



Simḥat Torah:

A Creation of the Jewish People

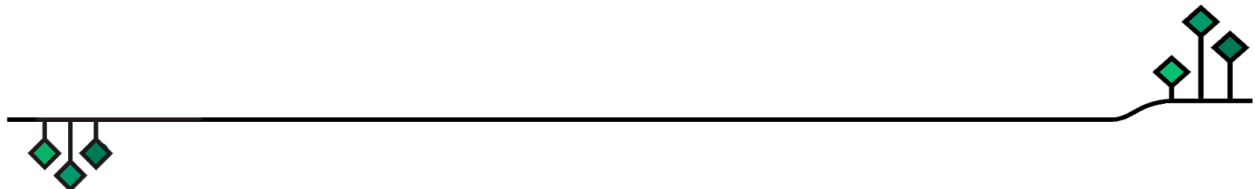
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Simḥat Torah 5782

Until the 20th century, Simḥat Torah was the last Jewish holiday to emerge. Of all the inherited holidays of the Hebrew calendar, only Simḥat Torah (literally, “Rejoicing in the Torah”) is not referred to either in the Bible or in the Talmud. Its establishment is a triumph of the *Torah she-ba-al peh* (the Oral Tradition) which accompanied, interpreted, and applied the Written Scriptures to the constantly changing conditions of Jewish history.¹ According to Rabbinic tradition, the Oral Tradition was also revealed at Sinai, albeit not written down, and is of equal authority to the Written Scriptures.²

¹ Rabbinics scholar Jacob Neusner has called Rabbinic Judaism, “the Judaism of the Dual Torah.” This is the fundamental claim of the Pharisees and the Rabbinic movement which grew out of their teaching. This is against the view of the Sadducees, the main competing sect to the Pharisees, who insisted that only the Written Scriptures were divinely given at Sinai. The rejection of the Oral Torah was also the hallmark of the Karaites who clashed with the Rabbinites into the Middle Ages. The Karaites eventually separated from the Rabbinic Jewish community. Now that Israel has become home of a major living Jewish community and the Karaites (in very diminished numbers) have come back to this land, there are some tentative efforts to reconnect.

² It could be argued that the Oral Torah is superior in authority, in that there are oral interpretations which are authoritative as to the meaning of the Written Torah, even though they could be seen as “overriding” the plain meaning of the Torah’s statements. Two famous examples: the Torah says, “an eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth, etc.” (Exodus 21:24) is the punishment for knocking out another’s limb. However, the Oral Law says the actual punishment is a **monetary** value of the lost limb, and one does not literally inflict equivalent physical damage



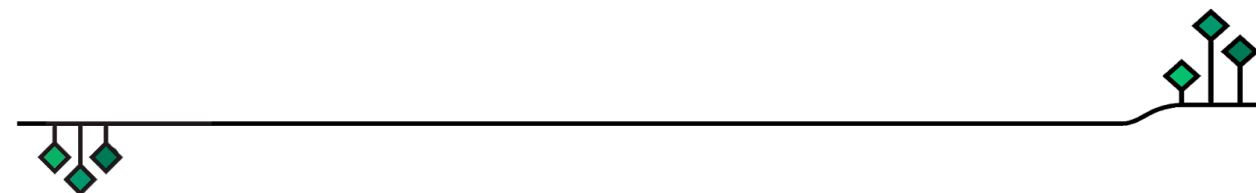
The reading of the Torah (with translation and commentary, so the masses would understand) probably goes back to the return from the Babylonian Exile in Second Temple times.³ The custom of reading it weekly became dominant after the Destruction of the Temple when the Torah text became the center of Jewish practice and religious experience. There were two established Torah reading patterns. In Israel, the Five Books were read weekly, but the cycle was completed over a three-year period. In the Diaspora, communities that followed Babylonian Jewish practices, the Torah cycle was read and completed in one year. Somewhere between the ninth and twelfth centuries, the Babylonian custom won out.

