
DANCING WITH SCROLLS: SIMḤAT TORAH

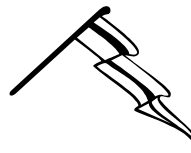
There are several reasons Jews rejoice with the Torah. First, we are reminded that God did not send us out into the world without a road map, but rather provided us with a detailed and comprehensive guide to living a productive and praiseworthy life. When we physically embrace the Torah, we acknowledge its primacy in our lives and reject any implication that it is simply a museum piece, worthy of admiration but not of application. Even more, with this symbolic act we personally accept the obligation to live in accordance with its dictates. We do not struggle under its weight, but rather dance to show the world that -- far from being a burden upon us -- the Torah presents a source of joy and enrichment.

Second, we rejoice in the very fact that God trusted us enough to give us the Torah at all. We have all seen the look of unabashed pride and happiness in the face of a child who is entrusted with an important task. So too do we radiate feelings of pleasure at having been given so significant a mission. Third, we rejoice in having successfully completed another year of life -- full of new experiences and new ideas -- and having entered immediately into a new year, filled with hope and possibilities.

Joy is a very positive emotion in our lives. From the beginning of Elul through Yom Kippur, we have looked into our souls, repented of our wrongdoing, and pledged to set things right. Now it's time to savor the moment and appreciate God's bounty. Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur mark a unique spiritual journey. Having survived that journey, we celebrate on *SimḤat Torah*. We sing, we dance, we hold hands, we wave flags, we affirm life and -- at the same time -- we assure the continuity of our religious tradition.



While the pilgrimage festivals -- *Pesah*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot* and *Shemini Atzeret* -- are listed several times in the Torah (e.g., Lev. 23:1-44; Num. 29:16-39), the term *SimḤat Torah* does not appear. It does not even appear in the Talmud. What, then, is the origin of this popular holiday which every Hebrew school child knows as a day of singing, dancing, flags, and some degree of chaos?



On the most basic level, *SimḤat Torah* is the second day of *Shemini Atzeret*. As with every *Yom Tov*, diaspora Jews traditionally celebrate an additional day to that prescribed in the Torah. *Shemini Atzeret* is, itself, a bit of a hybrid. On the one hand, it is *shemini* (literally, the eighth) and concluding day of the fall pilgrimage festival (i.e., *Sukkot*). On the other hand, the

Talmud relates that it is *regel bifnei atzmo*, a holiday unto itself. Still, the second day of every other festival (*Pesah*, *Shavuot*, *Sukkot*) simply bears the name of that festival. How did the second day of *Shemini Atzeret* get its own special designation?

Initially, in ancient Palestine, the Torah was divided into many more portions than the 54 we now use. However, in the first diaspora community of Babylonia, it became the custom to read the entire Torah on an annual cycle. This has become the universal custom, i.e., beginning in Genesis and completing the Five Books of the Torah in one year. Sometime during the Talmudic period (i.e., before 500 C.E.), it became customary to both end and immediately thereafter begin that annual cycle on *Shemini Atzeret* (or on the second day, in the diaspora).

While today it is accepted practice to have seven *hakafot* (circuits) on *SimḤat Torah* before the Torah is read, the *Mishnah Berurah* notes: "There are those who circle three times, there are those who circle seven times ... each locale acts in accordance with its own custom." *SimḤat Torah* also has one other distinction: It is the only time we take out and read the Torah at night.

It is certainly fitting and, perhaps, inevitable that *Shemini Atzeret* is the day on which we finish and begin again the reading of the Torah. *Sukkot* has a certain universal aspect to it. We move out of our homes to dwell in temporary booths (*sukkot*) and are visible to the entire world. In a way, *Sukkot* is like a week of pre-wedding celebrations. We are outside, and everyone is invited to join us. On *Shemini Atzeret* we move back inside with the immediate family for the wedding.

Indeed, much of the symbolism of *SimḤat Torah* is that of a wedding ceremony. The special title given to the honorees called for the last *aliyah* in Deuteronomy and the first *aliyah* in Genesis -- *Hattan* (groom) / *Kallat* (bride) Torah and *Hattan* / *Kallat Breishit*, respectively -- remind us of this. Similarly, particularly for these *aliyot*, it is customary to read the Torah under a *huppah*, or wedding canopy. In a larger sense, the food, song and dance help us to celebrate the marriage between God and the Jewish people. The Torah is the ultimate *ketubah* or wedding contract.

Sharing the Fun

Luncheon to Mark Conclusion of High Holy Days

Honoring a *hatan/kallah* for the final *aliyah* of *Devarim*, the first *aliyah* in *Bereshit*, and the *aliyah* for *Maftir* should not mark the only high points on *Simhat Torah* day. A congregational (by reservation) sit-down luncheon acknowledging the three *hatanim/kallot* with certificates of appreciation is a beautiful event that brings “closure” to the entire High Holy Day period.

Aliyot by Group

Some congregations hold separate Torah readings or repeated Torah readings on *Simhat Torah* so that every member of the congregation can receive an *aliyah*. An alternative is to keep the congregation together as a unit and have all the *Kohanim* gather together -- holding hands or placing their hands on the shoulder of fellow *Kohanim* -- to jointly receive the first *aliyah*. Likewise, *Levi'im* would come together for the second *aliyah*. The third and fourth *aliyot* can be afforded to all the men, then all of women. The fifth *aliyah* brings together all the pre-*b'nai mitzvah* youth under one or several large *tallitot*.

A “Giant” Tallit

The *aliyah* which brings the children to Torah is referred to as *Kol Na'arim* -- all the children. Here we have an opportunity to bring together the infants in the arms of a parent, the elementary school child, and even the junior high school students who have not yet become *b'nai mitzvah*. One congregation invited parents to embroider the names of their children in a huge, hand-made, hand-decorated *tallit*. The resulting product was a patchwork of interlocking squares with names on each section to honor the youngsters.

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