

# Reform Judaism In 1000 Words

## Simchat Torah



### **Context**

Early Reformers frowned upon excessive kissing, bowing, sometimes even the parading of the Torah as somewhat idolatrous. But Simchat Torah has become a joyous celebration for Reform congregations, honouring the text that sits at the heart of our communities meta narrative, the learning that stems from it, and, as **Rabbi Kath Vardi** of North West Surrey Reform Synagogue explains below, the cycles of life and of history.

### **Content**

The end of the seven days of Sukkot is marked by *Hoshana Rabbah* (literally, the Great Hoshana or the numerous hosannas). There then follows a further festival Shemini Atzeret– a final eighth day of assembly. Although separate to Sukkot, Shemini Atzeret is closely associated with it as the rabbis interpreted this final eighth day as being one of lingering. *“On the eighth day you shall hold a solemn gathering [atzeret]; you shall not work at your occupations”* (Numbers 29:35). The pilgrims to Jerusalem would stay one day longer before heading back home and readying themselves for winter and its material insecurity. This year’s crops have now been successfully harvested and we have rejoiced and given thanks for them throughout Sukkot, but the success of the crops in the coming year is, as yet, uncertain. We do not know if the rains will fall in their season. Shemini Atzeret therefore is the festival in which we pray to God to send the rains. During Sukkot we spend a full week living in close proximity to the elements, where we have feasted with friends, family and fellow members of the community. We may well have been enjoying the bounty of the earth, but we have done so in precarious accommodation. Shemini Atzeret marks the beginning of the transition back home, but whilst our accommodation may now be secure once more, the success of next year’s crops and our material wellbeing, is far from assured. The rabbis saw the success of our plea for rain on Shemini Atzeret as a faint and final echo of Yom Kippur<sup>i</sup>, which finished eleven days previously. The great question we asked on Yom Kippur – are we forgiven? - has not yet been answered and Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret only offer us the promise of redemption. We have to live out the next twelve months to confirm that God has not withheld God’s mercy.

It is out of this ritual history that Simchat Torah emerges. Following hot on the heels of Sukkot, Simchat Torah marks the end of the Torah reading cycle and the beginning of the next. During the Medieval period the once popular triennial reading cycle (in which the whole Torah was read over a three year period) was widely replaced by an annual reading cycle. The rabbis combined the conclusion of Sukkot, (which was capped off with Torah study on Hoshana Rabbah) and the second day of Shemini Atzeret with a finale of joyful celebration of life and continuity symbolised in Simchat Torah – a day of exuberant celebration of Torah and its centrality to Jewish life. The rabbis understood that time is both cyclical and linear. ‘Cosmic’ time has a linear quality in which God acts to redeem the Jewish people in History. Our life span is also linear, we are born and one day we will die. But, life continues around us, history continues to unfold even when we are no longer a part of it.

Time however also exists cyclically. The seasons, and our festivals, are repeated year upon year. Regardless of what happens on the historical stage to either us or our brethren, these cycles will continue. The moon will continue to mark our days, weeks and months. The sun and the rains will nourish our crops and, the Torah will

continue to inspire, instruct and comfort generations of Jews year upon year. The Torah cycle may end on Simchat Torah but it will immediately begin again, and it is this eternal cycle of living and our relationship with God which we celebrate so joyfully. As we end one cycle of Torah reading by reading about Moses's death, we immediately begin the cycle again by reading about the days of Creation. Death and birth, ending and beginning, the cycle continues on for another year.

In celebrating, the Torah Scrolls are processed around the synagogue whilst members sing and dance ensuring that all who want are able to dance with a scroll. The effect is one of 'holy pandemonium'<sup>ii</sup>. The celebrations should be wholehearted and exuberant. Unlike during the *hoshanot* of Sukkot (where we circle the Torah with our *lulavim*), during Simchat Torah we circle *with* the Torah. 'We take the connecting link between us and God – our ketubah<sup>iii</sup>, as it were - and circle around an apparently empty space that is filled with the One who fills everything.'<sup>iv</sup>

It is customary to invite specific members of the community who have been noteworthy for their contribution to community life in the last year to read the end of Deuteronomy and the beginning of Genesis. It is considered a great honour to be asked and recognised in this way. We call these individuals '*hattan* (groom) or *kallah* (bride) *Devarim/Bereshit*'. In many communities the remaining *aliyot* will be offered to as many people as possible, often necessitating the repeating of sections of the Creation story to ensure that as many people as possible are able to accept an *aliyah*. In other communities this wish is achieved through giving a group *aliyah*, perhaps to groups within the synagogue, or people with a common birthday, or all those studying for example or any myriad of other ways of ensuring that people can find a group to which they could belong. Simchat Torah is also the only time in the year when children (under the age of *b'nei mitzvah*) are also called up to the Torah. Perhaps with an accompanying adult, they too are afforded the opportunity to come and bless the Torah and to celebrate its reading. Some will read just Deuteronomy on erev Simchat Torah and then both Deuteronomy and Genesis on the following morning.

Simchat Torah is a celebration of the joy of living, of hope in which life continues, despite the fragility we sometimes experience. It is the celebration of our relationship with God, who looks to us to embrace all life has to offer as we look to God to share it with us.

## **Contemplation**

We return to the same stories, the same laws, yet each year we are struck by something new, or drawn to something that previously didn't speak to where we were. This is in many ways where the power of this incredible text lies for us as a community. It has been the lens and the core through which Jews have engaged with the world around them. Simchat Torah once again invites us to celebrate the continuing cycle. It does not end, but endlessly reinvents itself and makes itself a part of our lives as we learn and grapple with it. What will Torah add to your life this year?

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<sup>i</sup> (Waskow 1982)p. 69

<sup>ii</sup> (Greenberg 1988) p. 116

<sup>iii</sup> It is in this marriage document that the bride and groom detail their promises to one another.

<sup>iv</sup> (Strassfeld 1985) p. 158