



58

THE REJOICING OF THE LAW

SIMCHAT TORAH, REJOICING WITH THE TORAH, is the climax of the festivals at this time of year. On Thursday night (30 September) and Friday there is dancing with the Torah Scrolls. In some synagogues there is also dancing on Wednesday night. (In Israel all synagogues dance on Wednesday night).

For quite a number of people who were unfortunately estranged from Judaism, memories of the dancing with the Torah Scrolls remained as a profound link with the infinitely precious Jewish tradition. In Soviet Russia during the 1970s and 80s, before the fall of Communism, the warm celebration of Simchat Torah in Moscow and Leningrad (now St Petersburg) would bring huge crowds of young Jews to the synagogues: for them, the Rejoicing with the Torah was an important step towards a Jewish identity.

The sacred Zohar states: "G-d, the Torah and the Jewish people are one"¹. On the most profound level of our being, each Jew, man or woman, is unified with the Torah and with G-d. On Simchat Torah, the climax of the festivals, this inner dimension is revealed. How can we best express it? It is so profound that it is beyond words.

So the time-honoured custom is to open the Ark and to dance with the Torah Scrolls, expressing the elemental level of the essential being of the Jew, the point our eternal connection with the Divine.

117 GEORGE STREET, LONDON W1H 7HF
cru@lubavitchuk.com - www.chabadresearch.org

In this mood, we complete the annual cycle of Torah readings, and begin the Torah afresh. The Torah is our guide to life, and Simchat Torah marks the beginning of a new cycle of our existence, a new level of Creation.

THE POWER OF THE INDIVIDUAL

The Torah begins by telling us how the world was created, and how, step by step, life came into being. The Sages point out that while the fish, birds and animals were each created in millions, all over the world, at the beginning of the creation of man there was just one lone human being: Adam. Even Eve had not yet been formed as a separate person². Why was humanity created as a single being?

The Sages explain³ that Adam was created alone in order to teach us that each individual represents the *entire world*. This helps us understand something about our power and responsibility.

What is the purpose of life? The Sages tell us that as soon as Adam was created, he called on all existence: “Come, let us bow down and worship G-d who has created us!”⁴ Through bowing down, signifying dedicated acceptance of G-d, we reach our true wholeness.

The idea that each person represents the entire world tells us that not only Adam but every man and woman, even today, has the power to transform both themselves and the whole world. Each one of us has a unique and necessary role to play in bringing the process of Creation to completion⁵.

1. See Zohar III 73a. 2. The Sages state that Adam and Eve were originally one, forming a composite being, male on one side, female on the other. Then G-d divided them in two (see Rashi to Gen.2:21. 3. Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5. 4. Pirkei deR. Eliezer ch.11, quoting Psalm 95:6. 5. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's letter for Rosh Hashanah 1964.

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SEDRA BEREISHIT

DIFFERENT AND SPECIAL

Using a candle which had been kept burning during the Festival, Rachel lit her candle for Shabbat, said the blessing, and then watched her mother light *her* candles. There had been so many festival days, and then Simchat Torah, the Rejoicing of the Law. The men and boys had danced and danced with the Torah Scrolls, while the women and girls looked down from the women's gallery. Now it was Shabbat Bereishit, the first Shabbat after the festivals. Rachel's mother covered her eyes and said the blessing on the candles. She kept her hands over her eyes for a few moments. She looked at the flames, and then at her daughter Rachel. "Shabbat Shalom!" she said, smiling.

Rachel smiled back, but then frowned. "You know, Mummy, I was wondering.... Why is it that only the boys and men dance with the Torah Scrolls? The whole time we were just watching from the Women's Gallery. Why?"

"You know, Rachel, each person has something special to do in the world. Each person has their task. The boys dance with the Torah..."

"And what do the women do?" asked Rachel.

"Well, you tell me," said her mother, sitting down at the Shabbat table spread with a white tablecloth. The three candles burning made a special atmosphere. One had been lit by Rachel, and then two by her mother. Rachel sat opposite her.

On the table there were two Challa loaves covered with a cloth, a bottle of red wine, some silver goblets. Places had

been laid for four people, for the two parents and the two children. Rachel's brother Chaim had gone to the synagogue early with their father.

"We lay the table and do the cooking" said Rachel. "That's not as much fun as dancing with the Torah!" "What else do we do?" asked her mother. She looked at the candles.

"Alright," Rachel, "I can see what you are saying. We light candles. But that's not the same as dancing with the Torah!" "No," said her mother. "It's not the same. It's different. But it is still special."

"Is that why you kept your hands over your eyes for so long?" asked Rachel, in a shy voice. She often wondered what her mother was thinking when she did that, every Friday night.

"Yes, I was praying to Hashem to look after you and Daddy and Chaim and granny and everyone in the family. And I was also remembering what the holy Zohar says about lighting candles".

"I know," said Rachel. "When we light candles we bring peace to the world".

"Yes," said her mother. The Sedra this week tells us about the power of a woman. Eve ate from the Tree of Knowledge, and then gave Adam to eat. She had the power to persuade him. But she also has the power to persuade people to do good things. And a special power that every woman and girl has is to light candles for Shabbat and the festivals."

"And to bring peace to the world..." said Rachel. "It certainly needs that..."

At that moment, in came her father and brother. "Shabbat Shalom! How beautiful," said her father, smiling at her and her mother. "What a beautiful Shabbat table, with radiant candles shining..."

Rachel felt a glow inside her. She felt different, and also special.

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