

הגדה של הודיה

# Why North American Folk Eat Turkey on Thanksgiving

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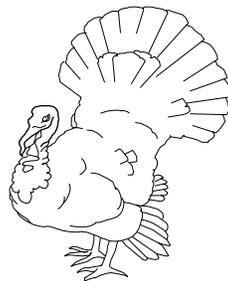
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**T**his paper attempts to determine the origin of the North American custom of eating turkey on Thanksgiving day from manuscripts that were found in an archeological excavation near Salem, Massachusetts.

## Introduction

One question that has plagued North American Thanksgiving day celebrants for years is why turkey (see Figure 1) is eaten in the traditional Thanksgiving day meal. Evidently,<sup>0</sup> the Canadian food custom is derived from the U.S. food custom. Thus, the question reduces to why the U.S. Thanksgiving is celebrated by eating turkey. This author has managed, with a great deal of difficulty and personal expense, to obtain an old Hebrew manuscript that was found in a recent classified<sup>1</sup> archeological excavation near Salem, Massachusetts. A bit of historical and Hebrew linguistic analysis applied to this manuscript has finally answered the plaguing question. This answer is given following descriptions of the background leading to the discovery and of the analyses.



*Figure 1: A turkey*

## Holidays and Food

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<sup>0</sup>Even though the Canadian holiday has an origin different from that of the U.S. holiday, both give thanks over a good harvest. Originally, the food eaten on the Canadian holiday was other than turkey. However, over time, Canadians gravitated to eating the same foods as on the U.S. holiday, perhaps as a result of hegemony from down south. This same hegemony seems to be responsible for Canadian's speaking English like residents of parts of the U.S. even though Canada uses many aspects of British spelling. (The reason that the first footnote is numbered "0" is that the author is a C programmer!)

<sup>1</sup>Therefore, there are no papers about the dig that I can cite, and security laws prohibit me from mentioning the archeologists by name. Even the reason for classification is classified.

On a holiday, it is quite traditional to eat foods that remind us of the purpose of the holiday. For example, on Passover (פסח), Jews eat matza (מצה) to remind them that the Hebrews left Egypt so hurriedly that they did not have time to let the dough rise to make bread. The question naturally arises, “Why does one eat turkey on the U.S. Thanksgiving?”. Indeed, part of the religious service, called the *Seder* (סדר), that is read before the festive meal on the first night of Passover, consists of the youngest at the table asking the *four questions*, which ask why matza and other special foods are eaten on Passover.

## International Bird

However, before getting into this question, let us observe something about the bird itself. The name of the bird is very international, despite the fact that the bird is truly native to North America; its name seems to be the name of another country in a lot of languages.

1. English: *Turkey*<sup>2</sup>
2. Portuguese: *Peru*
3. French: *Dinde* (from D’Inde, literally “from India”)
4. Hebrew: *Tarngol Hodu* (תרנגול הודו, literally “Indian fowl”)
5. Russian: *Indyuska* (Индюшка, literally “from India”)
6. Turkish: *Hindi* (literally “Hindi” a language spoken in India)
7. Greek: *Galapoula* (Γαλοπούλα, literally “French bird” in the modern Greek language, Demotic).
8. Hindi: *Peru Pakshi* (literally “peru bird”, where it is believed that the word “peru” is the same as in Portuguese<sup>3</sup>)

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<sup>2</sup>According to *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, published by Merriam-Webster in 1989, the origin of the English word “turkey” is from confusion with the Guinea fowl, supposed to be imported from Turkish territory.

<sup>3</sup>The evidence that “peru” has a Portuguese origin comes from the fact that the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama is considered to have discovered India for the West and Portugal colonized India before the French and British did. It seems reasonable to assume that the bird was introduced into India by the Portuguese and hence was called “peru pakshi” by the local folk as their rendition of what the Portuguese were calling it.

