

Rabbi Klein's message at the 2020 Annual Grosse Pointe Jewish Council/Grosse Pointe Congregational Church Interfaith Thanksgiving Service.

“Thanksgiving Prayers”

We call what we're living through a “new normal”.

Will we ever shake hands with a friend, much less a stranger? Will thousands of people, any time soon, pack stadiums and arenas for sports or concerts? Will work-from-home, and online classes, and Zoom meetings now become our standard operating procedure? Will our communal Thanksgiving service next year look like this?

There's something not quite right about coming together, albeit at a distance, to give thanks to God for gifting us with goodness as thousands of Americans die each day, to say nothing of world-wide deaths. This pandemic has broken our spirits, disrupted our sense of well-being, and taken our lives. Shall we pray to God to save us? Have there not already been heard millions of prayers from tens of thousands of houses of worship? And to what avail?! With what purpose do we pray? Can we really affirm a God who beneficently intervenes in our lives, who heals us if we're good, who protects us from misfortune because we merit blessing?

From within our Jewish Heritage this may be a radical challenge to traditional faith, but it is not a new challenge. Already in the 13th C Moses ben Maimon (“Maimonides”) wrote that the Infinite God does not reach down into our finite world, that the Infinite God does not, will not, cannot interfere, change or alter our finite reality. Maimonides' rejection of traditional belief may have banned his books, but the apparent truth of his realization is all around us—in full hospital beds and empty seats at our Thanksgiving tables. So then—of what purpose is prayer? For what ought we give thanks to God?

2000 years ago Rabbinic tradition rejected the notion that “prayer” is primarily a plea for intervention. The Hebrew word they coined, that we translate as “prayer”, does not mean “petition”. It is not a plea or request *for*. Our Hebrew word *t'filah* means “to search within”, to “search within oneself.” Thus in worship we are to look within ourselves for answers, for guidance, for direction. And there we realize that God has already blessed us, has already imbued us with courage to challenge what's wrong in our world, with patience to work through the problems that face us, with knowledge to seek answers in the midst of the unknown, with strength to overcome the setbacks in our path, and with faith in humanity's inherent sense of justice and mercy.

And as we are thankful to God for these gifts of the spirit, God's gifts that define “Humanity”, we are also thankful that we are surrounded by “community”, that we are not alone in this “new normal”, that we have never been alone despite separations. Together we can be and should be courageous, patient, wise, strong and faithful because together there is nothing we cannot accomplish, no plague that we cannot vanquish, no wrong that cannot be righted.

We look within each one of us and among the all-of-us for the wherewithal to overcome that which threatens us. So let us be thankful for the gifts God has imbued within us, that have always been there for us. And let us be thankful for family, friends and community that protect us and sustain us and carry us and encourage us.

We cannot merely pray to God to fix that which is broken in our world, for we have already been blessed with the power to repair it.

We cannot merely pray to God to solve the problems of our world, for that is our responsibility.

Therefore-- We pray for the insight and the courage to use the strength, wisdom and understanding with which we are already blessed to make this a better world for all created things. We pray that we might save ourselves from the evils of our own doing, that our world may be safe and that our lives may be blessed. We pray that we may find the courage, the patience, the wisdom, the strength and the faith to use the opportunities that come each day to repair what has been broken.

With this prayer of Thanksgiving we say Amen.