



APPRECIATING THE TORAH

THE CLIMAX OF THE AUTUMN FESTIVALS IS SIMCHAT TORAH, THE 'REJOICING OF THE LAW'.

The series of festivals began in a serious mood with Rosh Hashana, when we asked G-d for a sweet year, and heard the Shofar which aroused us to repentance. On Yom Kippur we fasted, and G-d forgave our transgressions and sealed us in the Book of Life. Then came Succot, expressing the joyful pouring of Divine blessing to us, and our unity together as the Jewish people.

Finally to crown it all comes Simchat Torah¹. We complete the cycle of Torah readings which has extended through the year, Shabbat after Shabbat, and we begin the Torah again from the beginning. There is dancing with the Torah round the Bimah in the Synagogue, flags and sweets for children, a lavish spread for adults, and a general air of festivity. But what is the nature of this celebration? Simchat Torah means Rejoicing of the Torah - the Book of laws and teachings. Surely the best way to enjoy the Torah is to sit and study it?

Here lies an important point. On Simchat Torah we celebrate our joy by closing the Torah scroll, wrapping it in its mantle, and dancing with it. Why?

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The Torah contains laws, teachings, the account of Creation and of the birth of the Jewish people. Its teachings are continued in the sacred books of the Prophets and ancient texts such as Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Songs. Its subtleties are explained in the hundreds or even thousands of books which comprise the Midrash, the Zohar, the Talmud, the Code of Law and all their commentaries. These teachings have inspired paintings, poems, plays, musical compositions, films and many other aspects of human endeavour.

Yet beyond all these aspects of the Torah is the Essence of the Torah, beyond all understanding. The Essence relates to the soul, not to the mind. It expresses the boundless infinity of G-d, far beyond human reason. Maimonides tells us that “G-d and His Wisdom are One”². When we study Torah, the expression of Divine Wisdom, we are connected not only with beautiful ideas but also with the sacred Essence of Torah and with the infinite holiness of the Divine.

How can we express our appreciation for this bonding with the infinity of G-d? The time-honoured Jewish custom is to do so by dancing with the closed Torah. Dancing itself expresses the way a person reaches beyond the limitations of ordinary consciousness, of cold reason. Dancing literally lifts us up to a higher level.

On Simchat Torah we bond with G-d and the Torah in such a way that we move a step forward in our commitment to study the Torah and to follow its teachings in our daily lives. The joy of Simchat Torah flows through us and becomes part of us, not just for a day, but for the entire year ahead. Throughout the year, every time we read a few words of Jewish teaching, attend a study session or think about an idea from the Torah, we will access the Essence, the holiness and the joy³.

Simchat Torah opens the door. We just have to walk through, and with G-d's blessing, enjoy every moment of the coming year.

1. Beginning Saturday night. In many Chassidic synagogues there is dancing with the Torah Scrolls on Friday night as well, Shemini Atzeret. 2. Laws of the Fundamentals of the Torah 2:10. Rashi to Gen.2:21. 3. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot* vol.4. pp.1165-1171.

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SIMCHAT TORAH

SECOND CHANCES

Keren lay in the hammock, lazily swinging back and forth, one foot dangling out. Her book was not in her hands. It was resting face-down on her stomach. She was gazing up at the branches on the top of her Sukkah. It was a beautiful Sukkah this year. She had even helped her brothers put it together. Really, it was because she had nothing else to do. Usually, she would be playing with her friend, Sarah, and together they would be having adventures. Not this time.

Keren sighed. The truth was, it was her fault. Sarah didn't mean to hurt her feelings when she called her hair "flaming red." She didn't know that that was *the* most *sensitive* topic. Keren could barely remember what she said to Sarah after that. She just knew that Sarah turned around and stalked off, and they hadn't spoken since.

When Keren and Sarah first met, six months ago, they had hit it off immediately. It was breaktime and the class was playing a game of tag. Keren was IT, and something made her target the new girl, Sarah, and chase her all over the yard. Sarah would look back and make funny faces. Keren would double up laughing and then resume chasing her!

Keren's book slid off her stomach, and she felt a tear escaping from the corner of her eye. It had been three weeks since they spoke, and she really missed her friend.

This is silly, she thought. I'm going over there to make this all better.

Ten minutes later, Keren was standing at Sarah's front door. She had her eyes fixed on the welcome mat. Sarah had the door open a few inches, and was looking at her feet. Keren chewed on her lip. "Uh, Sarah? I just want to apologize... I was a little, uh, not so nice...."

"Well, I'm sorry I said you had flaming red hair. I didn't mean to...." The girls looked up at each other. The eyes of both were a little more sparkly than usual. "The funny thing is," Keren said, "that my hair *really is FLAMING RED!*" They erupted in giggles.

That night was Simchat Torah. The Torah Scrolls had been taken out of the ark, and everyone was dancing and singing with the joy of the holiday. Keren and Sarah's mothers sat next to each other on a bench near the back of the women's section of the synagogue. They watched as Keren and Sarah danced together nearby, twirling each other about and bowing and making faces at each other.

"Do you think they know," Keren's mother said, "that they are re-enacting our relationship with G-d at this time of the year?"

"What do you mean?" Sarah's mother turned to her friend.

"Simchat Torah is really a celebration of Yom Kippur, when we were forgiven for the sin of the Golden Calf. We are celebrating getting the *second* set of tablets, after we had distance ourselves from G-d and He forgave us. We celebrate a connection that goes beyond distance. It is always there."

Sarah's mother looked at the girls. They seemed so happy to be together after those three weeks of not talking. "I guess," she said, "that when we truly return to G-d, we can be even happier together than we were before!"

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