

Thanksgiving

by: Rabbi Jeremy Rosen

Thanksgiving is a festival that records a group of settlers in America surviving a very brutal winter. Some argue that these settlers brought tremendous suffering to the indigenous peoples, and therefore this celebration should now be banned. I argue that, even so, Thanksgiving can still offer an important message and should not be scrapped.

Last month Columbus Day was the occasion for celebrating Columbus and for excoriating him. Some celebrated, others ignored it, and a few have been trying to obliterate it. His statues are vandalized all over the country and many communities have now changed Columbus Day into indigenous Peoples Day (why not then have two days, one for each?). New York Mayor de Blasio is seriously considering pulling down the statue of Christopher Columbus and renaming Columbus Circle (to Mickey Mouse Roundabout, perhaps). By this logic, they should remove his name from cities, rivers, and states. All because, in discovering the Caribbean, he was supposedly personally responsible for all the horrors that the Old World visited on the New. Steps have already been taken to remove George Washington's name, and in due course all the Founding Fathers will be similarly removed. Perhaps the Constitution will be scrapped too.

Of course they were quite awful in those days. Murderers, fanatically misguided, misinformed, and prejudiced on lots of issues—religion and race. They were homophobic and sexist. But whereas in the United States during the Civil War the issue of slavery was a public debate with clear moral principles at stake, in other times and places—whether Christian, Muslim, or Jewish—such issues were normative, however regrettable.

But if we regret the evil past, should we pull down all Catholic churches and cathedrals because it was the Catholic monarchs, the pope's instructions, and the Jesuit's mission to destroy native cultures and Christianize the Americas. And we should destroy all mosques, for they symbolize the violent conquest of Africa and whole chunks of Europe in Islam's violent assault on the remnants of the Roman Empire in the eighth century, not to mention their record on slavery and hostage-taking around the Mediterranean and Central Africa.

We should ban the Bible too, for it talks about conquering the Canaanite tribes and demolishing their native cultures. Greece refused women the vote and enslaved whole societies. So too did the Romans and indeed every country until the twentieth century. Away with racist, male chauvinist classical art, architecture, and sculpture. And definitely refuse to visit Switzerland, because they only gave the vote to women in 1970.

The Hindu nationalists are right to demolish mosques in India, because imperialist Muslims conquered huge areas of the subcontinent. Muslim historian Muhammad Qasim Hindu Shah (1560-1620) wrote that over 400 million

Hindus were slaughtered during the Muslim invasion and occupation of India. The Hindu population was said to have been around 600 million before the invasion, but by the mid 1500s it was 200 million. Those who survived were enslaved and castrated.

And we should smash Buddhist statues because of what they are doing to the Rohingyas.

We should throw all the statues of bishops off the Charles Bridge in Prague, because the inscriptions praise them for going to convert pagans and Jews. And we should dismiss all great Muslim philosophers, poets, and scientists like Averroes, Avicenna, Ibn Battuta, Omar Khayyam or Rumi, because they subscribed to a religion that claimed that Christians, Jews, and pagans were all second-class citizens, dhimmis or kafirs, and benefitted from slavery. Which is still going on, of course, as videos surfaced recently of slave markets in Libya.

There are some regimes so offensive to all human morality, like the German Nazi state, that they deserve the odium heaped upon them, and yet we still need to study them. It reminds people how bad we were when we see statues to evil men. But to try to remove all trace of those we disapprove of leads to iconoclasm, destroying works of art because they offend. Or following the barbarians of the Taliban and ISIS who think it glorifies their gods if they blow up ancient statues of religions they laughably think are inferior to theirs.

Sure British, Dutch, Belgian, French, Spanish, and Portuguese colonialists imposed their cultures on nations they conquered, and they exploited them. But so has every empire, every religion, every military leader in human history to some degree or other. That is the sad history of Homo sapiens, and we are challenged to try to get better. Meanwhile, it is ideologues on the right and the left who are perpetuating imperialist attitudes in trying to impose their orthodoxies on others.

This current desire to replace the art of white, male imperialists with third-rate examples from other artists simply because of their ethnic or sexual identities is as dangerous as any religious fundamentalism. As evil as communism's desire to erase the past. We cannot roll back history and pretend it never happened. Quite the contrary. We need to preserve the record, both to learn from it and to avoid repeating its errors. Nor can we sanitize any culture in such a way as to avoid any conflict or disagreement. That would so dilute it as to make it valueless. Norms change. Fashions change. But events are recorded.

We should be free to choose. To learn to discriminate. To refuse to listen to music, appreciate certain art and literature because we disagree with the opinions and actions of the artists. Indeed to refuse to celebrate days or events we not identify with. This is our right, even duty, as we see it. But we ought not to impose our views on others. That after all is the principle of free speech as enshrined in many constitutions.

In Jewish law it is the action that matters much more than speech. Even so we

have to avoid speech that offends. That is a religious obligation. One we take very seriously. But here we are talking about civil law, not religious. The law requires of us not to harm others, but it does not require us to think or even talk like everyone else. We should fight bigotry with all the tools of persuasion and all the protections the law can muster. But the moment you censor ideas and try to pretend the past was not, you lose that human variety and creativity that produces as much good as it does bad. It is just what Palestinians do when they pretend there were no Jews, no temples, no kings of Israel. And it is what Right Wing Settlers do when they pretend there were no Arabs living in Palestine.

Thank goodness Judaism is no great admirer either of statues or of perfection. Our disdain for idol worship biases us against statues. All statues of Jews I have ever seen have been either the work of non-Jews or secularists. Statues are a doubtful expression of human success. After all, think of the statues to Lenin, Stalin, Mao, Saddam Hussein, and all the other mass murderers—many of which still stand.

Old histories give way to new ones. The verdicts of history sort out the bad from the good. We need to focus on our own histories and make sure they and we will leave a better legacy than a crumbling statue. Remember Percy Bysshe Shelley's great poem about how statues decay, great men are forgotten:

*I met a traveler from an antique land,
Who said—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."*

In the Torah we are commanded to remember. Both the good and the bad. We remember we were slaves. We record our failures. But we also remember evil and our mistakes. It is the memory of the past, good and bad, that helps us cope with the present and pave the way for the future. Obliteration serves nothing other than human hubris. Meanwhile, looking at the good, gratitude for what we have—thanksgiving—can only benefit our positive, benevolent human spirit.