All the communities then read the Five Books in the course of the year, with the last chapter of Deuteronomy read on Shemini Atzeret. This day concludes the intense holiday season of Tishrei—from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to Sukkot and, finally, Shemini Atzeret (the Eighth Day of Assembly). The Torah text is a bit vague but seems to treat Shemini Atzeret as a separate holiday, although it follows the seventh day of Sukkot. While Shemini Atzeret is called in our liturgy *z'man simḥateinu* (time of our rejoicing), as is Sukkot, the day has no specific practices comparable to waving the *lulav* and *etrog* or building a *sukkah*. This left Shemini Atzeret open to the development of a celebration of the Torah, which eventually morphed into the holiday of Simḥat Torah.

As the tradition of completing the annual Torah reading on Shemini Atzeret became increasingly established, the community made two important additions to the day. Out of love of the Torah and tradition, people added elements of celebration: of dancing with the

(see Mishnah Bava Kama 8:1 and Babylonian Talmud Bava Kama 84a). Second, the Torah says, in corporal punishment, that a maximum of forty lashes can be administered (“forty times he shall strike him and no more” [Deuteronomy 25:3]), but the Talmud rules the maximum is 39, and that was the actual legal practice. See Babylonian Talmud Makkot 22b.

³ See Nehemiah 7-8.



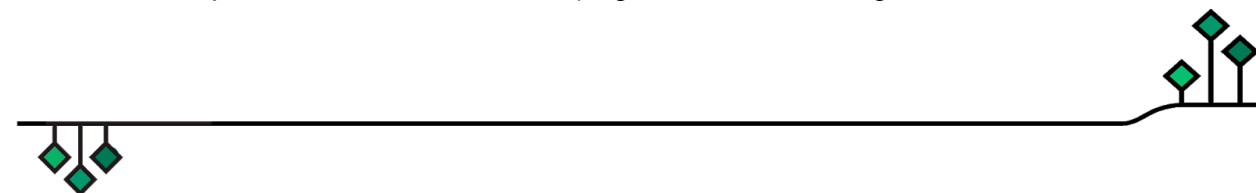
Torah, of honoring the person called up for the final reading, and of singing and dancing at the completion of the cycle. Over time, the custom grew that every male⁴ member of the congregation be given an *aliyah*, and all the children of the congregation would be called up with an adult in one *aliyah*. The entire group joined in the blessing of the Torah and the whole congregation joined in a special blessing of the children afterward.

The second important set of additions was meant to signal that the study of the Torah never ends. After the last portion of Deuteronomy, a second Torah was brought out and the opening portion of Genesis (the Creation story, Genesis 1:1-2:3) was read. The full opening *parashah* of Genesis (1:1-6:8) was read on the following Shabbat. But on this day the opening portion was read to make clear the intention to pursue a never-ending cycle of Torah study and reading. In the words of the Rabbis: “*Hafokh ba ve-hafokh ba, de-khola va*,” “Turn it over (i.e. analyze and reflect) and turn it over again, for all (i.e. endless wisdom and teaching) is in it” (Mishnah Avot 5:22).

All this expansion in celebration culminated in crystallizing the day as Simhat Torah, the holiday of rejoicing in the Torah. In the Diaspora, when there was an extra holy day in each festival, Simhat Torah was assigned to the ninth day after the start of Sukkot. In Israel, it was folded into Shemini Atzeret on the eighth day.

The celebration and dancing component of Simhat Torah enabled the holiday to play a central role in the reunion of Soviet Jewry with Judaism and world Jewry. Young Russian Jews—at first a handful, but eventually by the tens of thousands—reconnected to a religion which had been denied to them by attending the Simhat Torah celebration in Moscow’s main

⁴ In the 20th century, the liberal denominations and progressive Orthodox brought women into this ritual.

