In March 1762 the Superior Court of Rhode Island, in the colony founded on liberty of conscience, turned down Aaron Lopez and Isaac Elizer for naturalization. The court said first that the colony was "already so full of people" that its own sons were leaving for Nova Scotia, and then rested the dismissal on its law that "no person who does not profess the Christian Religion can be admitted free of this Colony." Touro was dedicated the following year.

The story that Hebrew was nearly made the official language of the United States gets told warmly, and mostly on our side of the table. Its earliest documentary root is one paragraph in the Marquis de Chastellux's *Travels in North-America*, London 1787, volume II: "some persons were desirous, for the convenience of the public, that the Hebrew should be substituted for the English... We may imagine that this project went no farther." No proposer, no body, no date, no vote, and an author who thought he was describing people who didn't want to speak English. Each retelling drops a qualifier — "some persons" goes, then "went no farther" falls off the end — and what's left is a proposal, which needs somebody to have received it. Congress is standing right there. Nobody in that chain lied. One more is ours to kill.

The thirteen stars over the eagle on the Great Seal, the one on the back of the dollar bill, sit in a hexagram, and the story that this honors Haym Salomon has no basis. Gaillard Hunt's State Department history of the seal has no such account, and the Bureau of Engraving and Printing says there's no intentional Jewish symbolism on the note. Salomon's money was real. The star isn't his. Exodus, though, nearly made it onto the seal. On 20 August 1776 the committee reported to the Continental Congress and specified the reverse in terms: "Pharaoh sitting in an open Chariot... in pursuit of the Israelites; Rays from a pillar of Fire in the Cloud... beaming on Moses." That was Franklin and Jefferson, in a written report, to the Congress. It was laid upon the table, six years and three committees went by, and none of it reached the 1782 seal.

Ezra Stiles is the honest exception. The Newport minister who later ran Yale met Rabbi Haim Isaac Carigal in 1773, saw him often, and wrote to him afterward in Hebrew. That's a friendship, and a real one. Stiles is also a Congregationalist of the 1770s, two generations past the Puritan century, and one man. So keep the debt and drop the affection. The debt is documented, it's inside what this country still does every November, and it never depended on anybody in 1669 liking us. The affection was never there to lose. Anyone building American Jewish belonging on Puritan goodwill is building on nothing, and they'll find that out from someone hostile who's holding the receipts.

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WASHINGTON'S PROCLAMATION READS LIKE DEUTERONOMY 8

God appears four times in the proclamation of 3 October 1789 and never once as Christ. He is "the great Lord and Ruler of Nations." No verse is cited, the word covenant never appears, and neither does a meal, a table, food, or a family. The dinner is what most people think they're commemorating, and what Washington proclaimed was a day of public prayer. Madison drew the line himself, about Washington's next one, in 1795: it "embraced all who believed in a supreme ruler of the Universe," where Adams's "called for a Xn wors[hip]." The lists of presidential Thanksgiving proclamations are padded, too. Adams issued fast days, on 23 March 1798 and 6 March 1799, the second hanging thanksgiving off the end of "a day of solemn humiliation, fasting and prayer" — Cotton's 1645 arithmetic, still running inside a federal instrument.

Washington makes the duty a national one in his opening clause and keeps the nation as his subject all the way down. What he gives thanks for arrives in order: deliverance, then "tranquillity, union, and plenty," then a constituted government, then "the civil and religious liberty with which we are blessed." Then he asks God to pardon "our national and other transgressions." Gratitude is cheap, and every civic ceremony has some. A country asking pardon in a state paper is keeping an account, and in that clause the wrongdoing has a collective subject.

Deuteronomy 8 runs the same sequence, tighter. Verses 7 through 9 hand over the good land in detail, down to the iron in its rocks. Verse 10 lands it: [illegible] — you will eat, you will be satisfied, and you will bless the LORD your God for the good land He gave you. JPS renders u-verakhta as "give thanks." The verb is barekh, bless. Verse 11 warns against forgetting, and verse 12 brings back the eating and the satiety, this time as the danger. Then the herds and the silver, then forgetting who brought you out of Egypt, then kochi v'otzem yadi, my own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me. Same full stomach, remembering at verse 10 and forgetting at verse 12. Washington's list runs the same way and ends by asking pardon. Same worry, eighteenth-century clothes. What the Puritans did with Deuteronomy 8 was Christian typological reading, which has a real history of its own and isn't a halachic reading of anything.

