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Thanksgiving service Nov. 23, 2005

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In honor of this holiday of Thanksgiving, I want to do two things. I want to share with you an ancient Midrash and then I want to share with you a modern insight that elaborates and expands on the truth of this Midrash.

First the Midrash: "Whenever Ben Zoma saw a crowd of people, he would say, "Blessed be God who has created all these people to serve me. For look how hard Adam had to work before he could obtain a piece of bread to eat. First, he had to plow and then he had to sow. And then he had to reap and then he had to bind the sheaves, and then he had to thrash, and then he had to sort the grain, and then he had to grind it, and then he had to sift the flour, and then he had to knead it, and then he had to bake it. And only then could he eat bread. Whereas I wake up in the morning and find that all these things have been done for me."

That is the Midrash. I confess that I never paid much attention to it. I thought that it was a nice poetic way of expressing the interdependence of all human beings. And I let it go at that. But last year I read a column by Jeff Jacobi, who writes for the *Boston Globe*, and he made me aware that what Ben Zoma said some 20 centuries ago is more than poetry. It is a description of the economic reality in which we live our lives.

He began by saying that almost every one of us says some kind of a prayer when we sit down at the Thanksgiving table. It may be “Hamotzi Lechim”, if you’re Jewish, or it may be a prayer that we compose ourselves. We may say: Thank You God for the food we are about to eat, or: Thank You God for being together as a family, or: Thank You God that we live in this blessed land of America, or: Thank You God for our health, or whatever. Most of us say some kind of prayer of thanksgiving before we begin a meal.

Jeff Jacobi says, “There are many things we take for granted at the meal, and that we do not stop to think about or give thanks for.” For example: the turkey itself. Of course, it is there where it is supposed to be. And, of course, it was at the supermarket or the kosher butcher shop where we went to buy it. Where else should it be? And yet, says Jeff Jacobi, if you think about it, there is something wondrous, something almost unexplainable in the way that this turkey came to us through the work of vast numbers of total strangers. To bring that turkey to your dining table required the combined efforts of hundreds, perhaps thousands of people, starting with the poultry farmer who raised the bird. But what about the feed distributor who supplied the food that nourished the turkey? If he had not made that feed, that bird would have looked a lot thinner and a lot frailer than it did when you served it on Thanksgiving. And what about the

trucker who delivered that feed to the farm? And what about the architect who designed the hatchery in which the turkey lived? And what about the electrician, the carpenter and the other workmen who built that hatchery to the architect's designs and maintained it so your turkey could be warm and comfortable in the hatchery? And what about the shochet [the Jewish butcher, if this bird was intended to be kosher, or the slaughterer if it was not? And what about the person who defeathered it, and the one who inspected it to make sure it met federal standards for disease control? And what about those who transported it first to the wholesaler and then to the retailer, and what about those who wrapped it in plastic and those who priced it and those who put it on display in the glass case together with other turkeys, so that you could choose which one you wanted?

And if you think about it, you realize that each of these people was supported by armies of other people who helped them accomplish their tasks. What about the people who refined the gasoline that fueled the truck that the feed distributor used to deliver the feed or that the driver used to deliver the turkey to the wholesaler? What about the people who manufactured the plastic in which it was wrapped?

If you think about it, you will realize that it took the activities of countless people over the course of many months, intricately choreographed and carefully timed to arranged things so that when you showed up to buy a turkey there would be one-or-more likely, many more than one for you to chose between when you got to the butcher shop or to the supermarket.

But what is more mind boggling saying for Jeff Jacobi is that no one coordinated it. No turkey czar sat at a command post somewhere consulting a master plan and reading a computer and issuing orders to people from coast to coast. No bureaucrat in Washington was involved with all these people and forced them to collaborate for your benefit, and yet they did cooperate.

When you showed up at your supermarket, your turkey was there waiting for you. Had it come a week too early you would not have been interested. Had it come a week too late, you could not use it. But it came right on time, just when you needed it. And that is no small wonder. When you think of all the different people who were involved, you realize that Ben Zoma was right in what he said 20 centuries ago. He felt that he was more fortunate than Adam was. We ought to feel that we are more fortunate than Ben Zoma was because look how many people are involved in making sure we have a turkey to eat on Thanksgiving!

What shall we call this complex efficient system that brings the work of hundreds and hundreds of people together this way? Adam Smith, the great economist gave it an interesting name. He called it: **The Invisible Hand**. The mysterious power that leads so many people, each concerned for his own gain, to do things that benefit many. Out of the seeming chaos of millions of uncoordinated private transactions emerges the spontaneous but effective order of the market. Free human beings freely interact, and the result is a dazzling array of goods and services more immense than the human mind can comprehend. No dictator, no bureaucracy, no supercomputer plans it out in advance. In fact, the more the economy is planned the more it is plagued by shortages, missed locations and errors.

That is Adam Smith's explanation. The invisible hand is the hand of economics, which persuades all people to do what they can for their own personal profit, and the result of their efforts combined is good for the well being of society. That is one way to understand the wonder of how the turkey got to your table. And I do not question its validity.

But there is another way of understanding this phrase: **The Invisible Hand**. It is commonplace to see the work of God in the intricacy of a spider's web or the complexity of a beehive. But these wonders pale in comparison with

the kaleidoscopic energy and the productivity of the free market. If it is a blessing from heaven when a tiny seed is transformed into grain and when grain is transformed into bread, then is it not even more of a Divine blessing and even more of a wonder when our private separate voluntary exchanges of effort are turned into mutual prosperity and mutual benefit? Isn't the "**Invisible Hand**" a good expression with which to describe the workings of God in the world?

So, let us be one of the things that we thank God for and that we do not take for granted this year when we sit down at the Thanksgiving table. The turkey that started out many miles away and that was fed for many months by many people, was slaughtered, and de-feathered, and inspected, and then driven to the wholesaler, and from there to the retailer, and that it was wrapped in plastic and put into a glass case, so that we could see it and buy it. That so many different people did so many different things in so many different places so that this turkey could come to this house of ours. This too is a wonder and a blessing for which on this Thanksgiving Day we should be grateful.

Ben Zuma was right. Look how hard Adam had to work and look how many things he had to do for and by himself before he could eat a bit of bread. And look how many people do so many things for us.

We thank You God for Your Invisible Hand. Amen.