



# Simchat Torah

By Steve Cohen

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## The Significance of Simchat Torah

The culmination of Sukkot and Shemini Atzeret. Final Parsha (selection of text) from Deuteronomy is read in synagogue. Everyone called to the Torah reading. Conclusion of the annual Torah reading cycle. This occurs on 22nd (outside of Israel 23rd) day of Tishrei and involves celebration and dancing in the synagogue as all the Torah scrolls are carried around in seven circuits (hakafot). Simchat Torah is related to the culmination of Sukkot (The Feast of the Tabernacles).

*And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying, Speak unto the children of Israel, saying, The fifteenth day of this seventh month shall be the feast of tabernacles for seven days unto the LORD. On the first day shall be an holy convocation: ye shall do no servile work therein. Seven days ye shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD: on the eighth day shall be an holy convocation unto you; and you shall offer an offering made by fire unto the LORD: it is a solemn assembly; and you shall do no servile work therein. -- Lev 23:34-37*

## Timing

On the Hebrew calendar, the holiday of Sukkot in the fall (mid to late October) is immediately followed by the holiday of Shemini Atzeret. In Orthodox and Conservative communities outside Israel, Shemini Atzeret is a two-day holiday and the Simchat Torah festivities are observed on the second day. The first day is referred to as "Shemini Atzeret" and the second day as "Simchat Torah," although both days are officially Shemini Atzeret according to Halakha, and this is reflected in the liturgy during which the children of Israel were wandering in the desert, living in temporary shelters. Work is permitted on the remaining days. These intermediate days on which work is permitted are referred to as Chol Ha-Mo'ed, as are the intermediate days of Passover.

## Festivities

The Simchat Torah festivities begin with the evening service. All the synagogue's Torah scrolls are removed from the ark and are carried around the sanctuary in a series of seven hakafot (circuits). Although each hakafa need only encompass one circuit around the synagogue, the dancing and singing with the Torah often continues much longer, and may overflow from the synagogue onto the streets.

In Orthodox and Conservative Jewish synagogues, each circuit is announced by a few melodious invocations imploring God to Hoshiah Na ("Save us") and ending with the refrain, Aneinu B'yom Koreinu ("Answer us on the day we call"). In Orthodox and Conservative synagogues, the hakafot are accompanied by traditional chants, including biblical and liturgical verses and songs about the Torah, the goodness of God, Messianic yearnings, and prayers for the restoration of the House of David and the Temple in Jerusalem.

Congregations may also sing other popular songs during the dancing. Children are often given flags, candies and treats. The vigor of the dancing and degree of festive merriment varies with congregational temperament.

In Orthodox synagogues, the dancing is mainly carried out by men and boys; very young girls may also be sent in to dance on their fathers' shoulders. Women and older girls often have their own dancing



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circles, or look on from the other side of a mechitza (partition) in accordance with the rules of tzniut (modesty). In Conservative congregations, men and women dance together. In some congregations, the Torah scrolls are carried out into the streets and the dancing may continue far into the evening.

It became a custom for every male member of the congregation to read from the Torah, the passage Deut. 33:1-29 being repeated as many times as was necessary for this purpose. Today this practice is still followed in Orthodox synagogues; Conservative synagogues adapt this practice by also including women.

One person is given the privilege of completing the reading of the Law with Deut. 34:1-12; he receives the name of Chatan Torah (bridegroom of the Torah). After him comes the member who recommences the reading of the Torah with Genesis 1.

### **A Symbol of Jewish Identity**

In the 20th century, Simchat Torah came to symbolize the public assertion of Jewish identity. The Jews of the Soviet Union, in particular, would celebrate the festival en masse in the streets of Moscow. On October 14, 1973, more than 100,000 Jews took part in a Simchat Torah rally in New York City on behalf of refusniks and Soviet Jewry. Dancing in the street with the Torah became part the holiday's ritual in various Jewish congregations in the United States as well.

Y'shua said:

*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 5:17-19*



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## For More Information

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The Apple of His Eye Mission Society  
PO Box 1649  
Brentwood, TN 37024-1649  
(888) 512-7753  
[info@appleofhiseye.org](mailto:info@appleofhiseye.org)

For additional resources, please visit our website at [www.appleofhiseye.org](http://www.appleofhiseye.org).