The Guests Missing from Our Thanksgiving Tables

By Karen Brodsky

Thanksgiving, just a few weeks away, is a time when we sit around our tables with family and friends. We talk about the different things we are thankful for. It's hard to imagine anyone who does not know of it. Also at Thanksgiving we lament that certain relatives and friends could not be at our tables for various reasons. Oblivious to this American tradition, only a small number of newly resettled refugees get a taste of it is like to be a part of the holiday in the U.S.

Thanei Taithio, a HIAS NC caseworker from Burma, remembers his first Thanksgiving in America. His caseworker brought a large roasted turkey, still warm from the oven, to his home. He had never had roasted turkey, and he recalls the experience and the taste to this day.

As much as we bemoan empty seats at our Thanksgiving table, there are refugees who have been waiting years to bring family members to the U.S. They, too, wish to fill seats at their tables.

For refugees, the process of bringing family from their home countries is long and complicated. It takes patience and perseverance. If you are a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident, your close family members can immigrate to the U.S. based on their relationship to you. Depending on whether you are a U.S. citizen or a permanent resident, and the type of your relationship with the family members, applicants fall into different categories, and may have to wait a number of years before they can immigrate.

U.S. law is very complex and the complexities may cause long separations, even for refugees and their families. Getting family members here is fraught with complications. Family of the Montagnards from the Central Highlands, for example, must bribe local officials to provide birth and marriage certificates and passports, all needed to come to the U.S. Then copies of these documents must be sent to the American consulate in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon), where the family members are interviewed by the International Organization for Migration (IOM). After that, one must make application to the Vietnamese government to leave.

Weh Ksor, a Montagnard, was encouraged by friends to apply to bring his family here. He was reluctant because he truly did not think they would actually be able to come. It was a hope and a dream. He filed an application so that his wife and two sons (under the age of 21) could to come to the U.S., which was submitted to the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). After about three years, they were approved to come, and Ksor sent money to his wife and children in his village. It had to be enough to bribe the officials, to pay for the 24-hour bus ride to Ho Chi Minh City, and pay for two nights in a hotel before their plane departed. All the steps were very dangerous, including the walk to the bus, especially in light of the tensions between the Vietnamese and the Montagnards. Miraculously, his wife and children arrived safely in Charlotte.

Late in the 19th century, Eastern European Jews had only to have the money to bring their relatives to America. After working long hours for many months to earn enough money for passage, the next concern was the quota imposed upon the number of immigrants the U.S. would accept.

Currently the numbers have nothing to do with quotas although there are limits to the number of refugees can come to the U.S. It is a much more complicated process.

A case aid for HIAS NC, Rebecca Sangkim, is waiting for her husband to arrive. He left Burma for Malaysia, where it is illegal for non-citizens to work. He lives in a rented apartment in Kuala Lumpur, where he plays in a band and waits to hear about his status. HIAS NC has made application, and sent letters and their marriage certificate. Now that Rebecca has been here with her two brothers for about three years, she is hoping that her husband will join them at their Thanksgiving table, probably this year and most certainly by next year. ✡

Pass the Turkey, B'vakasha!

By Edmon J. Rodman

Los Angeles (JTA) — How Jewish is Thanksgiving? With relatives flying in from eretz everywhere, with drama in the kitchen and at the table, and a time to give *modim*, thanks, and say *shehechiyanu* for being able to celebrate together another year, how can we not think of Thanksgiving as an adopted Jewish day of family gathering?

Though Judaism is a religion of feasts, with a *seudat mitzvah* — a feast commemorating the completion of a mitzvah — for circumcision, consolation, completing a tractate of Talmud or preparing for Purim, there is no *seudat* for thanks.

Deuteronomy does tell us, however, that upon being brought into the land of olive trees and honey, "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks."

Even considering a tough economic year with retirement funds shrinking, and the cost of food and tuition growing, whichever calendar you follow, are there really ever enough available days to give thanks?

With mainstream culture where we lie and rise, it's a struggle being a religious minority in America. Every so often Jews need — without the threat of identity loss — an opportunity simply to fit in. We need to bring home the turkey like everyone else, then sit around after dinner sleepy, stuffed and watching football.

A national holiday since 1863, Thanksgiving for many Jewish families is a time to meet, greet and eat between Sukkot and Chanukah. It's especially so for college students, who travel home to show off new boyfriends and girlfriends, hairstyles, beards and learning. Even the dirty laundry becomes part of the ritual.

The day can be a test, too.

A non-Jewish publisher for whom I once worked asked, "Do Jews celebrate Thanksgiving?"

Surprised at first, not sure how to respond, I finally answered with a question: "It's an America holiday. We qualify, don't we?"

It's an American holiday with origins in a persecuted religious group who makes an exodus and finds its way if not to a promised land, then to a land of religious freedom. Ring any bells, dinner or otherwise?

Some think Thanksgiving feels much like Sukkot. Both are harvest holidays where thanks and praise are given, and mass quantities of food are communally shared. Each involved a wilderness pilgrimage. Each has origins in makeshift living accommodations.

So while we're shopping for decorative cardboard Pilgrims, perhaps we should throw in an Israelite or two. Or while watching the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, just imagine a giant inflatable etrog floating by.

As for the main course, it's the Jews who have the inside scoop on the lifestyle and husbandry of America's favorite Thanksgiving entree. Israel is a major turkey-producing country, with many kibbutzim specializing in turkey

ranching.

Many who have visited Israel, especially students, have had the opportunity to observe turkeys doing more than gobbling. My wife while in Israel tended a turkey co-op for a month — the month that lasts a lifetime. Every Thanksgiving she regales us with stories of corralling, feeding, even injecting turkeys while on every evening of her stay dining on turkey schnitzel.

Now how many other American households have an ex-turkey rancher at their table?

Besides, kosher turkeys are grown without hormones. And according to Cook's Illustrated, a gourmet magazine that ran a taste test, kosher birds, probably because of the salt used in koshering, are moist, flavorful and taste best.

So, pass the turkey, *b'vakasha*!

The Jewish community has also found community-minded ways to celebrate the day. Many synagogues as tzedakah activities contribute staffing along with material and financial contributions to Thanksgiving meal giveaways.

Thanksgiving is one of the few days in America where interfaith cooperation reigns, with many synagogues and churches holding combined services. Rabbis, ministers, priests and pastors try valiantly to craft services that will be meaningful yet not offensive to their combined congregations.

As a child at such a service, the first time I went to a church, the service ended with the congregation singing a song of thanks that began, "We gather together to ask the Lord's blessing …" From a hymn book I sang along, reassured to discover that other people sang about God, too.

Jews have their own prayers and psalms of thanks. *Modim*, a

(Continued on next page)