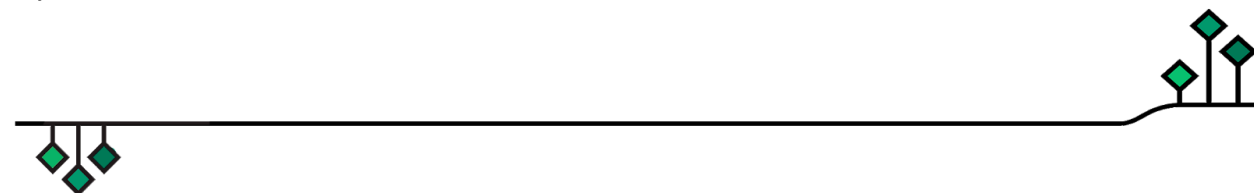


Synagogue on Archipova Street. For people who could not read Hebrew or say a prayer, just being present or joining in the dancing became an act of defiance of tyranny and of reclaiming their Jewish identity. When unaffiliated Jews keep only one holiday, it is typically Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, no drinking, self-denial, and endless—often incomprehensible—prayers. But I have always marveled at the Soviet Jews who wisely chose to connect to the holiday cycle with Simḥat Torah, a day of socializing, dancing, and celebration.

In addition to filling Shemini Atzeret with a special observance, there was another logic for developing Simḥat Torah in this season. Pesah and Sukkot, exactly six months apart, both celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, the core event of Jewish religion. The people noted that seven weeks (7 times 7 days) plus one day after the Exodus, the Hebrew calendar marks the holiday of Shavuot as the holiday of the giving of the Torah at Sinai.⁵ Shavuot was known as Hag Ha-Atzeret (the Holiday of Assembly), when the people gathered to receive the Torah at Sinai, and reenacted that acceptance every year. Atzeret also means the closing assembly, as in Shemini Atzeret. The logic of the biblical calendar was that the Exodus was not only an event of liberation from servitude, but the beginning of a process which climaxed with the acceptance of the Torah and the covenant on Shavuot. Thereby Jewry became a “holy nation” with a mission to pace humanity toward a future redemption (i.e. *tikkun olam*), when the world would be redeemed.

The people saw that Sukkot—the celebration of the Exodus liberation from Egypt in Tishrei—could be connected to a seven plus one day as well, namely Shemini Atzeret. This

⁵ The number 7 in the Bible is a signifier of wholeness and completion. The creation is completed on the seventh day, Shabbat, which itself represents wholeness and completion. The number 8 (7+1) in the Bible is a signifier of covenant. Humans take God’s creation—rated at 7—and join a covenant to improve it even more (7+1). Shavuot, the holiday of the covenant, occurs 50 days, 7x7 days (i.e. completion squared) after the Exodus, +1 covenant day.



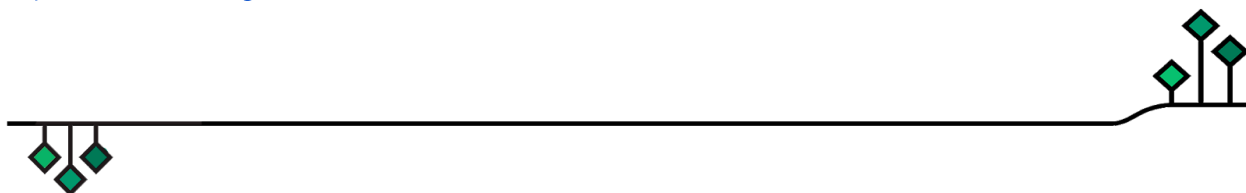
Atzeret/Assembly would parallel Shavuot by closing the liberation process with a renewed acceptance and celebration of the Torah and covenant on the eighth day. This was the message of Sim_hat Torah, which became a kind of parallel Shavuot.