Since so many languages name the bird after India, it was interesting to determine what the bird is called in India. Each person I asked gave me a different answer. Besides the answer cited above, one Hindi speaker, Malini Kanth, a software consultant at Atlantic Duncans International, said that in Hindi, turkey is called “shuturmurg”. “Murg” means “chicken”, but it is not known by Indians what “shutur” means.<sup>5</sup> (a footnote reference within a footnote!) A related word “shuta” means “little” but that does not sound right given the relative sizes of turkey and other fowl. Harsh Varma, from Bear Stearns & Co., a native speaker of Hindi, pointed out that in India, there is a cousin of the turkey called the “Lalsar” (literally “red head”),<sup>4</sup> and many Indians use that term for the turkey as well.

Rivka Best, a Hindi scholar, points out that the reason for the variety of names is the rich diversity of languages and dialects in India. She observes that English serves as a lingua franca to bridge this linguistic diversity, and offered that most most Indians call the bird by the English word “turkey” since the bird is not native to India.

Farhad Arbab, a computer scientist at CWI, Amsterdam, points out that the Persian word for turkey, *booghalamoon* (بوگلمون) or *booghalmoon*, the second being more poetic a transliteration than the first, means “many-colored”. He recalls at least one poem dating from the 15th or the 14th century in which this word is used to mean just that, i.e., “multi-colored” or “colorful” and has nothing to do with the bird. “Many-colored” has a dynamic sense also, meaning “changing colors” in time. He supposes that turkeys in those days were considered more colorful than other birds in the region, or else, they would not have deserved the name. Note that in Japanese, one name of the bird is *sitimencho* (七面鳥, literally “seven-faced bird”) This name may be based on the same observation about the bird that the Persians made. (There are theories that both the Japanese and the Persians are two of the ten lost tribes of Israel; perhaps the common observations were made when they were not yet lost! The only problem is how they managed to see a bird native to the New World long before Columbus discovered it. Perhaps, prophetically, the bird itself was so lost from North America that it made its way to ancient Israel!) Arbab adds that there is another common meaning for the same Persian word which is clearly more of a connotation

9. Arabic: *Deek Rumi*<sup>6</sup> (ديك رومي, literally “Roman or Romanian fowl”)
10. Austrian German: *Indian* (literally “from India”)<sup>7</sup>
11. Polish: *Indyk* (derived from the Polish word for India)<sup>8</sup>
12. Klingon: *Khardassia* (literally, “Cardassia”)<sup>9</sup>

than a meaning. It is used as a negative adjective to describe a person who changes his or her friendships, associations, moods, loyalties, etc., quickly and frequently to fit the occasion and to further his or her selfish interests. In this sense, it is similar in the connotation of the English word “chameleon” when used in the same context.

<sup>4</sup>Arbab has two additional comments about the Indian words for turkey. Recall that *lalsar* means “red head” in some Indian language. Well, as is well known, Northern Indian languages are descendants of Sanskrit, which is the sibling language of Old Persian. Also, for centuries, the Persian language and culture flourished in northern India. For these reasons, it is very common to find direct Persian words and phrases or Persianized versions of Arabic words and phrases in Indian languages, and/or find words that have common roots due to the common ancestry of Persian and Sanskrit. *Lalsar* is not a common term in modern Persian, but it is the conjunction of two very common Persian words: *la’l* and *sar*. *Sar* means “head” in Persian. However, *la’l* literally means “ruby”, the precious gem, which is, of course, red, and therefore, it only metaphorically means red. By the way, *la’l* is the same word used as a name in India, e.g., *Javaher La’l Nehru* which literally means “Jewel Ruby Nehru”.

<sup>5</sup>Arbab’s second comment is regarding the meaning of *shuturmorgh*, which again is a Persian word. It happens to be a common word, and it is indeed made out of two words. The Persian word would be transliterated as *shotormorgh*, of course, but the Persian letter represented by “u” and “o” are the same, the *vav*. The second word *morgh* means “bird”, and it has always been used in Persian. It is also common in many Indian languages through the Persian and the Persianized Mongol, or Mughul, influence. One can see this word in the names of many Indian dishes, especially those from the North and places with Mughul links. The first word, *shotor* or *shutur* is also a Persian word. It means “camel”. Therefore, *shotormorgh* literally means “camel bird” in Persian and is indeed the name for a particular peculiar bird, the ostrich!