Judaism does have a law of communal thanksgiving. Esther 9:27-28 has a community binding itself and its descendants, and Chanukah's Al HaNissim, plural throughout, says what the days are for: l'hodot u'lehallel, to give thanks and to praise. The Chatam Sofer took up the exact question a proclamation raises — may a community set a Yom Tov for a deliverance of its own — at Orach Chayim 191, following Maharam Alashkar, and said yes. Frankfurt had kept a Purim of its own since 1616. The resemblance to a proclamation is real, and it's a coincidence. The rescued community binds itself, where a president recommends from above. Its obligation follows a family across borders, where a proclamation obliges nobody to anything. And the Chatam Sofer allows it only for rescue from mortal danger, where 1789 gives thanks

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for plenty and a peaceable constitutional order. So the mechanism looks Jewish and what Americans give thanks for looks like Deuteronomy 8. Those are two findings, and running them together buys a conclusion neither one paid for.

The argument made for it in the House on 25 September 1789 came from the Hebrew Bible, by name, on the floor of the first Congress. Roger Sherman justified the practice "as warranted by a number of precedents in holy writ," and the precedent he picked was "the solemn thanksgivings and rejoicings which took place in the time of Solomon, after the building of the temple." He reached for 1 Kings 8 and expected the room to follow him. Having argued from the dedication of Solomon's Temple, Sherman then had to add that the example was "worthy of Christian imitation on the present occasion." The Hebrew form needed a Christian license, on the floor, in the same breath. Two members objected. Aedanus Burke disliked "this mimicking of European customs," where two warring parties sing Te Deum over the same battle. Thomas Tudor Tucker made the constitutional objection and conceded the premise while making it: "it is a religious matter, and, as such, is proscribed to us." A man arguing against the resolution told the House the thing on the table was religious. Elias Boudinot, who had moved it, answered with precedents from the Continental Congress, and Tucker lost. It "was carried in the affirmative," with no tally recorded. Congress had asked thanks for the chance "peaceably to establish a Constitution of government," and Washington wrote "a form of government," widening it past the document the resolution meant. Congress approved the twelve proposed amendments that day, and the Senate agreed to the thanksgiving resolution the next morning.

Jefferson's famous sentence — "I have refrained from prescribing even occasional performances of devotion" — sits in the draft of his letter to the Danbury Baptists, circled and struck before mailing on Levi Lincoln's advice. The Baptists never read it. Their own letter says nothing about thanksgivings. Jefferson wrote the reason in his margin: the paragraph "might give uneasiness to some of our republican friends in the eastern states," where the practice "is an antient habit, & is respected." A president who thought the federal version unconstitutional cut his objection from a public letter because New England liked the custom. His sent refusal comes six years on, to Samuel Miller in 1808, on a question about a fast day. His quarrel is with the federal instrument. He had none with a governor doing it, which is the line Tucker drew nineteen years earlier.

Madison issued four religious proclamations, only the last a thanksgiving, and drafted it to be as weak as he could make it. Then, around January 1820, in private, he wrote out why the practice had been wrong from the start. Proclamations "seem to imply and certainly nourish the erronious idea of a national religion. This idea just as it related to the Jewish nation under a theocracy, having been improperly adopted by so many nations which have embraced Xnity, is too apt to lurk in the bosoms even of Americans." He's describing the thing accurately in order to kill it, which makes our argument for us. The case rests on two men who agreed about the source and about

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nothing else. The Detatched Memoranda sat unread until 1946, so nobody alive at the time ever had to answer him. Madison lost anyway. The practice whose idea he tied to the Jewish nation under a theocracy is a federal holiday.