There is another message in the establishment of Sim_hat Torah. The processes of revelation and of living the covenant did not stop with the founding events and religious leaders of Judaism. Judaism is a covenantal way of life. Jewry goes through history trying to redeem the world and teach all nations the good life, and about the divine-human partnership, in order to turn this planet into a paradise. Therefore, the creation of new holy days and absorption of new religious experiences is appropriate and welcome. It is a sign that Judaism is alive and that every generation can contribute to the unfolding of the Torah.⁶

The fact that the people created Sim_hat Torah also is testimony to the quality and inspiration of Jewry. The advance of the Torah is not just accomplished through divine revelation, or by the authority of learned scholars, but is driven by the collective wisdom and spirit of Jewry. The vitality of Jewish activity in history in recent centuries has been expressed from the grassroots up. Zionism was mostly initiated by a small avant-garde of the people who understood that it was time to end exile, persecution, and powerlessness, and to renew Jewish life.

I believe that the Holocaust and the rebirth of Israel represent major developments on the Jewish way in history. Therefore, Yom HaShoah (Holocaust Commemoration Day) and Yom Ha'Atzma'ut (Israel Independence Day) are major new holy days on the sacred Hebrew

⁶ See also my essay on Parashat Bo which explores this theme of Jewish holidays as a core expression of the unfolding covenantal way, "The Hebrew Calendar is the First Commandment," available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/hebrew-calendar-first-commandment>.

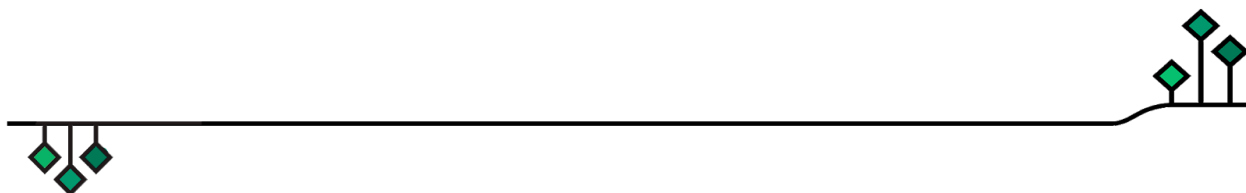




calendar. When I wrote my book on the Jewish holidays, *The Jewish Way*, I included chapters on these two contemporary days, arguing that they are sacred and central to Jewish self-understanding, just as the classic holidays such as Pesah, Shavuot, and Sukkot are. It is notable that these holy days were established by so-called “secular authorities,” particularly the Knesset of the State of Israel, in response to the popular will. To my mind, it is regrettable that Haredi leadership has opposed these initiatives, while many other religious leaderships have dragged their feet or accepted these days with limited fervor and support.

One of my father’s favorite quotes from the Talmud was: “leave it to the children of Israel [to get the religious issues right and add new religious experiences]—for if they are not prophets themselves [prophecy having ended two millennia ago] they are the children of the prophets” (Babylonian Talmud Pesahim 66a). This means that Jews have an innate spiritual quality that inspires them to live covenantally—i.e. authentically religiously—in changing times and new civilizations.

This year, when you go celebrate and dance and experience Simhat Torah, know as you experience this joy that you are confirming the wisdom and creative religious spirit of the Jewish people. Follow this up with absorbing the new sacred events and memories of world Jewry and acting them out. We are witnessing the emergence of the next phase of Jewish renewal and religious renaissance.



POSTSCRIPT

With this reflection, I have completed the one year cycle of *parashat ha-shavu'a* (with joy). Hadar's weekly Dvar Torah will be authored this coming year by Rabbi Aviva Richman, an outstanding member of the Hadar faculty and Rosh Yeshiva. I want to thank Jeremy Tabick and Judith Weil for their excellent and timely editing each week. They were joined from time to time by Elisheva Urbas, Rabbi Effy Unterman, and Sam Greenberg of the Hadar staff. I thank Sara Goldberger for her help with research and sources. I also wish to thank Blu Greenberg, Moshe Greenberg, David Greenberg, Deborah David for their edits, insights, and invaluable help. Most of all I thank you, the readers, for your attention, as well as your ongoing constructive responses. It has been a privilege and an inspiration to write for you.

I will be following Rabbi Richman's thoughts on the weekly *parashah* intently and I invite you to join me by staying on this list, and continue to learn in the never-ending cycle of the Torah.

