

# DANCING OUR WAY INTO JEWISH HISTORY

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Until the 20<sup>th</sup> 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. 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.<sup>1</sup>

The public 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.<sup>2</sup> The custom of reading it weekly became dominant after the Destruction of the Temple, when public readings of the Torah text in community 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 Babylon and much of the Diaspora, the Torah cycle was read and completed in one year. Somewhere between the ninth and twelfth centuries, the Babylonian custom won out.

All communities then read the Five Books in the course of the year, with the last chapter of Deuteronomy read on Shemini Atzeret (the Eighth Day of Assembly). This day concludes the intense holiday season of Tish-

rei—from Rosh Hashanah to Yom Kippur to Sukkot and, finally, Shemini Atzeret. The Torah text is vague, but it seems to treat Shemini Atzeret as a separate holiday, even though it immediately 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* or building a *sukkah*. This left Shemini Atzeret open to the development of a celebration of the Torah itself, 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 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 male<sup>3</sup> member of the congregation be given an *aliyah*, and all the children of the congregation would be called up for an *aliyah* with an adult. 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 is meant to signal that the study of the Torah never ends. After reading the last portion of Deuteronomy, a second Torah is brought out and the opening portion of Genesis (the Creation story, Genesis 1:1-2:3) read. The full opening *parashah* of

Genesis (1:1-6:8) is read on the following Shabbat. But on this festival 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 our 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 Simḥat Torah, the holiday of rejoicing in the Torah.

The celebration and dancing component of Simḥat 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 that had been denied to them by attending the Simḥat Torah celebration in Moscow’s main synagogue on Arkhipova Street.<sup>4</sup> 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 American Jews keep only one holiday, it is typically Yom Kippur, a day of fasting, 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. Pe-

1 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. For two famous examples, see Babylonian Talmud Bava Kama 84a and Makkot 22b.

2 See Nehemiah 7-8.

3 Over the last century or so, the liberal denominations, together with a contingent of progressive Orthodoxy, brought women into this ritual.

4 For a summary of these events, see *Simchat Torah on Arkhipova Street: Jewish Pride and Dreams of America* (accessed 5/5/2022).

sah and Sukkot, exactly six months apart, both celebrate the Exodus from Egypt, the core event of Jewish religion. The people noted that seven weeks (seven times seven 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 “concluding,” 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 whose climax was the acceptance of the Torah and the covenant on Shavuot. Through that process, the Israelites became a “holy nation” with a mission to pace humanity toward a future redemption (i.e. *tikkun olam*), when the world would be redeemed. Hence, the Holiday of Atzeret is a culmination—a closing of the loop—of the process of redemption initiated by the Exodus.

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 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 Simhat Torah, which became a kind of parallel Shavuot.

There is another message in the establishment of Simhat 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 his-

tory 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 the 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.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that the people, rather than divine command, created Simhat 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. Zionism was mostly initiated by a small avant-garde who understood that it was time to end exile, persecution, and powerlessness, and to renew Jewish life.<sup>7</sup>

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 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. With every dance step, we are witnessing the emergence of the next phase of Jewish renewal and religious renaissance. ♦



- 5 The number seven in the Bible is a signifier of wholeness and completion (e.g. the seventh day, Shabbat, marks the completion of creation). The number eight (one more than seven) is a signifier of covenant in the Bible. Humans take God's creation—symbolized by seven—and add on a covenant to improve it even more (seven + one). Shavuot, the holiday of the covenant, occurs fifty days, which is seven x seven days (i.e. completion squared) after the Exodus, plus one covenant day.
- 6 See also my essay on Parashat Bo, “The Hebrew Calendar is the First Commandment,” which explores this theme of Jewish holidays as a core expression of the unfolding covenantal way, available [here](#).
- 7 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 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 leaders have dragged their feet or accepted these days with limited fervor and support.