THE HOLIDAY AMERICANS KEEP WAS MADE IN 1863

Lincoln proclaimed three national days of prayer in 1863, and the first of them was a fast. On 30 March, at the Senate's request, he appointed a day of national humiliation, fasting, and prayer for the last Thursday in April. On 15 July, with Gettysburg and Vicksburg behind him, he appointed a day of thanksgiving, praise, and prayer for 6 August, opening on "the supplications and prayers of an afflicted people." On 3 October he appointed the one everybody knows — the last Thursday in November, with no battle behind it. He'd done it before, too: 12 August 1861, a day of humiliation, prayer, and fasting, at a joint committee's request. Two hundred and eighteen years after John Cotton wrote the rule down, a wartime president was still doing the arithmetic.

The October text does the covenant accounting harder than Washington's ever did. It opens on "the blessings of fruitful fields and healthful skies," counts a population that grew "notwithstanding the waste that has been made in the camp, the siege and the battle-field," and then takes the credit away from everybody. The gifts came from a God "who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy." The war is the anger. The harvest is the mercy. They arrive from the same hand in one sentence — and the proclamation that gives thanks for the second commends the war's widows and orphans to that hand "with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience."

Scholars call the New England sermon form behind it the jeremiad, after one of ours, and it ran in three moves: invoke the standard the community is held to, show how far it has fallen, and promise a renewal that carries the promise and the accusation together. Lincoln's proclamation runs all three, in order. The gracious gifts of the Most High God. Our national perverseness and disobedience. Then the plea "to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it… to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union." The scholarship that gave the form its name is still fighting over its larger claims, so take the match against this document as mine.

The tradition credits the text to Seward, and Gideon Welles's diary backs it. On the morning of 3 October 1863, Seward called on him and "read me the draft of a proclamation for Thanksgiving." He wanted, he said, to extinguish the old claim that thanksgivings were "a State prerogative" and "make such days national." Welles, a Connecticut man, pushed back: until recently, in his state, "all servile labor and vain recreation" on those days had been "by law prohibited." Two cabinet secretaries, the morning the proclamation is dated, arguing over the colonial rule. Roy Basler, who edited Lincoln's *Collected Works*, doubted the attribution. Say Seward wrote every word. Whoever held the pen didn't have to invent the form he was working in.

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The date wasn't law until 1941. From 1863 on, Thanksgiving rested on a president deciding, every year, to proclaim one, and Roosevelt showed what that was worth. November 1939 carried five Thursdays, and he moved the holiday to the fourth to lengthen the Christmas shopping season. The states split, and he did it again in 1940. For two Novembers running, which Thursday a family sat down on depended on which side of a state line it lived. Congress closed it: H.J. Res. 41 passed the House on 6 October 1941, the Senate wrote "fourth Thursday" over "last Thursday," and Roosevelt signed it on 26 December 1941. Seventy-eight years after the proclamation everybody credits with settling the question.

Hale's letter of 28 September asks for a date and nothing else — the last Thursday in November, "which falls this year on the 26th," fixed by proclamation. Not a word about food. Hale did her work on dinner elsewhere: in *Northwood*, her 1827 novel, where "the roasted turkey took precedence on this occasion, being placed at the head of the table," and in the recipes *Godey's* ran through the fifteen years she spent writing to governors. The thirty-six years you'll often see is the distance from that novel to Lincoln's proclamation. The turkey never once traveled by proclamation or by statute.

Five days separate Hale's letter from the proclamation, because none of it had to be built. A country in the third year of killing itself went looking for something to say to God about that, and it was all still there — the fast for the judgment, the thanksgiving for the mercy, the work stopped, the sin confessed in the first person plural. Nobody had to explain to Lincoln what a day of national humiliation was, or to the Senate that asked him for one. The holiday was made in 1863. The vocabulary it was made from was two centuries old and had never once been written into federal law, and every pulpit in the Union knew exactly what Lincoln meant by it. It was still working.

