

Miketz 5774 Thanksgivukah

Shabbat Shalom.

So, the big question of the day is: is it really another 77,000 years? That's such a long time!

Perhaps you received the an email a few months ago that said that the next time Hanukkah and Thanksgiving will coincide after this year is in the year 79,811? The version I got continued: "Given our trajectory with global warming, it is fair to say humans won't be here then.

And if there are no humans, the holidays will be cancelled. So on November 28th 2013, enjoy your turkey and your latkes. It has never happened before, and it will never happen again."

Wow – that sounds really cool (not the part about the end of the human race!) - it never happened before and it won't happen for 77 millennia - this year is going to be awesome! And I liked the not-so-subtle reminder about the environment as well.

As you have all heard, this became a great marketing opportunity: a new word was coined: Thanksgivukah and people sold t-shirts and Menurkeys (Turkey *Hanukkiyot* – Hanukkah menorahs). I was kind of hoping for the name: *Turkiah* which one of our students came up with, but I guess it wasn't as catchy....

Well, it was all very exciting, but, there was one small problem.

It was not true.

I looked it up. Hanukkah has occurred on Thanksgiving before: in 1888, in 1899 and in 1918. And if you were in Texas in 1945 and 1956, it occurred there - apparently Texas observed Thanksgiving on a different day than the rest of the country until 1957 (gotta love Texas!).

In fact, Hanukkah will again fall on Thanksgiving in a mere 57 years in 2070, which is a lot sooner than the year 79,811. After 2070, it will also occur in the year 2165.

So what happened here? Why did this email go viral if it is incorrect? Well, first, it's a good reminder not to trust implicitly everything we read on the internet. Sure enough, there are errors.

In this case, the story is complicated. The email that made the rounds was not entirely false. Apparently, whoever wrote that was only counting the first day of Hanukkah falling on Thanksgiving, which did occur two days ago and will not occur again until the year 79,811. In the other aforementioned years, the first night of Hanukkah fell on Thanksgiving Day (not the evening before as it did this year) or on a later night of the festival. Whoever wrote this got a bit carried away with the first day of Hanukkah falling on Thanksgiving.

In any case, many have asked the good question of why it won't happen again for so many years. This is an excellent opportunity to remind ourselves (or learn for the first time) how the Jewish calendar works.

The Jewish calendar is a fascinating and somewhat unique creation, different from the Muslim calendar, for example, which is simply a lunar calendar. That is why Ramadan (the month-long Muslim holiday of daytime fasting) can occur at various times of the year. The lunar calendar is 11-12 days shorter than the 365 ¼ day solar calendar. So each year Ramadan slides back and it can occur in the winter which, since it is a sunrise to sunset fast, is much easier than Ramadan these days, when it falls during the summer!

Our modern American solar calendar that adds a leap year with an extra day (February 29th) every four years does a fairly good job of keeping to the natural seasonal spin around the sun; however, it loses the connection to the moon. So, if the Jewish calendar were purely solar, *Pesah* would not necessarily occur on the 15th of the month when the moon is full, as it did for the Israelites from 3500 years ago.

Thankfully, our holidays occur on the same day in the lunar cycle as they did thousands of years ago since the Jewish calendar is a lunar calendar that is synched with the solar calendar. Shmuel, the rabbi who created this some 1600 years ago, added a leap year which includes an extra month 7 out of 19 years, which does a pretty good job of keeping us on track.

That said, our calendar is slipping - albeit slowly. Over time, the holidays are slipping back and it will take about 80 millennia until the cycle comes all the way around again. But we will have a major problem in a couple of centuries when *Pesah* slips out of the springtime in Northern Hemisphere, which is when the Torah ordains it must occur.

At that point, the entire Jewish community will have to come together and agree to change the calendar to fix the problem. Given the Jewish propensity to disagree, I am not sure how easy it will be for the entire Jewish people to come together and change the calendar. I only wish I could be a fly on the wall for that one!

So beyond the calendar and the latke-stuffed turkey and other such fun, what can we learn from confluence of these two holidays: Hanukkah and Thanksgiving?

Let me first state how important Thanksgiving is for us as American Jews. Not only did we get "You cut the turkey?? You cut the turkey without me!!" from the movie Avalon in 1990 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EEI7uV6YQU>, but we are also privileged to live in a country which celebrates a true interfaith religious experience.

Thanksgiving is about religious freedom and has come to include interfaith services that bring together clergy and parishioners of different faiths. Ours was held on Tuesday evening and Rabbi Fel participated in it. We should make sure to appreciate this – and we should be aware that this does not occur in other parts of the world. We should be thankful that we have many of these interfaith gatherings throughout this great country.

