

AMERICA'S TABLE

A THANKSGIVING READER

A program of AJC's
COMMUNITY of CONSCIENCE



CELEBRATING OUR DIVERSE ROOTS
AND SHARED VALUES



Illustrations: Rinat Gilboa
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Introduction

As we sat at our Thanksgiving tables one year ago, none of us could have imagined what the coming year would bring. This year, as we gather—whether virtually or in person—to celebrate community and give thanks for our blessings, we invite you to make use of this annual edition of *America's Table* to reflect on the life of our nation.

The first edition of *America's Table* was produced at another 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, 19 years after our first *America's Table*, we return to the table, wounded and weary from a global pandemic and reckoning with polarization, tumult, fear, and rising bigotry. 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 hope that, by reading *America's Table*, you will find new meaning in this much loved and unifying holiday of Thanksgiving because, yes, we are all Americans and part of the rich tapestry of this land.

— AJC CEO David Harris

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 dinner a sacred time.

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.

Let us frame our time together with questions.

In our world of polarization and political grandstanding, we recognize the value of asking rather than telling, of listening to each other's answers instead of jumping to conclusions. Questions open conversations. They allow us to hear others. They allow us to refine our own thinking.

You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.

INDIRA GANDHI



The First Question

On all other holidays, we participate in some ritual prayer or activity. Why on this holiday is the only ritual a meal?

This year, as we sheltered in our homes during the first wave 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 this special feast together, 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

The Second Question

On all other holidays, we eat with our families and our communities. Why on this day are we joining together with a larger and more diverse community of Americans?

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 continues to haunt America to this day. Let us read the words of African-American poet Langston Hughes, the great grandson of slaves:

I, Too, Sing America

Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.	Tomorrow, I'll be at the table
I am the darker brother.	When company comes.
They send me to	Nobody'll dare Say to me,
eat in the kitchen	"Eat in the kitchen,"
When company comes,	Then.
But I laugh,	Besides,
And eat well,	They'll see how beautiful I am
And grow strong.	And be ashamed—
	I, too, am America.

FOR DISCUSSION:

1. What does eating in the kitchen represent in this poem?
2. How does the poem envision a better future for African-Americans in America?
3. How has this past year changed the dialogue in America about race?
4. What should our next steps be in our journey to create a more just and equitable society?

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.

“
***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)



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. Why does Lazarus have the “Mother of Exiles” tell Europe to keep its “storied pomp” (illustrious past)? What is truly valuable in her eyes?
2. In what ways has America lived up to its promise as a haven for refugees? In what ways has it failed to do so?



We are each part of America's journey.

We did not leave heritage behind, like unwanted baggage at immigration's door. It is a vital aspect of who we are as individuals and what we have become as a nation. Our differences enrich America in many ways.

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.

“

The land flourished because it was fed from so many sources—because it was nourished by so many cultures and traditions and peoples.”

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

“

As you begin to realize that every different type of music, everybody's individual music, has its own rhythm, life, language and heritage...you learn how to be more open and adaptive to what is around us.”

YO-YO MA

“

If hate, violence, bigotry, bitterness, and antisemitism are to be defeated in our world, we must move in the direction of dignified dialogue where we talk with others.”

DR. BERNICE KING

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.

- When did your family come to America? What stories do you know about their immigration?
- What does being American mean to you?
- Can you remember a time that you were particularly proud to be an American? Can you remember a time that you were ashamed to be an American?
- 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?
- What does it mean to be patriotic? Do you feel like a patriotic American? Why or why not?



The Third Question

On all other holidays, we talk about whatever we want at the table. Why on this holiday do we stop to think about what we are thankful for?

“

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

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.



The Fourth Question

On all other holidays, we focus on our past. How on this day can we think about the America we want to build for the future?



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

Prayer

Rabbi Jack Riemer

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.

We close with a moment of quiet contemplation. Usually a moment of silence is used to remember and mourn. Today, let us use it as a time to plan. What can each of us do in the coming year to build a better nation and a better world? How can we work together to achieve our goals?

“

How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”


ANNE FRANK

“

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





We end our
Thanksgiving meal
with our prayerful wish:

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

AJC's Community of Conscience

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 Global Jewish
Advocacy

AJC Mission:

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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