There is an age-old connotation associated with “ostrich” in Persian; some people are called *shotormorgh*, and it is not a nice thing! The connotation comes from a well-known, age-old saying that goes like this: When a *shotormorgh* was told to fly, he said, “I cannot, I’m a camel!” Then he was told, “Then carry a load”, and he said, “I cannot, I’m a bird!” So, an ostrich is someone who always has handy convenient legitimate excuses for changing alliances, affiliations, and beliefs to refuse to do anything, especially if it involves hardship!

By the way, although *shotor* is the common word for camel in Persian, there are other related words for camel, which are variations of the same root as well. The words *oshtor* and *ashtar*<sup>11</sup> (another footnote reference within a footnote!) also mean camel and are also well known in modern Persian, although they sound a bit too poetic. The word *ashtar* has something to do with the ancient Iranian religion of Zoroastrianism, *Zardosht*, which is the Persian name for the prophet Zarathustra, is a combination of the two words *zard* and *ashtra* which mean “yellow” and “camels” in Old Persian. The word for yellow in modern Persian is also *zard*. It is known that *Zardosht* was indeed called by this name because he was the owner or the herder of yellow camels.

<sup>6</sup>Arbab’s final observation, confirmed by Richard White, is that the word *rumi* has two meanings, “of or related to Rome”, as mentioned above, and “of or related to what is now Turkey”. The reason for this is that what used to be the East Roman Empire is now Turkey. Therefore, *deek rumi* is doubly “turkey”. Indeed, the entire area of Anatolia is often referred to as *Rum*, as opposed to *Rom* for Rome in old Arabic and old Persian texts. The world famous Persian Sufi master and poet Molavi, also known as Mevlana, who is buried in Kunia (*Ghooniyeh*) in today’s Turkey, is often referred to as *Rumi* because he lived and taught most of his life in Kunia which was in *Rum*. Also, the name *Erzerum* in Turkey is a corruption of the Arabic term *arz-al-rum* which was what this whole area was called and literally means “the land of Rum”.

<sup>7</sup>The German German word for turkey is *truthahn*. While *hahn* means “hen”, the part *trut* does not seem to have any particular meaning, least of all not the name of any country.

<sup>8</sup>Simeon Reich, a mathematician at the Technion, points out that the male turkey is *Indyk*, the female turkey is *Indyczka*, India is *Indje*, Indian from India is *Indyjski*, and Indian from the American continents is *Indjanin*. So clearly *Indyk* is derived from the Polish word for India, but it doesn’t exactly mean “from India”. Strangely enough, “Indyk” is also the family name of the U. S. Ambassador to Israel at the time of writing of the 1996 edition of this paper. Despite the meaning of his family name in Polish, Ambassador Martin Indyk, is no turkey.

<sup>9</sup>Cardassia is the name of a world that is an enemy of the Klingon empire. In the 24th century, when citizens of the United Federation of Planets residing on the Klingon homeworld introduce the bird to the planet to provide human-edible food for Thanksgiving, there is a possibility that the Klingons will name the bird after Cardassia, so says Mark Shoulson, a member of the Klingon Language Institute. Only time will tell!

13. Welsh: *Twrci* (pronounced "toorki", i.e., like the English word)
14. Ojibwa (a language in the Algonquian family): *Misiss* (plural *Misissens*), which shares the beginning syllables with the name of yet another Native American place, Mississippi<sup>10</sup>
15. Micmac (another language in the Algonquian family): *Apatapegi jit*, which shares the beginning syllables with the name of yet another Native American tribe, the Apache.
16. Japanese: *karakuncho* (カラクン鳥 or 唐國鳥, literally "Tang Dynasty Country (i.e., Chinese) bird")<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps the reader can supply other examples in languages not known to the author.<sup>13</sup>