AMERICAN JEWS RECOGNIZE THE SHAPE BECAUSE IT HAPPENS AT A TABLE

An American Jew sits down to Thanksgiving without having to decide anything first. The day comes on a fixed date, it happens at a table, it gives thanks for a rescue and for a good land, and it asks nobody to affirm a creed or walk into a church to do it. Robert Bellah, who gave American civil religion its name in 1967, set it deliberately apart from the state and from any denomination. That distance is what a Jew walks into on the fourth Thursday of November.

Shearith Israel in New York held a Thanksgiving service in 1789, on the day Washington's proclamation appointed, and its hazzan, Gershom Mendes Seixas, preached. The congregation's own trustees' minutes carry a resolution of 7 November 1847 to open for services on Thursday the 25th, the day the governor had appointed for a general thanksgiving, with the hazzan told to announce it the Shabbat before. It's an internal minute, written at the time by people with no argument to win. Behind it runs a whole line of sermons. David Einhorn at Keneseth Israel in 1863, preaching the war "because God is King and not cotton." Marcus Jastrow at Rodef Shalom in 1868, going after a governor for putting Christian language in a proclamation — the objection Isaac Mayer Wise had already made to Ohio's governor in

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1856. Isaac Werne in Chicago as late as 1914. And then the services emptied. By 1906 they were reported meagerly attended, and the day kept moving into the house. Nobody legislated that. The holiday walked to the table on its own, and American Jews were already sitting at it.

A nation bound together to give thanks for a deliverance and for a good land is a fair reading of Deuteronomy 8, where rescue, land, and forgetting are welded into one address to Israel as a body. It's a fair reading of Deuteronomy 26 too, which adds what chapter 8 lacks: a fixed text, recited in a fixed place, telling a national deliverance in the first person plural. As a description of halacha it falls apart, and the codes are what take it apart. The rabbis lifted verse 10 out of chapter 8 and left the chapter behind. Rambam opens Hilchot Berakhot by making the Torah-level obligation turn on one person's being satisfied. The Shulchan Aruch argues at Orach Chayim 186:1 over who is bound, person by person. The baraita on Berakhot 48b reads the blessings of Birkat HaMazon out of that one verse, word by word, as a legal formula, though the same page says the fourth was added at Yavneh, and deliverance and forgetting do no work in the derivation. Birkat HaGomel is the same move with the label attached. Berakhot 54b says four must give thanks, Rambam says four individuals, the Shulchan Aruch heads the siman "the blessing of individual thanksgiving," and all four triggers are personal escapes. Sea, desert, illness, prison. Not one of them is a nation.

The tradition made the obligation personal and the discharge public. HaGomel has to be said in front of ten. The todah offering comes with its breads and has to be eaten inside a day, so its own form drags a crowd into the room. And in Deuteronomy 26, the strongest corporate text anyone can point to, one farmer speaks the whole nation's story with the basket still on his shoulder. The Bible supplied the materials, the rabbis worked the same verses into something else, and the Puritans read the materials. They had no access to the tradition and no interest in it.

Rav Moshe Feinstein took up Thanksgiving four times across roughly two decades, at *Iggerot Moshe* Even HaEzer 2:13, Orach Chayim 5:20:6, and Yoreh Deah 4:11 and 4:12. Four careful English accounts of those teshuvot — Moshe Kurtz in *Tradition*, the RCA's own journal, Yisroel Ben-Porat on Torah Musings, Michael Broyde's "Torah from Dixie" essay, and the *Halachically Speaking* newsletter reviewed by Rav Yisroel Belsky — contradict each other on which of the last two is the lenient one, and on the date of the first by ten years. We couldn't reach the Hebrew, and I'd rather print that than the clean sentence everybody else printed. *Halachically Speaking* explains part of the mess. Yoreh Deah 4:11 has several parts, se'if 3 states a broad permissive principle, se'if 4 rules something narrower, and two honest readers working from different se'ifim come away with two different summaries of one document.

