

Background: Thanksgiving is traced to a 1621 celebration in Plymouth. This feast by the Pilgrims was sparsely documented. For many years, Thanksgiving observances varied from state to state. In 1863, President Lincoln, influenced by Sarah Josepha Hale, declared Thanksgiving an official holiday. He felt that Thanksgiving would foster a sense of unity between North and South during a time of war.

While for many European Americans Thanksgiving is a time of joyous celebration, it is not the same for native peoples. The arrival of European settlers brought devastation to native communities. Up to 90% of the native population were killed by disease. European settlers forced Native Americans off their lands and into reservations. They killed countless people and signed false treaties. Native children were taken from their families and forced into schools where they were forbidden to speak their language or practice their religion. This devastation still impacts native communities today.

The following prayer was written to help bring to light this history.

A Thanksgiving Prayer by Rabbi Erica Asch

As we gather around our tables, on this holiday of Thanksgiving, we pause.
We give thanks for the many blessings in our lives.

For the blessing of sustenance

The food on this table,
the people who labored to in fields and warehouses to bring it to us,
those who prepared this meal with love.

For the blessing of community

The opportunity to gather with family and friends
the ability to share our joy with others,
the support we find in hard times.

For the blessing of freedom

Shelter to protect us from the harsh winds of winter,
health to enjoy this meal together,
the ability to worship as we wish.

For the blessing of awareness

The ability to acknowledge the suffering and tragic losses of the native peoples,
the opportunity to raise our awareness
the chance to begin on a better path.

While we give thanks, we are also mindful

Of those who live with scarcity and do not know what they will eat tomorrow
Of those who sit alone, without a supportive community surrounding them
Of those who do not have adequate shelter
Of those who are not yet ready to leave their current way of thinking.

As we join together today in celebration, we know our joy is not complete.

We remember the oppression native peoples faced, and continue to face, at our hands.

We acknowledge the benefits we have gained, even if we were not directly responsible.

We take this opportunity to begin again.

As we enter into our Thanksgiving meal, we pause.

We acknowledge the suffering that has occurred.

We give thanks for our ability to turn towards a different path.

We take responsibility for creating the world in which we want to live, today and every day.