

5

SIMCHAT TORAH—DANCING IN FULL CIRCLE

WHILE the holiday of Simchat Torah coincides with the conclusion of Sukkot, it is truly its own holiday. On Simchat Torah the annual cycle of reading the *Torah*, the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, is completed and immediately begun again. This one-day holiday is celebrated by dancing with the scrolls of the Torah—physically demonstrating the link between Torah and the Jewish people.

The Torah is the central symbol of Judaism. The Hebrew Bible contains the traditions, history, and laws of the Jewish people. Its stories and values are transmitted from generation to generation. Today the text of the Torah is available from many different publishing houses in a myriad of languages.

Each physical Torah scroll is handwritten on pieces of parchment. The individual pieces are sewn together to create a very long scroll containing the entire first five books of the Hebrew Bible. The scrolled Torah is covered with an outer covering of decorated fine material and adorned with silver or, in Sephardic practice, enclosed in a silver or wooden case.

Whether Jews dance with the scrolls of the Torah on the streets of Moscow or in the synagogue in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, they are showing pride in their Jewish identity. The Torah itself may be heavy to carry, but the celebration marks an unencumbered joy that Jewish people are free to participate in this moment each year.

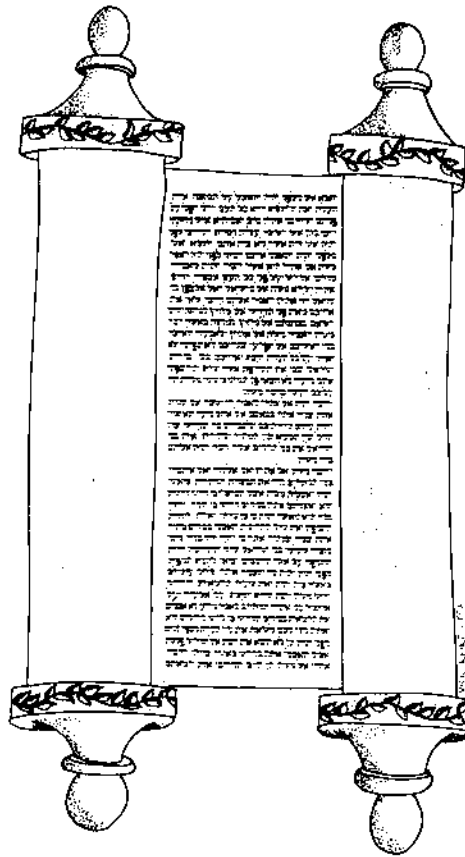
When we dance with the Torah we experience a sense of personal connectedness

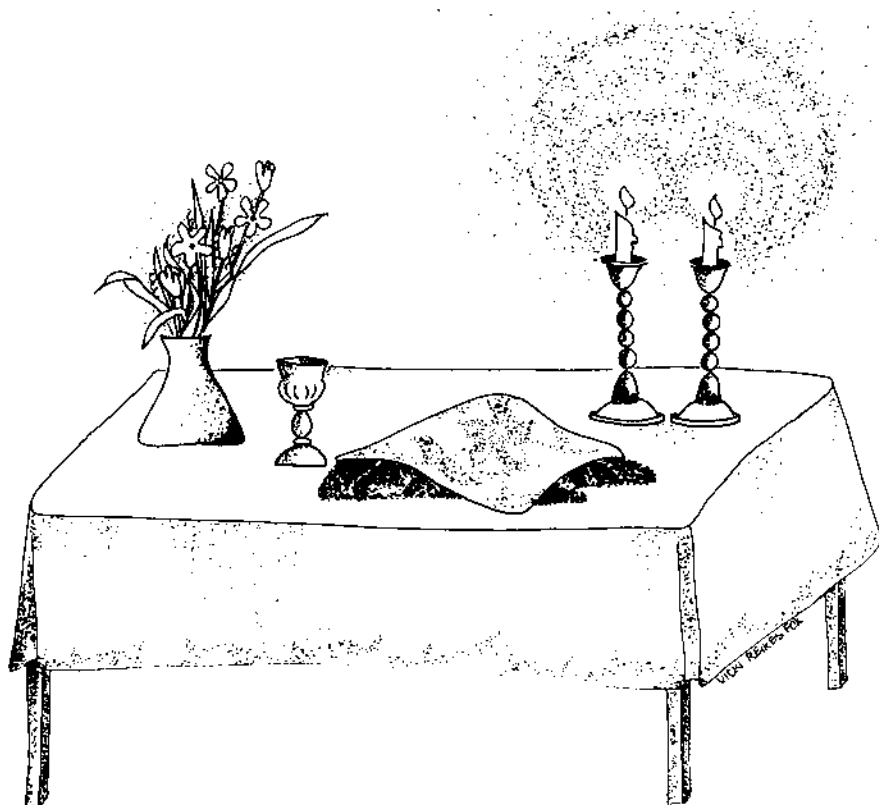
to it. The Torah did not only belong to our ancestors, but it belongs to us today—to women and men—to cherish it, study it, and dance with it.