Every account agrees on this much: a formal, fixed, religiously flavored Thanksgiving celebration is disfavored or forbidden, and eating turkey is fine, as is a family meal that happens to fall on the day and isn't run as an observance. Rav Yitzchak Hutner forbade a yearly observance tied to the

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Christian calendar outright and said to keep away from such customs. Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik ate the turkey and saw no chukat ha-goyim problem, reportedly following his father. Belsky put the civic case as cleanly as anyone has. If such parties were made as a sign of patriotism to the United States, he wrote, it would be acceptable for Jews to make them as a sign of loyalty to their host country — and then he judged that this isn't what they are. The most stringent of Rav Moshe's four is also the least settled. Orach Chayim 5:20:6, in Kurtz's English, rules that a formal festive meal for Thanksgiving "should certainly be prohibited" and reasons it from Leviticus 18:3. It then declines to call it idolatry requiring martyrdom, and closes by conceding that the exact nature of the transgression "is not clear and requires further analysis." A posek of that stature writing that about his own ruling is the most valuable sentence in the literature.

Nobody has counted how many American Jews keep the day. Pew's *Jewish Americans in 2020*, the standard survey of American Jewish religious practice, searched end to end, mentions Thanksgiving zero times. Nobody paskened American Jews into that room, either. The gratitude for a rescue and a good land was cut out of our own chapter, by men reading it in a way we never did. The part that never asks what you believe came later, from Washington's deism and Hale's table. We came in through a door they left open by accident.

THE CONFIDENCE RAN ON THE GRAMMAR

American Jews after 1948 could hold Americanism and Zionism as one commitment, and no diaspora before them had a country whose founding language allowed it. The charter is a letter of 18 August 1790, and half the famous words in it belong to a Jew. Moses Seixas, warden of the Newport congregation, wrote to Washington the day before, and "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance" is already in Seixas's address. Washington sent it back with two words moved. "The children of the Stock of Abraham" is Seixas's as well. A president has been collecting the credit for a synagogue warden's sentences for two hundred and thirty-six years.

Washington's own line is the one the argument runs on: "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights." Toleration was a term of art in 1790, and it wasn't a compliment. Joseph II had issued his Patent of Toleration for Austria's Jews eight years earlier, and the word meant a majority putting up with a minority's worship, revocable by whoever granted it. "Inherent natural rights" comes out of Locke and runs through the Declaration. Rights held before there was a government to notice them, which is why no government gets to take them back by ceasing to be fond of you. Washington throws out the first frame by name and stands a Jewish congregation inside the second.

Everybody quotes the same Louis Brandeis line. "To be good Americans, we must be better Jews, and to be better Jews, we must become Zionists." We went looking for it in *The Jewish Problem: How To Solve It*, the 1915 pamphlet it's always hung on, and it isn't there. Five secondary discussions quote it, and none supplies a speech, a date, or a document. Brandeis did write

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this: “Multiple loyalties are objectionable only if they are inconsistent” — the dual-loyalty charge answered in nine words by a man who would be on the Supreme Court within a year. Then the line the myth softens: “loyalty to America demands rather that each American Jew become a Zionist.” Demands. The obligation sits on the American side, where being a good citizen here is what requires the Zionism. The version everyone repeats asks less.

The synthesis had to win a fight at home, and the side that lost was serious. The Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, fifth principle: “We consider ourselves no longer a nation, but a religious community, and therefore expect neither a return to Palestine, nor a sacrificial worship under the sons of Aaron, nor the restoration of any of the laws concerning the Jewish state.” Reform reversed itself at Columbus in 1937 — “We affirm the obligation of all Jewry to aid in its upbuilding as a Jewish homeland” — eleven years before there was a state to owe anything to, under the pressure of Nazi Germany. The American Council for Judaism was founded in 1942 by Reform rabbis led by Louis Wolsey, with Lessing Rosenwald as its first president and Rabbi Elmer Berger as its chief spokesman. It held that being Jewish was a matter of religion alone, and it opposed a Jewish state. It claimed 20,000 members. Honest position, serious people, and it lost.

