

## Thanksgiving: Finding Joy on Thanksgiving Rabba Sara Hurwitz

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Although Thanksgiving is not a Jewish holiday, much like the chaggim, it is marked as a time of joy, family, and celebration. Just as most holidays are designated as times happiness in that we are commanded to rejoice (*v'samechta b'chagecha*, Exodus 16:14), holidays, and Thanksgiving are an opportunity to think about the plight of others. The verse in Exodus continues, "You shall rejoice on your festival—you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, the Levite, the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow." How does one achieve joy? One must help those who have less. The holiday celebration cannot be complete unless space is designated at the table for the orphan and the widow. Charity is not simply the act of giving money. The formula for achieving happiness is inviting others to your table and treating all people with dignity.

The *mitzvah* (command) of celebrating holidays can only be fulfilled when we are mindful of the needs of others. In a discussion about the holiday of *Sukkot*, the Zohar (vol III 104a), suggests that when we enter the *sukkah*, and encounter a lavish table laden with food and drink, we invite in the *Ushpezin*, celestial guests, in the form of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Aaron, and David to the table. The Zohar explains that Abraham, the father of *chesed* of kindness, refuses to remain at the table unless a second set of *Ushpezin*, the impoverished is present at the table: "And if s/he dwells in the shade of faith, and invites these celestial guests, the guests of faith, and fails to give them (the poor) their portion, they (the celestial guests) all arise and leave him, saying "do not eat the bread of him that has an evil eye..." (Proverbs 23:6).

One cannot fully engage with our faith and tradition unless the downtrodden are invited to engage alongside us. *Tzedaka* is not merely a mandate of the Torah, it is the ethical basis for the way we strive to live our lives. Caring for others is the way in which we achieve joy. For there cannot be authentic *simcha*, real happiness, when those in need are left outside our gates, and shut out of our synagogues.

The test of our community is not how it receives those who are powerful, but how it welcomes the lonely and the vulnerable. We cannot only accept those who fit the paradigm of our communal standards, we must focus on those who are in need. On this Thanksgiving, as we prepare our tables laden with food, let us consider how our happiness must be contingent on reaching out and helping those who are less fortunate.



*Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.*