The Torah is made up of the books of *B'raisheet*—Genesis; *Sh'mot*—Exodus; *Va'yikra*—Leviticus; *Bmidbar*—Numbers; and *Dvarim*—Deuteronomy. The Torah is central to the Jewish people because it contains laws and traditions, customs and celebrations. It also reveals the ongoing narrative that is the history and culture of the Jewish people.

Simchat Torah is a holiday not found either in biblical or in later Talmudic sources. It was created while the Jewish people were in exile in Babylonia to affirm their dedication to the Torah even while they were away from their homeland.

On this holiday people rest at home and in the synagogue and, if possible, do not go to work or school.





GREETINGS

The greeting for this holiday is “*Hag Sameach*—Happy Holiday.”

HOME TRADITIONS

Evening

The holiday is welcomed, as is customary with festivals, by the lighting of two candles at the onset of evening. Following candle lighting, it is a tradition for parents to bless their children.

The festive evening meal is eaten in the home, not the *sukkah*. At the beginning of the meal, Jews recite *Kiddush*, the blessing over the wine (or grape juice), and

continue with the blessing over the *challah*, which is dipped in honey and given to each person. The *Birkat Hamazon*, the thanksgiving blessing, is sung at the conclusion of the meal.

Daytime

After morning services a festive meal is served. The blessings over the wine and the *challah* are recited prior to the meal. This is the last time in the fall holiday season in which *challah* is dipped in honey. The *Birkat Hamazon* is sung at the conclusion of the meal. People rest and relax throughout the afternoon.

SYNAGOGUE TRADITIONS

Evening Service

The most popular aspects of Simchat Torah occur in the synagogue at evening services. After the initial prayers are recited, the focus of the synagogue celebration begins with the recitation of praises to God and the Torah.

Various members of the community are asked to read a verse in the prayerbook, then the congregation responds. This honor of reading often goes to the oldest members, community leaders, new arrivals from foreign countries, benefactors of the synagogue, its teachers, or its rabbis.

The evening service begins when the Ark containing the Torah scrolls is opened. All congregants rise as the Torahs are lifted from the Ark. It is an honor to carry a Torah, and again various leaders and representatives are usually honored first. However, each Jew should carry a Torah on this occasion, so throughout the evening the Torahs are passed from person to person.

The leaders sing and carry the Torah, followed by a procession of congregants, young and old, men and women, who sing and dance. The procession encircles the synagogue, and each procession is called a *hakafah*, or circuit.

When the seventh cyclical procession is completed, all Torahs but one are returned to the Ark. The leader then continues the evening service with the prayers for removing the Torah from the Ark.

It is only recently in American Reform and Conservative congregations that women have been allowed to carry a Torah. Some women still hesitate to hold a sacred scroll. Some claim they cannot put down their children to pick up the Torah.

Yet it is vitally important for our children to see both women and men, their



mothers and fathers, actively participating in their heritage. So encourage everyone to pass their children to another adult, pick up a Torah, and celebrate!