Dwight Eisenhower, a month before his inauguration, on 22 December 1952: “our form of government has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is. Of course, it is the Judeo-Christian concept, but it must be a religion with all men being created equal.” Popular quotation drops the second sentence, which is the half that seats Jews as equals. Will Herberg supplied the sociology three years later in *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*: America as “one great community divided into three big sub-communities religiously defined.” That’s what the record holds for those years. We found no sermon, Federation campaign document, or published rabbinic statement from 1948 to 1967 making the American-covenant argument itself.

None of it rested on goodwill, which was in short supply. Germany’s annual quota under the 1924 act was 25,957, and 27,370 once the Anschluss folded Austria’s in. By USHMM’s own account it ran unfilled through most of the 1930s, filled completely in 1939, and came within fifteen visas of it in 1940. The law had room in it. What kept the room empty was administration — Hoover’s public-charge instruction of 1930, the sponsor requirements, the June 1941 relatives rule — men with discretion declining to issue visas Congress had already authorized. The *St. Louis* sailed in May 1939 with 937 passengers, was turned away at Havana and then off Florida, and the passengers were told to await their turns on the waiting list. Two hundred and fifty-four of them died in the Holocaust. Those are USHMM’s figures.

A. Lawrence Lowell proposed a fifteen percent cap on Jewish enrollment at Harvard in 1922 and wrote down why: “If their number should become 40% of the student body, the race feeling would become intense.” Harvard never adopted the cap. It swapped competitive examination for holistic admission,

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went recruiting in Wyoming and North Dakota, and by 1931 the Jewish share was down to Lowell's ceiling with nothing on paper anywhere. The deeds were less delicate. A 1947 Minnesota deed barred sale "to any person of negro [sic], Chinese, Japanese, or Hebrew descent." *Shelley v. Kraemer* killed judicial enforcement in 1948, and the words stayed on the paper for decades after, dead and unstruck.

Washington's sentence held anyway. A grammar is a set of terms a country has put in writing about itself, and Washington's sentence does the same work whether or not the man reading it wants you at his table. That, I'd argue, is what American Jews stood on from 1948 to 1967, and why they mostly did without the qualifier in front of the word American that *The Inverted Body* traces from 1967 forward. Hardly any of them could have quoted the sentence. It held them up regardless.

THE SAME TOOL IS POINTED AT AMERICA AND AT ZION

Patrick Wolfe is the scholar most associated with the settler-colonial reading, and his best-known paper, twenty-three pages in the *Journal of Genocide Research* in December 2006, takes on North America and Israel at once. "Settler colonizers come to stay: invasion is a structure not an event" is his. He opens the destroy-to-replace argument on Herzl: "If I wish to substitute a new building for an old one, I must demolish before I construct." He writes that "Israel's progressive dispensing with its reliance on Palestinian labour would seem to present an ominous case in point." One tool pointed at two places is his own method. What he never mentions is Plymouth. Not the Pilgrims, not the Puritans, not Thanksgiving, anywhere in the article or its eighty endnotes. His North American case is the nineteenth century — Cherokee removal, the Dawes Act, blood quantum. Lorenzo Veracini's 2010 theoretical overview mentions the Massachusetts Puritans exactly once, in passing. We checked because we were about to write the other sentence, the one where the same scholars did Plymouth and Zion, and that sentence is wrong. This piece has spent seven sections on other people's broken citation trails, and it would be a poor joke to hang the eighth on one of ours.

Plymouth got recoded anyway, starting in 1970. Massachusetts invited Wamsutta Frank James, an Aquinnah Wampanoag elder, to speak at the dinner for the Mayflower landing's 350th anniversary. Officials read his remarks in advance, took them off him, and handed him a script somebody else wrote. He refused it, and several hundred people gathered on Cole's Hill above Plymouth Rock instead. That was the first National Day of Mourning, and it has run every year since. His suppressed speech survives, and he had the record on his side: *Mourt's Relation* itself tells how the first explorers dug up a grave, a man's and a child's, and carried off about ten bushels of buried corn. "The Pilgrims had hardly explored the shores of Cape Cod for four days before they had robbed the graves of my ancestors and stolen their corn and beans." "We fought as hard to keep our land as you the whites did to take our land away from us." The words "colonialism" and "settler colonialism" don't appear. That's 1970 talking — theft, graves, land, and freedom — thirty-six years before Wolfe's paper and forty-one before *Settler Colonial Studies* ran

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its first issue. It's the same order *The Inverted Body* found on the Israel side, the politics first and the citable version bolted on afterward. I'm reading that off a calendar, though. Nobody has traced the lineage.

