

Jewish Festivals

Simhat Torah: The Joy of the Bible

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When the Bible is danced and sung and rejoiced upon . . .

The park was jammed with thousands of Jewish celebrants—young and old, men and women, rabbis and city dignitaries, representatives of the many different Jewish communities—all dancing together in giant circles with ecstatic joy, accompanied by exuberant singing and instrumental bands. Dotted the throngs of dancers there were scores of individuals hugging *Torah* scrolls as they danced, enthusiastically lifting them aloft at musical crescendos and then hugging them once more.

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I was savoring *Simhat Torah*, “The Rejoicing of the *Torah*”! Though the seven days of the Feast of *Sukkot* (*Tishri* 15-21) were over, I had arrived in Israel in time to witness the final climatic celebration of the eighth day. (In modern Jewry this day is technically regarded as a festival independent of *Sukkot*, and called *Shemini Atzeret* “Eighth day of Solemn Assembly” [cf. Numbers 29:35]. In the Diaspora—outside Israel—*Shemini Atzeret* lasts two days [*Tishri* 22-23], and the second day is called *Simhat Torah*, while in Israel *Shemini Atzeret* lasts only one day and thus also includes *Simhat Torah*. What I was viewing at the park actually came at

the end of the Israeli one-day combined celebration of *Shemini Atzeret* and *Simhat Torah*; in the late afternoon and evening Israelis have a final public “Rejoicing of the *Torah*” celebration to coincide with the beginning of *Simhat Torah* outside of Israel.)

. . . .

Since that scene of ecstatic Bible revelry indelibly imprinted my memory a decade and a half ago, I have been back to Israel a number of times, with visits spanning the different seasons of the year. The dream I had thought was dashed forever—to be able to observe and celebrate the whole annual round of Jewish festivals in the Holy Land—has now become a reality. I have

also been able to research more deeply the significance of these sacred times for both Jews and Christians.

All of the Jewish festivals have grown precious to me, but none has superseded the “Rejoicing in the *Torah*,” *Simhat Torah*. Rabbi Hayim Halevy Donin has rightly called *Simhat Torah* “probably the most joyously celebrated festival day of the year.”¹ I can testify that he is also right when he says, “To see a *Simhat Torah* celebration in Jerusalem is to witness the heights to which religious ecstasy can rise.”²

The major rituals of *Simhat Torah* revolve around the completion of the annual cycle of *Torah* readings and the beginning again of the new annual cycle. It is preeminently a time of rejoicing in and honoring the *Torah*—God’s foundational revelation contained in the Five Books of Moses.

Certainly the most impressive tradition and the one most intimately identified with *Simhat Torah* is the ceremonial processional “circlings” (*hakkafot*) by worshipers carrying the *Torah* scrolls amid chanting and singing and dancing. Seven “circlings” around the *bimah* (the raised “pulpit” where the *Torah* is publicly read) in the synagogue take place in the evening service and another seven in the morning service. Although this practice on *Simhat Torah* was not introduced

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in Judaism till the late 16th century C.E., it is similar to the “circlings” of the second Temple altar with the palm and willow branches at *Sukkot* as described in the Mishnah, and ultimately reminiscent of the seven circuits around Jericho by Joshua and the army of Israel (Joshua 6).

The “circlings” in honor of the *Torah* are popular especially because they involve everyone—including the women and children. During the *hakkafot* is the only time in the year when the women are allowed to join the men on the main level of the synagogue. The small children also follow the *Torah* scrolls in the procession, each carrying a min-

ature scroll or a decorative flag (reminiscent of the tribal banners of ancient Israel in the wilderness) topped with an apple hollowed out to hold a lighted candle (evoking the image of *Torah* as light.) As the *Torah* scrolls pass by the celebrants, it is customary to kiss the scroll, or rather (out of respect for the holiness of the *Torah*) touch scarves or prayer shawls to the scroll and kiss them.

Between each of the seven circuits the leader breaks out in joyous song and dance, and the entire congregation forms circles dancing around the *Torah* scrolls in the center. The ecstatic fervor honoring the *Torah* often rises in intensity to a frenzy of enthusiasm, and singing and dancing can go on for hours.

The celebration is even sometimes carried outdoors. In Israel the morning *hakkafot* includes a mass procession through the streets of Jerusalem as thousands of celebrants dance and sing their way 8-10 abreast to the Western Wall, led by *Torah* scrolls carried under protective canopies. The jubilant procession stretches as far as the eye can see!