Children themselves participate through dance, song, and, of course, by carrying apples on top of Israeli flags. Why apples? We can only answer, "It's a tradition." (The apple may represent sweetness and knowledge gained through the study of and relationship to Torah.) In congregations that have very light, little Torahs or other small sacred scrolls, children are often allowed to carry these scrolls.

The Torah reading is taken from the very end of the fifth book, Deuteronomy, and then from the very beginning of the first book, Genesis. This signifies that there are no endings to the Torah process because study and learning never cease.

Morning Service

The morning Simchat Torah service is similar to other morning holiday services with special emphasis given to *Hallel*, the special holiday psalms. After the singing of Hallel, seven hakafot begin again. After the hakafot the Torah is read.

The reader recites this same concluding Torah portion (Deuteronomy 33:1–26) over and over again until every member of the community has had an *aliyah*—an opportunity to be called up to recite the blessings over the Torah.

Some congregations will call people up by groups. Sometimes this is done humorously, calling all people over forty, all whose children require braces, all accountants, schoolteachers, and so on.

After all adults have had an aliyah (in traditional synagogues this does not include women), all children are called up for the aliyah called *kol hanearim*—the voice of all the children. This is the only time in the year that children are called to the Torah prior to their *Bar/Bat Mitzvah*. It is wonderful to see so many young faces singing the blessings as a *tallit*, a large prayer shawl, is held high above them.

INSIGHTS

Centrality of the Torah to the Jewish People

Many times in Jewish history Jews were expelled from the lands in which they lived. We think of the ancient expulsion from Israel to Babylonia, the fifteenth-century expulsion from Spain into Poland and Amsterdam, the modern-day expulsion from Germany, Austria, and Poland to America. However, after the first expulsion, Jews were never again a land-based people. They developed professions that did not

require ownership of land for agriculture or land for real estate development. They were and are a mobile people.

What Jews took with them at each expulsion were values, traditions, and beliefs. These are contained in the Torah, which give the Jewish people a unique destiny. The Torah and its demands for certain behaviors in family life and communal life allowed Jews to reestablish themselves after each forced uprooting. The Torah gave them the hope needed to believe that life would be better in a new land. The centrality of the Torah as a guide and inspiration kept them alive.

The Political Import

Simchat Torah has been understood in modern times to carry a political message to the Jews in oppressed countries. During the communist reign in the Soviet Union, when only the Jewish elderly dared to go to synagogue, Simchat Torah was the one holiday in which Jews of all ages would gather at the synagogue, to see and be seen by other Jews celebrating their holiday.

Moving descriptions of Simchat Torah celebrations worldwide can be found in such stories as “Moscow via the Eyes of Eli Wiesel” and “The Night of Hakafot” by Shalom Aleichem (Philip Goodman, *The Hanukkah Anthology*, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976, pp. 204 and 281).

The Torah: All Knowledge Is Contained Within It

A traditional phrase that refers to Torah states: “Turn, turn, turn it: all is within the Torah.” This indicates the vast levels of wisdom that are to be found within the biblical tradition. The phrase highlights the variety of knowledge that Jews have attributed to the Torah, including history, law, literature, and folktales.

But on an even deeper level, aspects of human relationships found in the Torah speak to us today. The Torah focuses on family struggles such as sibling rivalry, separation anxiety, and marital conflict. The Torah emphasizes that growth and change are difficult for individuals and for nations. Even as individuals, we, too, can say “turn, turn, turn it; all knowledge is within the Torah.”

Unmitigated Joy at Dancing with Torah

The frenzy of activity and joy found at Simchat Torah is similar to that at Jewish weddings. The music begins, the Torah comes out of the Ark. Initially the march is slow and careful, but then the music speeds up. The line dancers wind in and around



those carrying the Torah. As the music changes, the direction of dancing suddenly shifts. But care is taken to encircle the Torah, ensuring it is the center of attention.