Plimoth Plantation announced in July 2020 that it would become Plimoth Patuxet Museums, to give the Wampanoag half of the site equal billing. Kate Sheehan, an associate director, put it plainly: "We thought our name doesn't reflect the balance of the story we tell." Paula Peters, a Mashpee Wampanoag historian who ran its public relations for five years, called it "an important correction." The academic term never turns up in the *Boston Globe*'s piece on the change, even though its critic thought the museum still "largely avoids bigger questions about colonialism." The one instance that uses the phrase and pins it to the holiday is a college. Sarah Lawrence's Residential Life office sent students off for Thanksgiving break in late 2025 with a message saying the campus sits in the "wake of settler colonial occupation." That one reaches us secondhand, from Samuel Abrams at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank, and the quoted phrase is what AEI printed. TIME found teachers in Virginia and Iowa rebuilding the lesson in 2019 around Native perspectives, and none of them is reported using the academic term either.

The line that's everywhere now, that Israel is doing to the Palestinians what America did to the Indians, borrows Wolfe's lens without his evidence. He builds each case from separate material — nineteenth-century United States Indian removal law on one side, Israeli land, labor, and citizenship law on the other — and the lens doesn't carry the evidence across. *The Inverted Body* already made the documentary case against the Israel application, and I'm not running it again.

We checked three instruments for a question about belonging to America, or about what an American Jew thinks the founding story has to do with him: AJC's *State of Antisemitism in America 2025*, Pew's *Jewish Americans in 2020*, and the ADL, Hillel, and College Pulse campus survey from the fall of 2024. None of the three asks it. AJC measures whether people feel safe. Pew measures belonging to the Jewish people, which is an in-group number and says nothing about America. The campus survey gets closest and still isn't close. Of 1,030 Jewish students across 128 campuses, 49.6 percent were very or extremely comfortable with others knowing they're Jewish, and comfort with others knowing their views on Israel fell from 37 percent to 26.7 percent in a year. Those numbers are real, and they measure fear. The founding-story question comes back unanswered, which is a different thing from coming back no.

So the claim can't be falsified, and I'm not going to pretend otherwise. The vocabulary's reach is thin — YouGov found in November 2023 that between 60 and 76 percent of American adults call specific historical policies wrong, and that the public splits on the word "colonization" itself. Of everything above, one college used the phrase, the museum didn't, and none of the teachers did. October 7 is a sufficient shock on its own terms. A people that watched that morning and the years since doesn't need a prior erosion to explain a loss of

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nerve. And better-measured floors are already in the record. *The Wrong Map* put numbers on the Orthodox share of American Jewry going from twelve percent to a projected twenty-nine over fifty years. Those are counted. A shared founding story can't be.

Wolfe built one tool and pointed it at both cases himself. The Plymouth recoding began in 1970 and picked up its academic vocabulary later. And both readings run on one story — a people, a promise, and an arrival in a good land — which makes this move and the Puritan one mirror images. The Puritans read America into the Israel story and claimed the continuity. This reading takes America and the return to Zion out of any national story anybody is allowed to keep, and calls it rupture. The last step is mine, and I want it read as mine: one of the supports had already gone before October 7 put weight on the floor. The people doing the dismantling aren't thinking about Jews at all. What they're taking apart is a story about a covenant people brought into a good land.

Nobody invited us into this house. The men who drew it worked from our own plans, and they put it up before we got here, fully expecting to take the plans off us on the way to inheriting the promise. They inherited nothing. The room they built out of our chapter turned out to be the most habitable one this country has ever offered a Jew, and that's an accident of their theology and a fact about our book. The grammar is the asset, and the claim on it is ours. We can still read it in the original.

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