The next most distinctive feature of *Simhat Torah* after the

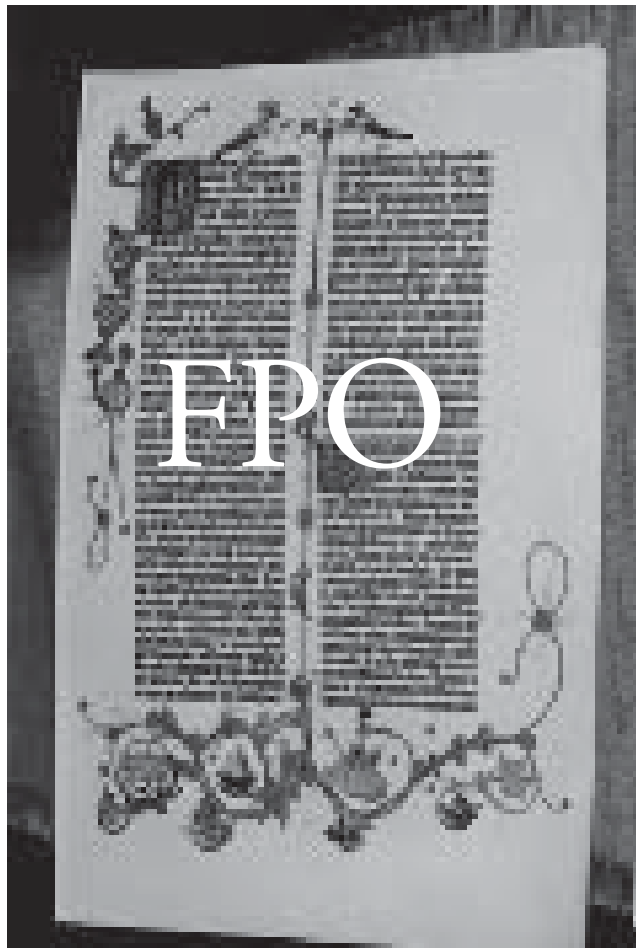
Although this practice on Simhat Torah was not introduced in Judaism till the late 16th century C.E., it is similar to the “circlings” of the second Temple altar with the palm and willow branches at Sukkot as described in the Mishnah, and ultimately reminiscent of the seven circuits around Jericho by Joshua and the army of Israel (Joshua 6).

hakkafot is the *aliyot*—the “goings up” to the *bimah* (“pulpit”) to read the *Torah*. *Simhat Torah* is the time for every adult male worshiper to be able to publicly read the *Torah*. Some synagogues have *aliyot* to read portions of the *Torah* in the evening service (which makes this the only time in the year when the *Torah* is read in the synagogue at night), but the main part of the *aliyot* ritual occurs in the service the next morning. After the seventh “circling” of the morning service, all the *Torah* scrolls are returned to the Ark except three. From the

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first scroll every adult Jewish male has an opportunity in turn to “go up” to read the Scripture portion found near the close of the *Torah* (i.e., Deuteronomy 33:1-26). Even the young children come up for a special collective *aliyah* with a prayer shawl canopy over their heads, and receive a special blessing (from Genesis 48:16).

Then the “Bridegroom of the *Torah*” (*Hatan Torah*), a revered person in the community selected for this particular honor, is ceremoniously called up “by permission of the Great God” to read the final verses of the *Torah*, the description of the death of Moses in Deuteronomy 33:27 - 34:12. The annual reading cycle of the *Torah* is ended. The congregation rises and calls out (in



Facsimile of the Gutenberg Bible (1453-1455)

This printing in Mainz, Germany, is the first and most significant effort of using modern techniques.

Hebrew), “Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened!”

The first scroll is dressed and returned to the Ark, and the second scroll is opened to the book of Genesis. The honored “Bridegroom of Genesis” (*Hatan Bereshit*) is invited “by permission of One on High” to read from the beginning portion of the *Torah*: the Creation account of Genesis 1:1 - 2:31. The new cycle of *Torah* readings has commenced. The move from the end of the *Torah* to the beginning, from the death of Moses to the Creation account, embodies the truth that out of seeming death comes forth profound new life.

In some congregations, the entire *Torah* scroll is unrolled and held in a huge circle around the synagogue, with the end and beginning next to each other, ready

to be read from the last panel of the parchment and then the first, while the whole congregation is literally encircled by the *Torah*.