## Archeological Excavations

In excavations near Salem, Massachusetts, an old Hebrew manuscript was found that sheds some light on why one eats turkey on Thanksgiving. This manuscript was titled *Haggada Shel Hodaya*<sup>14</sup> (הגדה של הודיה, literally "Telling of Thanksgiving"), reminiscent of the book used during the Passover *Seder* titled *Haggada Shel Pesach* (הגדה של פסח, literally "Telling of Passover"). It prescribes that someone at the table ask why turkey is eaten at the festive meal, it gives the story of thanksgiving that is familiar to every child in the U.S. today, and then suggests eating a festive meal containing at least turkey. It, unfortunately, does

<sup>10</sup>Of course, one wonders what the bird was called by the indigenous people of the region, the Algonquian Native Americans, who were found mainly in New England and upstate New York in the U.S. and Ontario, Ottawa, and Québec in Canada (Note that the Native American tribes have been collectively called "Indians" for the same mistaken reason that the turkey has been called "Indian chicken". (See the mainline text referring to Footnote 14, in the **Key Discovery** section.)). Elaine Rene Keown was kind enough to supply the names for turkey in several of the Algonquian languages. Two of these, in Ojibwa (from F. Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Ojibway Language*, 1886, 1992) and Micmac (from A.D. DeBlois, *Micmac Lexicon*, 1984) and listed in the mainline text, do sound like they could be derived from names of other places, both Native American places. She also points out that the Abenaki (from Gordon Day, *Western Abenaki Dictionary*, 1995) word is *nahama* which sounds a lot like the Hebrew word נהמה, which means "roaring or growling". If we accept the theory that some of the Native American tribes are descended from some of the ten lost tribes of Israel, perhaps the wild turkey of those days made a much louder noise than the modern day domesticated variety, and the name is an attempt to capture that fact. The Blackfoot (from D.G. Frantz, *Blackfoot Dictionary*, 1989) word is *aitsiyihk'si*. This word is very interesting, because it can be spelled faithfully with Hebrew letters, אִיִּצִיִּיחַסִּי, using two letters that do not exist in the Latin alphabet, thus lending more credence to the ten lost tribes of Israel theory. To write the word with Latin letters requires the use of diphthongs. The Delaware (from Brindon, *A Lenape-English Dictionary*, 1888, 1979 (Lenape = Delaware)) word is *tshickenum*, which sounds suspiciously like the English word "chicken".

<sup>11</sup>With regard to the Persian word *ashtar*, Ron Roth points out that *Ashtar* is the name of a goddess known in Hebrew as *Ashtoret* (עשתרת) and the name "Esther" (אסתר), of a Persian Jewish heroine, is a variant of *Ashtar*. More interestingly, the name of the Christian Easter in most European languages is the same as or is a variant of the name of Passover, e.g., in French, both Easter and Passover are called "Pâque". In English, however, Easter has a totally different name from that of Passover, probably from a pagan source, probably related to the worship of *Ashtar*. Perhaps, we have a link between Easter, Passover, and Thanksgiving through the turkey.

<sup>12</sup>This Japanese name for the bird is a double pun. It is derived from the Dutch word for the bird, *kalkoen*, the Dutch being among the early Western arrivals to Japan. It is no longer used, having been replaced by *sitimencho* (see Footnote 3). In Katakana, the Japanese alphabet reserved for writing foreign words and words of foreign origin, *kalkoen* is written phonetically, with "l" replaced by "r", as *カラクン* (in Romaji: *ka ra ku n*). This word happens to be one pronunciation of the Kanji 唐國, which means "Tang Dynasty Country". Since the Tang Dynasty was the ruling dynasty of China from 618–907 of the common era, this Japanese name for the bird is often thought of as "Chinese bird". In a sense, then, this name for the bird is the name of another country.

Interestingly, the Dutch word, *kalkoen*, is considered by the Dutch to be an onomatopoeia.

<sup>13</sup>Please send any examples to the author at [dberry@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dberry@uwaterloo.ca) on the Internet.

<sup>14</sup>This document is not to be confused with *Mishlei Hodaya* (משלי הודיה, literally "Psalms of Thanksgiving"), which are songs of more general thanksgiving, found in Qumrun. It is clear, however, that the Hebrew name of the holiday, *Chag Hahodaya* (חג ההודיה, literally "holiday of the thanksgiving") is derived from this ancient name of these of psalms.

not really give a direct answer to the *why* question, leaving the reader to figure the answer out from the story.