But there is an even more straightforward connection between Hanukkah and Thanksgiving. To understand it, we need to peel back some of the layers of Hanukkah history.

The earliest historical records about Hanukkah are the books of Maccabees which were written in the decades after the conflict of the years 167-163 BCE between the Maccabees and the Syrian Greeks.

In them, we find the original name for Hanukkah. I know some of my 7th graders know it, but I don't want to put them on the spot.

I'll give you all a hint - it's not very catchy! It was "Hag HaSukkot She'be'Hodesh Kislev."

You haven't heard that?!?

It means: The holiday of Sukkot that occurs in the month of Kislev.

Because the Maccabees were at war for years, they could not celebrate the pilgrimage festivals in the *Beit Hamikdash* - in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. But finally, the fighting was over and the Temple cleaned. By that time it was two months after Sukkot, which falls in the month of *Tishrei*, but everyone was so desperate to celebrate this most joyous of the three pilgrimage festivals that they went ahead and observed it during the month of Kislev.

That may be one of the reasons that Hanukkah has eight days. Since Sukkot (seven days in the Land of Israel), plus *Shmini Atzeret* (the eighth day festival) equal eight days, they celebrated for eight days in the year 163 BCE.

So the original Hanukkah was Sukkot!

The Hasidic tradition picked up on this and that is why they allow for atonement not only until Yom Kippur and then extended until *Hoshana Rabbah*, but all the way until Hanukkah.

In fact, our tradition loves to weave its celebrations into each other. We use our *Rosh Hashanah* cards to decorate our *Sukkot*, some use the *etrogim* from Sukkot to make *Etrog Liqueur* which they share on *Tu B'Shvat*, as we celebrate the new year of the trees. Some follow the custom to save their *lulav* until *Pesah* when they use it to sweep up the hametz during *Bedikat Hametz*, the search for leaven on the evening before *Pesah*, burning it the next morning. And the list can go on and on.....

What about Thanksgiving?

Well, we know the Pilgrims loved the Bible - and knew what they called the Old Testament, what we Jews call the Hebrew Bible, pretty well.

So as they were celebrating their survival, giving thanks for their blessings, they thought of the biblical festival of Sukkot. This original pilgrimage festival became the bedrock for the Pilgrims harvest festival.

And the connection is even deeper. To the rabbis, Sukkot was the original interfaith holiday. They believed that the 70 sacrifices biblically ordained for Sukkot represented all the nations of the world (70 in their time, by their count) coming

together. And what would they do? They would all ascend the God's holy mountain in Jerusalem and eat a meal together within the Universal Sukkah of Peace.

So, Sukkot was the original interfaith holiday. And we are most fortunate that we can observe Sukkot and the two holidays it spawned: Hanukkah and Thanksgiving.

But, there is one more layer here that is vital to mention. The key mitzvah of Hanukkah is *pirsumei nisa* in Aramaic - or in Hebrew, *Pirsum Hanes* - publicizing the miracle. We are commanded to share the miracle of Hanukkah.

While the miracle itself can mean different things to different people - the military victory of the few vs. the many, the miracle of the oil or simply, the miracles that exist all around us – the key is that we are supposed to share it publically.

That is why to fulfill the *mitzvah* of the lighting of the Hanukkah candles you must put your *Hanukkiyah* in a place where it can be seen – such as in the window. In Jerusalem, many of the homes even have little outdoor boxes for a *Hanukkiyah*. It's one of the reasons that I have an electric menorah so I can have the lights on all the time - highlighting the miracle.

As American Jews, who live in a primarily Christian country, this has become quite important. We are surrounded by signs that it is Christmas, and we need to be able to be proud that we are Jews. Publicizing the miracle is a big part of that. Rabbi Fel and the Emunah engineers who build our 10x12 foot *Hanukkiyah* that is standing over Route 2 did just that.



They have filled us with a great feeling of pride - we Jews are a part of the cultural and religious landscape in this land and we should be excited about that.

Similarly, Thanksgiving affords us the opportunity to be proud we are Americans. Being thankful and doing good (I am thinking of the thousands of dollars we raise each year at the Interfaith Thanksgiving Service as an example) are part and parcel of that experience.

While the country has many problems - as acknowledged in the line in the song "American, the Beautiful" that hopes that we can "Mend thine every flaw," it has brought much good into the world and we, as American Jews, can stand up and be proud of that, as we participate in the life of this country.

So this year, we can enjoy this unusual convergence and give thanks as both American and Jews - we certainly have a lot to be thankful for.

And whether the two holidays intersect again soon or not, we can appreciate their connections and our pride in being American Jews.

Shabbat Shalom.