For many people this is one of the few times during the year that happiness can be so freewheeling. Certainly, in the Orthodox community, this is one of the few times of the year to let excitement and fervor encircle the community. It is a time to loosen certain restraints of serious synagogue behavior.

However, even in those settings the rules separating Orthodox men and women in the synagogue are still maintained; only the men dance with the Torah, while the women dance on their side of the synagogue. In more liberal Conservative and Reform synagogues, men and women dance together with the Torah.

Simchat Torah enables adults to demonstrate to the next generation by actions, not only by words, how central the Torah is to their lives. The unbroken cycle of the year of Torah can bring joy to each and every Jewish community throughout the world.

So wear comfortable shoes—and may joy dance into your souls!



EVERYONE IS WELCOME!

One of the wonderful facets of this holiday is that anyone can walk into a synagogue for Simchat Torah and participate in the circle dancing that weaves in and out around the people holding and dancing with the Torahs. If you don't know the words to the Hebrew songs, just hum along. And if you don't know the dance steps, just move your feet in time to the music as you're pulled along by the person in front of you and pushed by the person behind you.

The circle of dancers snakes around and around, with dancers breaking in all the time to join hands, while others, tired from their exertions, drop out. Frequently refreshments are available to reward the celebrants. Children wave their flags and munch on their apples. Old and young alike join together in this powerful expression of Judaism.

You've got to see it to believe it and feel it! Come dance next year!



ACTIVITIES

1. Because Simchat Torah follows immediately after Sukkot, crafts for Simchat Torah can be made during Sukkot week.

a. It is traditional to make flags that can be carried in the Torah processional.

Take a 2' × 3' piece of sturdy paper and glue or tape the narrow end to a ruler or dowel. Decorate on both sides with freehand drawings, paintings, papercuts, or stencil designs.

The flags can also be made from cloth, using tie-dye or stitchery for the decorations. Wrap the cloth around cardboard. Attach to ruler or dowel and hold it high!

b. It is also fun to create Torah scrolls. Take sheets of parchment and illustrate the stories from the Bible. Attach the separate illustrations to each other, then attach each end of the scroll to dowels. Roll the two sides toward each other. Wrap a cloth tie around your scroll and carry it throughout the synagogue.

c. You might enjoy creating artistic poster expressions of Torah scenes that are symbolic of family names or favorite biblical tales. These posters can be mounted and carried in the procession.

d. The first chapter of the book of Genesis deals with the creation of the world: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." The description of the six "days" of creation can be quite exciting to children and can be incorporated into art projects for various age groups that can be done in preparation for the holiday.

One such project is to create a mural that depicts the creation of the world beginning with day one and progressing to day six. Children can color or paint the mural or can cut out magazine pictures or other existing material in order to make a collage of the six "days" of creation.

2. Another wonderful activity can be to learn how a Torah scroll is made. Visit a Jewish scribe and learn about the process, the time, and materials that are used to make a Torah. You can read the book *A Torah is Written* by Paul Cowan (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1986) to prepare for the visit.

3. A fun-learning activity for children is to participate in a Torah "roll" at a synagogue. The Torah is unfurled on several contiguous tables and the children are allowed to view the parchment sections that are stitched together and study some of the finer points of the handwritten scroll. A leader can describe how to recognize the visual forms of certain sections of the Torah: poetry is set out in a wide, open style, empty space is found between different sections of the Torah, and so on.

4. Consider enrolling in a Torah study group—or any other ongoing adult Jewish study. Call the temples or Jewish centers in your city to locate current courses. Or start your own—even a lunch-time study group at work.

RECIPES

TZIMMES

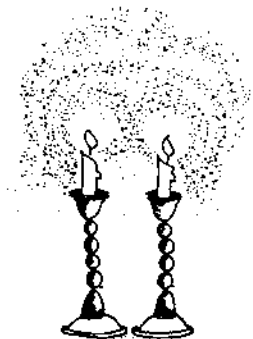
3 carrots (or more) (peeled)
4 sweet potatoes (peeled)
3 tart apples
½ cup brown sugar

3 Tbsp. margarine
1 cup water
1 6-oz. package dried apricots
cinnamon, optional

Cook carrots and potatoes in water until soft. Drain liquid and slice. Pare and slice apples. Alternate layers of carrots, apples, and potatoes with the brown sugar, margarine, apricots, and cinnamon. Add water, cover, and bake in 350-degree oven for 1 hour (or until apples are soft). Baste with its own juice occasionally. Remove cover for last 15 minutes to brown top. Serves 6.