It is clearly not surprising that a manuscript dealing with the origins of Thanksgiving was found near Salem, Massachusetts. However, it may be surprising that a *Hebrew* manuscript was found near Salem, Massachusetts. It should not be; the influence of the old testament, written in Hebrew, on the pilgrims and their descendants in Massachusetts is well known. Just look at the maps of Israel and the Palestinian Authority combined<sup>15</sup> and of Massachusetts in the last two pages of this paper. The Massachusetts cities of Salem, Rehoboth, and Hebronville are clearly named after the ancient Israeli cities of Jerusalem (ירושלים), Rehobot (רחובות), and Hebron (חברון). That Salem is named after Jerusalem is clear when you consider that Jerusalem's original name in Genesis XIV:18 is Salem (שלם). Later, in Zacharia XIV:4, the Hebrew name of the city is ירושלם; the modern Hebrew name of the city did not get the yod (י) between the lamed (ל) and the mem (ם) until much later, when the city was extended to include the full seven hills.

## Hebrew in the U.S.A.

Moreover, Benjamin Franklin once proposed that Hebrew be the national language of the nascent U.S.A. After all, why keep English if the U.S.A. is breaking away from England? Franklin felt that *every* educated person should be able to read the Old Testament of the Bible in the original language. Moreover, Hebrew was a required course at Harvard and Yale. It went so far that Hebrew is in the seal of Yale, *Urim v'Tumim* (אורים ותמים).

Can the reader imagine what would be today and the future if Benjamin Franklin had his way?

- Everyone would be speaking Hebrew in the U.S.A.
- Hebrew would be the international language of diplomacy, science, technology, commerce, etc.
- Everyone in the world would call a computer *machshev* (מחשב).
- This paper would have been written in Hebrew.
- In the 23rd and 24th centuries, the standard language of the United Federation of Planets would be Hebrew; Humans, Vulcans, Klingons, Romulans, and Cardassians would all be speaking Hebrew!

By the way, Franklin once proposed that the national bird of the U.S.A. be the turkey instead of the bald eagle. He argued that the turkey was more honest, more honorable, more diligent, and smarter than the bald eagle. As with the national language issue, he was not able to prevail. Perhaps that he failed in this issue is a good thing. Who would want to eat his country's national bird on a national holiday? It is somewhat ironic that today consider the turkey to be the epitomy of dumbness.

## Key Discovery

Analysis of the manuscript showed that the pilgrims evidently knew that the Hebrew word *hodu* (הודו) means both:

- thank (plural imperative)
- India

The other name for turkey in those days was *Indian* chicken because Columbus thought he was in India when he saw turkeys for the first time! Indeed, in modern Hebrew, the phrase for turkey is precisely

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<sup>15</sup>This author is an Israeli who is optimistic enough to believe that the violence will stop and the land shown in this map will be divided into two countries with yet to-be-negotiated, secure, peaceful borders.

*tarngol hodu* (תרנגול הודו), literally “Indian fowl or chicken”),<sup>16</sup> and this is often shortened to simply *hodu* (הודו), especially in contexts in which it is known that one is speaking about a fowl to be eaten. What better way to have the holiday dinner remind people to give thanks!

## An Old Quotation

The reader’s curiosity may be demanding to know precisely what was found in the *Haggada Shel Hodaya* manuscript? The manuscript contained a very curious wish for the holiday that alerted us to the above conclusion, and it clarified the origin of a Thanksgiving day greeting that is given to this very day. The wish is quoted below with a phrase by phrase transliteration and translation given below. Do notice the play on the word *hodu* (הודו), which means both “thank” and “India”.

