

There are many rituals that we, the people, have helped to create and make meaningful. These are the rituals about which there is no legal requirement to begin with, although once the ritual becomes popular there are many guides to performing it correctly. One of these rituals is Simchat Torah (celebrated this year on Thursday night, October 16).

Originally, the day that is now called Simchat Torah was considered the second day of Shmini Atzeret, if you lived sufficiently far from Jerusalem. We have retained a reminder of that in the various inserts for the day found in most Siddurim. In the diaspora most Jewish groups retain a second holy day to begin Sukkot, to begin and end Pesach, and for Shavuot. Rosh Hashanah's two days come about for a completely different reason.

The Torah Reading assigned to the second day of Shmini Atzeret was V'Zot HaBrachah (this is the blessing) which is near the end of the Torah scroll. Once the cultural war over how long it would take to read the Torah was won by Babylon (who won all the other Jewish cultural wars as survival mode replaced revival mode in Israel proper), the day became known as Simchat Torah, the day the Torah Scroll was completed.

This sounds completely wonderful, but a few of the folks thought up a fairly thorny problem which the whole scenario of celebrating the completion of the Torah might cause. Supposing something happened the night after Simchat Torah? The heavenly prosecuting attorney could claim that the Jewish people were celebrating because they would never have to read the Torah or study their history again!

The first fix was to change the prophetic selection from Solomon's blessings to the first chapter of Joshua (which showed that we remembered that history continued after Moses). This fixed the issue on a philosophical level, but it felt emotionally empty. So, about the time that the extended Kabbalat Shabbat service was created, the people decided to read from Genesis on the very same day they read from V'Zot HaBrachah.

We, the people, were not done fine tuning the festival. Everything done since then has been meant to increase the joy we feel and show. Members of the community showed their joy and gratitude by providing comparatively large feasts for the community. Each Torah Scroll was removed from the Ark and then sung to. Some decided that just as we asked God to help save us on Hoshanah Rabbah by going around seven times with the Lulav and Etrog, we should remind God of why it is worth God's while to save us by going around with the Torah Scrolls seven times.

Different communities of Jews throughout the ages decided that joy could be visibly shown by bringing the children and letting them run around and letting the adults stride somewhat less sedately while carrying the Torah. We danced in public when the world let us, and just as on Purim we made fun of the Rabbis, on Simchat Torah we made fun of the Cantors.

We also demanded that everybody have an opportunity to act as a witness that what was being read from was indeed the Torah Scroll. (This is one of the things that taking a spoken Aliyah is all about.) So Torah Readers became quite proficient at these particular readings, and would create their own traditions to increase the sense of fun felt on the festival. One Torah Reader changed his accent and style of reading to match the person taking the Aliyah. It was often the only time during the year in that community when everybody finally heard somebody pronouncing Hebrew the "right" way. Another congregation changed the melodies for the first five aliyot so that each melody used throughout the

year was represented. When I was very much younger, I created a somewhat unique style of reading the final Aliyah. Guided by the text, I assigned specific melodies to particular verses. In the course of this single selection, you could hear echoes of the High Holidays, Haphtarah, Esther, Lamentations, the special melody used for the other three Scrolls (Song of Songs, Ruth and Ecclesiastes), as well as a big finish in normal Torah reading mode.

Over the years, we brought in songs to sing so we could dance even longer. We found ways to approximate the manner the Torah itself prescribed for it to be reviewed – having it all visible as a fairly large single document, to better appreciate how the bits we know fit together. Recently, we decided that being concerned for safety was just as important as exhibiting joy, as a single physically painful incident can mar the enjoyment of the festival for years.

I hope that we can take the communal joy we find in Simchat Torah and let it carry us through until Hanukkah.