

Friends,

As the snow falls here in New Jersey blanketing the earth with the first layer of winter, Thanksgiving descends and we consider all the gifts with which life envelops us and for which we express thanks. Within hours, our homes will fill with the smells, sounds and sights of all that warms our hearts.

And yet, the world around us is burning. Ferguson, Missouri and cities around the country are struggling to control the flames – real and figurative – of racial tensions that continue to divide our country.

And we are still reeling from the monstrous attack in Jerusalem last week that came on the heels of several other heinous and murderous terrorist assaults in Israel.

Ariela Dubler, the new Head of School at the Abraham Joshua Heschel School in Manhattan where our children attend, reminded our school of Rabbi Heschel's words about how difficult it can be to express gratitude when things seem to be going so wrong. Earlier today Ariela wrote,

*"... Rabbi Heschel also reflected on the difficulty of appreciating the world around us when, too often, people are "hating, hunting, hurting." As he declared, reflecting on the need for gratitude and also the juxtaposition of nature's glory and human actions: 'It is so embarrassing to live!'"*

When we think about the gift of being alive and how often life is spurned by people who behave with contempt and hatred towards others, it can indeed feel shameful to be human.

These days our prayers for peace vie for airtime amidst the cacophony of reports and the sickening images that suggest they are at best futile, and at worst, hopelessly naïve.

But Ariela also reminded us that this is not the first time Thanksgiving and our desperate yearnings for relief from suffering and pain are colliding. They did so at the very first Thanksgiving, too. As she wrote,

*"Fittingly, the first national declaration of Thanksgiving occurred amidst the most fervent prayers for peace. As the Civil War raged, Abraham Lincoln declared a day of Thanksgiving to be observed at the end of November 1863. In his Proclamation of Thanksgiving, President Lincoln offered his thanks to God that, notwithstanding the war, "the country, rejoicing in the consciousness of augmented strength and vigor, is permitted to expect continuance of years with large increase of freedom."*

I pray that during these difficult times, as you gather and share with your loved ones all that we do indeed have to be thankful for, that you remain hopeful, open-minded and open-hearted to our vision of a world free of terror, trauma, hatred and alienation and that you remain determined to move it out of the realm of dreams and into the realm of reality.

For the gift of optimism, of relentless, unyielding hope, we give thanks.

Please read and share this Dvar Torah that I had published in the Jewish Standard last weekend and that speaks to this light of possibility within the darkness of despair. [PAUL: ADD THE LINK HERE.]

Wishing you all a very Happy Thanksgiving.

Dini

Rabbi Adina Lewittes