



Torah for Turbulent Times

"Joy, Love & Torah"

It's time to celebrate (again)! Having eaten our fill of apples and honey, fasted, and dwelled in our humble sukkah huts, the fall holiday season wraps up this Sunday morning with Simchat Torah, literally the "Joy of Torah." In a "normal" year, we would gather at the Roth Center to pray, sing and then bring out all the Torah scrolls to dance and parade them around. Many have commented that one of the High Holiday highlights was being able to see the Torah scroll up close during the Torah service. One Simchat Torah custom is to unroll the entire scroll for that very reason, as well as to take it all in as the "whole megillah." Like some of the other symbols at this time of year, completing and beginning the Torah anew symbolizes coming full circle. We finish by reading the last verses in Deuteronomy and begin again at Genesis. Along with joy, we express our aspiration for wholeness in the rituals of this holiday.

Commentators have noted over the years and perhaps you've heard this question. Which is the last letter of the Torah and which is the first? It ends with the word "*Yisrael*, the people Israel," and begins with the word, "*B'reisheit*, beginning." The last and first letters are pointed out to be "lamed and bet," spelling the Hebrew word, "*lev*, heart." How beautiful it is to come full circle and begin anew with a full heart of both joy and love. These are what help bring Torah, teaching, and spiritual insight into our lives and homes. It has surely not been a perfect year for us all, but during this transition in seasons and sacred time, we pause to acknowledge not just joy and wholeness, but the power of love to help us get through it all.

The power of love between us, and between us and the Universe and the Holy One, is ritualized on Simchat Torah. Yes, with the "first dance" of the New Year, shared by us and the scrolls. But, also traditionally with seven *hakafot*, seven circles around and around. Ecstatic, dizzy, tired, longing and yearning for more, Torah and life become intertwined. With an emphasis on joy and love, a first dance, and seven circles, we're

transported to the “wedding ceremony.” This holiday’s unique ritual includes stretching out a tallit over two, specially appointed people or groups of congregants, and calling them up to the Torah as “bride and groom, *Kallah/Hattan Ha'Torah*” and “*Kallah/Hattan B'reisheit.*”

Today, we all stand under the *chuppah*, imagining ourselves surrounded by a canopy of joy and love, beginning anew, and renewing our commitments, our vows, and our responsibilities for a fresh and healthy start.

-Rabbi Mark