SIMCHAT TORAH BLESSINGS



Introductory meditation to be recited before candle lighting:

Today we gather to thank God for all the goodness in our lives, for the beauty of nature, for the love we feel for one another, for the Simchat Torah tradition which we share.

May our celebration increase our awareness of your ongoing gifts, O God.

Candle lighting:

(Recite this blessing, then light the candles. If it is Shabbat, light the candles first, then recite the blessing.)

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, asher keedshanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu l'hadleek ner shel (Shabbat v') Yom Tov.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who enables us to welcome (Shabbat and) Simchat Torah by kindling these lights.

Shehehayanu:

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, shehehayanu, v'keeyomanu v'higeeyanu laz'man hazeh.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and encouraged us to celebrate this joyful festival.

Parents' blessing for their children:

(Place hands on children and recite.)

FOR BOYS:

May God touch you as you strive to live in the image of Ephraim and Menashe, leaders who carried on our traditions with pride.

FOR GIRLS:

May God touch you as you strive to live in the image of Sarah and Rebeccah, Rachel and Leah, leaders who carried on our traditions with pride.

CONTINUE SAYING FOR BOTH:

May the Eternal bless you and keep you.

May the Eternal bring you warmth and protect you.

May the Eternal embrace you and grant you peace. Amen.

Evening Kiddush:

(Raise wine cups and recite. Then drink the wine.)

We praise God with this symbol of fullness, and give thanks for the opportunities we have to share life's blessings.

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, boray p'ree hagafen.
Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who creates fruit from the vine.

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, asher bachar banu meekol ahm, v'romemanu meekol lashon, v'keedshanu b'meeztvotav. V'teetayn lanu, Adonai Elohaynu, b'ahavah (Shabbatot leemnucha oo) moadeem l'seemcha, chageem u'zmaneem l'sasson et yom (haShabbat hazeh v'et) yom hag haatzeret hazeh, z'man seemchataynu, mikrah kodesh zaycher l'tzeeat meetzrayim. Kee banu bacharta v'otanu keedasha meekol ha-ahmeem, (v'Shabbat) oo'moaday kodshecha (b'ahavah oo'vratzon) b'seemcha oo'vsasson hee-haltanu. Baruch Ata Adonai M'kadesh (ha-Shabbat v') Yisrael v'hazmaneem.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who has chosen us from among all people, sanctified us with holy acts, and given special times and seasons for rejoicing. (Shabbat and) Simchat Torah remind us of the times for celebration, recalling the exodus from Egypt and the gift of Torah. You have distinguished us from all people, and have given us (the Shabbat and) holy festivals full of joy and inspiration. Blessed are You

Adonai, Eternal One, Who sanctifies (the Shabbat,) the people Israel, and our sacred seasons.

Shehehayanu:

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, shehehayanu, v'keeyomanu v'higeeyanu laz'man hazeh.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and encouraged us to celebrate this joyful festival.

Daytime Kiddush:

(Raise wine cups and recite. Then drink the wine.)

El Moaday Adonai Meekrah-ay kodesh, asher teekrehoo otam b'moadam. VayDaber Moshe et moaday Adonai el b'nay Yisrael.

These are the sacred times appointed by God; and you shall announce them in their season.

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, boray p'ree hagafen.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who creates fruit from the vine.

Blessing over the challah:

(Remove challah cover and recite. After blessing, dip challah in honey and distribute pieces to each person.)

Baruch Ata Adonai Elohaynu Melech Haolam, hamotzi lechem meen ha-aretz.

Blessed are You Adonai, Eternal One, Who creates bread from the earth.