The final reading, from the third scroll, is Numbers 29:35 - 30:1, which describes the instructions for sacrifices on this eighth day of solemn assembly. This is accompanied with the *Haftarah* reading from the first part of Joshua, which records the continuity of God’s people and leadership under Joshua after the completion of the *Torah* and the death of Moses, and the beginning of the fulfillment of the *Torah* promise to enter the Land. Thus is embodied historically what is symbolized in the renewed cycle of *Torah* reading—from the death of Moses comes life in the land of Promise.

After the *aliyot* the worshipers

proceed to the *Kiddush* (prayer of “sanctification” over the wine and bread) and to refreshments chosen from a multitude of culinary delicacies. The remainder of the day is occupied in visiting each other’s homes, with more refreshments and merriment at each. Oh the joy of the *Torah*!

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The attitude of reveling in the *Torah* is a dominant theme in the *Torah* Psalms of the Bible.³

Although the festival of *Simhat Torah* is not mentioned in the Bible by that name (the origin and name of the festival may be traced to the Middle Ages when the annual cycle of *Torah* reading became fixed throughout Jewry), its essential features may be deduced from three biblical passages connected with *Sukkot*. First, Leviticus 23:34-36 pinpoints the day and its general festival nature: “The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the Feast of Tabernacles [*sukkot*] for seven days to the Lord. . . . On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation. . . . It is a sacred assembly, and you shall do no customary work on it.” Second, Deuteronomy 31:10-11 implies a focus of activity for *Sukkot* which presumably included the eighth day: “At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time in the year of release, at the Feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God in the place which He chooses, you shall read this *Torah* before all Israel in their hearing.” Third, Leviticus 23:40 indicates the jubilant mood of *Sukkot*: “you shall rejoice before the Lord.” Putting together these three injunctions, the eighth day would be the natural climax to the special time of reading of the *Torah*. The final portion of the *Torah* would presumably be read at the last (eighth) day of the Feast, and it would provide the climax of re-

joicing that was to characterize the entire feast. Thus the understanding of *Tishri* 22 as the ultimate day of “Rejoicing in the *Torah*”—*Simhat Torah*—is consistent with Scripture, and the historical development of this festival and its liturgy serves to highlight the importance of the *Torah* for ancient Israel.

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It is not without significance that the two major Jewish pilgrim festivals—*Pesah* (Passover) and *Sukkot* (Tabernacles)—both end in holidays celebrating *Torah*. This testifies to the high value that Judaism places in the Bible. *Pesah* is a seven-day festival, which culminates (fifty days later) in a one-day festival—*Shavuot* (Weeks, or Pentecost); likewise *Sukkot* is a seven-day festival culminating in a one-day festival—*Simhat Torah*. Both of these one-day festivals are lacking in specific biblical details for celebration. In Judaism *Shavuot* came to commemorate the divine revelation of *Torah* at Mt. Sinai, and its mood became one of awe and gratitude to God for giving the *Torah*, demonstrated by serious study—remaining awake all night poring over the *Torah*.

Simhat Torah, by contrast, does not focus upon God’s revelation of *Torah*, but upon the *Torah* itself as a “beloved com-

panion” in daily Jewish life. Michael Strassfeld makes an apt comparison to the joy and intimacy of a wedding couple: “As with a bride and a groom dancing with each other at their wedding, on *Simhat Torah* we desire to hold the *Torah* in our arms and dance the night away.”⁴ Strassfeld goes on to show how at *Simhat Torah* Jews learn to throw themselves completely into rejoicing with the *Torah*, drop their reserve and their defenses, and let go in the fullness of an unmitigated love relationship to a *Torah* of joy, a *Torah* without sense of burden or restrictions.

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Protestant Christianity, like the Karaite Jews, emphasizes the value of serious Bible study (the theme of *Shavuot*) with the dictum of *sola Scriptura*, the Bible and the Bible only, rejecting all external interpretive grids such as tradition or philosophy. But Christianity has nothing compared to *Simhat Torah* to highlight the mood of delight in Scripture, and thus Christians may well learn from the Jewish celebration of this feast how to rejoice unabashedly in the Bible.

¹Hayim Donin, *To Be A Jew; A Guide to Jewish Observance in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1972), p. 257.

²Ibid.

³Psalms 1:1-2; 19:7, 10 (8, 11 Hebrew); 119:72, 77, 92, 97; cf. vss. 14, 16, 24, 47, 103, 111, 127.

⁴Michael Strassfeld, *The Jewish Holidays: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 155.