בחג ההודיה:		
הודו שאין אתם תרנגול הודו אשר לפניכם.		
בחג	ההודיה:	
b'chag	ha-hodaya:	
On-holiday-of	the-Thanksgiving:	
הודו	שאין	אתם
HODU	she-ain	atem
Give-thanks	that-not	you-are
תרנגול	ההודו	אשר לפניכם.
tarngol	ha-HODU	asher lfaneikhem.
fowl	the-Indian	that-is before-you.
	the turkey	

or in more colloquial English, “On thanksgiving, give thanks that *you* are not the turkey!” (this turkey that we are eating).

So now, the origin of eating turkey on Thanksgiving day is clear.

## More Haggada Details

There was still more in the *Haggada Shel Hodaya* manuscript. The *Haggada* also specifies a number of thanksgiving prayers after the meal and ends with a single sentence that is reminiscent of the last sentence that is said after the Passover meal, which is aimed mainly at Jews in the diaspora, *L'shana habaa b'irushalayim* (לשנה הבאה בירושלים), literally “Next year in Jerusalem”). The last sentence of the *Haggada Shel Hodaya* is *L'shana habaa b'shalem* (לשנה הבאה בשלם), literally “Next year in Salem”). Evidently, those planning the Thanksgiving holiday celebration anticipated a future diaspora of U.S. citizens, such as this author! For some reason, yet to be discerned, this prayer has fallen into disuse along with most of the rest of the *Haggada Shel Hodaya*.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined an old Hebrew manuscript found in an archeological excavation near Salem, Massachusetts, that answers the age-old question of why one eats turkey on the U.S. thanksgiving holiday. Besides answering this question, the manuscript clarified the origin of a greeting given to this day

<sup>16</sup>One astute reader of an earlier draft of this paper asked why modern Israeli Hebrew adopted Columbus's terminology since it is known today that Columbus was *not* in India, but was rather in America, i.e., why is not the Hebrew name for turkey the equivalent of “American fowl”? Perhaps it has to do with the well-known fact that Columbus was Jewish and was perhaps on a voyage to find a new home land for the Jews being kicked out of Spain in the 1492 Expulsion. Modern Israel wished to honor this early Zionist by keeping his terminology.

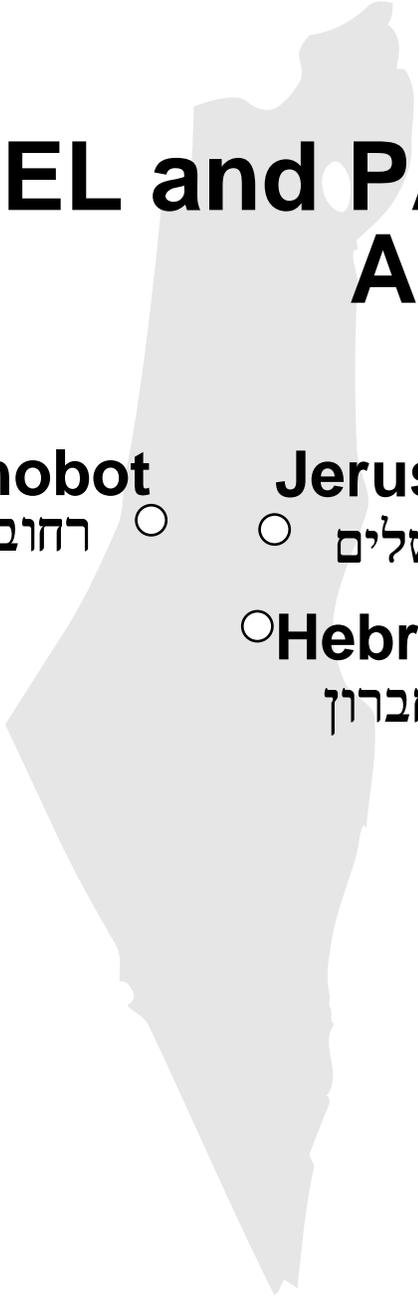
and gave another prayer that is not said today, despite its intention to be said today.

Bon Appétit, (בתאבוו)

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# ISRAEL and PALESTINIAN AUTHORITY



**Rehobot**  
רחובות ○

**Jerusalem**  
ירושלים ○

○ **Hebron**  
חברון

# MASSACHUSETTS

