

Unpacking Thanksgiving: Merging Tzedakah with my Indigenous Roots

To say Thanksgiving is exhausting is an understatement. No, I'm not referring to the hours Americans spend grocery shopping and cooking a meal, but am speaking from my experience as an indigenous person, specifically a *Diné Asdzáán* (Navajo woman). Thanksgiving is the final piece in my community's annual struggle for truth and acknowledgement. This ongoing battle begins in October with the American celebration of Columbus Day, perpetuating the myth that Christopher Columbus "discovered" a continent that was already inhabited by indigenous people. Like my ancestors preparing for battle, Native people show up to the front lines as ambassadors for the truth to dispel historical inaccuracies and condemn the actions of a man who brought disease, death, and warfare to people perceived to be inferior.

November initially brings a period of brief respite with Native American Heritage month. Each November I see my relatives across the country proudly wearing traditional regalia and showcasing our unique talents, history and culture. It is a rich panoply of Native America across the spectrum showcasing academics, teachers, lawyers, healthcare workers, cultural caretaker's, language guardians, and more, who beautifully blend their heritage with the broader American society. Contrary to popular belief, Native Americans continue to thrive culturally and linguistically, which makes the Thanksgiving narrative all the more frustrating.

As a child I was taught the real story of Thanksgiving, and how it contradicted what non-Native American children are taught in schools across the United States. Instead of the story of Pilgrims and Indians, our teachers, elders, and community members teach the children the basics of our culture, including the Navajo months and what they symbolize. The month of November is traditionally referred to as *Nilch'its'osi* or *Slender Winds*. The days become shorter, and the community continues to prepare for winter. This time was also marked by community meals where extended families would gather and all could come to eat. Today, this celebration often coincides with Thanksgiving but with a Native twist. Many families cook a turkey, but also include traditional Navajo dishes as well. As an adult, I've merged these customs with my Jewish values of giving tzedakah and helping those in need.

My views on tzedakah have been influenced by one of the most inspirational Jewish leaders of all time—the Lubavitcher Rebbe. A particular teaching that has stayed with me is the idea that we should give humbly and anonymously. In 2020, what does it mean to be humble and why give anonymously? In an age where social media has heavily influenced our behavior, society has fallen into an endless cycle of "doing it for the (insta)gram," yearning for more 'likes' on a facebook post, or trying to claim moral superiority over one's peers. Through these actions, the holiness is taken out of the mitzvah of giving tzedakah and it becomes nothing more than a superficial gesture. That isn't to say that this type of giving doesn't have an impact, but if we keep our ego in check this becomes an opportunity to elevate our actions to a higher spiritual plane. We should also remember that if we have the means we are obligated to give more, not because we want to be acknowledged for our actions, but simply because the Jewish people are compelled to do so. As we approach Thanksgiving, this need to give permeates the atmosphere, we cannot ignore how many Americans are facing food insecurity which has also been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For me, this is a stark reminder of the crippling poverty found on the Navajo Nation.

The Navajo Nation is the largest Native American reservation in the United States, extending into Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. I consider myself lucky to have been raised in Dinétah (ancestral Navajo land), one of the most beautiful places in the world that also holds my history, community, and traditions. Beneath the surface of the picturesque landscape lies an enemy that has affected the people for generations—food insecurity and poverty. Part of what contributes to this is that the reservation is a food desert. **In total there are 13 grocery stores for approximately 180,000 people.** These grocery stores are in major towns across the reservation, but can pose a challenge for those who live in rural areas—sometimes hours away from the nearest grocery store. In addition to geographic isolation, one out of three people lacks electricity and running water in their home, increasing the reliance on processed food for those who can afford it. Although poverty doesn't discriminate, one of the most impacted groups on the reservation are Navajo elders. To combat this, local grassroots organizations and the Navajo Nation government are working tirelessly to address food insecurity by providing food, cleaning supplies,

and water to those in need. This Thanksgiving, I implore the community to remember the first people of this nation and of our duty to care for the most vulnerable. I wholeheartedly believe each of us has the capability to make the necessary changes to create a more just world, and even the smallest action can tip the scale in a positive way. In the words of my Navajo ancestors: T'áá hwó' ají t'éego, or "if it is to be, it is up to me."

What Can You Do?

Knowledge is power but is useless without action. Please consider expanding your knowledge and helping the Native American community if you are able.

Read:

This Land is Their Land: The Wampanoag Indians, Plymouth Colony, and the Troubled History of Thanksgiving (2019) by David J. Silverman.

This Thanksgiving, Make these Native Recipes from Indigenous Chefs

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/indigenous-native-thanksgiving-dinner_n_5be1c1b3e4b01ffb1d06b538

Learn:

Type your address in and learn whose land you live on. Continue to research the history of the tribe and where they are now.

<https://native-land.ca/>

Many urban communities have Indian Centers (similar to the JCC). Indian Centers serve a wide range of functions, and accept volunteers and donations. Consider giving your time or resources if you are able. In a post-COVID environment, this is also a great way to learn from and interact with the community.

<https://www.ocindiancenter.org/>

Watch:

Saints and Strangers by National Geographic.

A more accurate depiction of the events leading up to the first Thanksgiving and what followed after the historical gathering.

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