

Simchat Torah

This Saturday night starts Simchat Torah. The Torah is completed and we return once again to The Beginning. As soon as we finish, we start over. The cycle can never end; there is always so much more Torah to discover, appreciate, and internalize. The timing here is interesting. Why do we choose to complete the Torah and celebrate Simchat Torah just now, right after Sukkot? What does Sukkot have to do with Simchat Torah?

What is the mitzvah of the Sukkah? What exactly do we do in there? We just live ordinary lives. We eat, we sleep, and we dwell in the Sukkah. This is the mitzvah, nothing fancy, just plain living: “Dwell in Sukkot for seven days” (Vayikra 23:42). So the simple act of living in a Sukkah is actually a Biblical mitzvah. What is the meaning of this? How could satisfying basic physical needs be a mitzvah? What’s so holy about eating and sleeping? What is G-d trying to tell us here?

The message of the Sukkah is possibly the most fundamental message of Judaism. It is not only our souls that can serve G-d. Our bodies can too. G-d gave us our bodies and He expects us to satisfy our physical needs. Every physical act has the potential to be the fulfillment of G-d’s Will. But there is a right way to do things and a wrong way to do things. When we do things right it is all mitzvah. This is the message of the Sukkah.

As we strive to carry the sanctity of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur into the New Year, it is vital that we understand this truth well. To deny our physical reality is not only an exercise in futility, it is also quite unjewish. Our only chance of maintaining the purity of the Days of Awe is if we can learn how to properly live our lives in this world. So before we jump into the perils of the New Year, we practice living a life of mitzvah and holiness in the Sukkah. A life of mitzvah is not a life of abstinence and denial. It is just a life lived right. But how do we know what is right? Should we trust our instincts? What if my instincts are different than yours? Is there no absolute truth?

G-d does not expect us to know all the answers on our own. Instead of creating us with that kind of wisdom built in, He blessed us with the Torah. The Torah teaches us how to live a life of mitzvah, a life of kedushah, a life where every physical act is elevated and infused with spirituality. The Torah teaches us how to live right.

Now we can understand why the sages chose to restart the Torah and celebrate Simchat Torah on the day after Sukkot. At the very end of the holiday season, the Jew makes a fundamental statement. A life of mitzvah is not confined to the week of Sukkot. We can live in virtual Sukkot all year long. Our every act can be elevated before the Divine Presence. It can be done. And the Torah tells us how.

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This is why we sing and dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah. We do not accept the Torah's guidance begrudgingly. We enjoy it, we love it, we revel in it. For the wisdom of Torah is the secret of transforming and elevating our supposedly mundane physical existence into mitzvah. And a life of mitzvah is a life of activated potential, a life respected, and a life enjoyed. And so, on Simchat Torah, we embrace the Torah, we sing and dance with it, and we return to The Beginning. But it is not only our bodies that the Torah elevates. The Torah elevates our minds as well.

The Torah ends with the following statement: "Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moshe, whom G-d had known face to face ... and for all the great awesomeness that Moshe performed before the eyes of all of Israel" (Devarim 34:10,12). With that the Torah ends. But what does it mean? What awesome act did Moshe perform "before the eyes of all of Israel"? What exactly is the Torah referring to here in its final words?

Actually, there is one thing that Moshe did that was described by the Torah as being before the eyes of the Jews. "Awesome" is an apt description, but it is certainly not what we would expect: "I grasped the two Tablets and threw them from my two hands, and I shattered them before your eyes" (9:17). This must be what our verse is referring to (Sifrei 357). The Torah ends by complimenting Moshe for breaking the Tablets!

When Moshe saw the Jews worshipping the Golden Calf, he received no prophecy directing him to destroy the Tablets. That was a decision that he made on his own, and it certainly wasn't an easy one to make (see Shabbos 87a). Smashing G-d's gift! It was for this that G-d took the Jews out of Egypt! Moshe had no way of knowing that G-d would grant the Jews a second set of Tablets, but he broke them anyway. Where did the most humble of men get the confidence to act with such decisiveness? The answer is clear. Moshe just spent the last forty days studying Torah with G-d. He had internalized the wisdom of Torah and he had made it his own. His mind was now enabled to tackle the most difficult of challenges and come up with solutions and decisions that G-d himself would applaud. The breaking of the Tablets was Moshe's finest hour. And the Torah concludes with this extraordinary example of a human mind perfected by the study of Torah.

When we celebrate this Simchat Torah, let's appreciate what we are celebrating. The Torah elevates our souls, our bodies, and our minds. It reveals the path to a life of G-d-consciousness, a life lived seriously, a life of mitzvah. May we all merit to successfully construct a Sukkah over our lives that will last all year long.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Samayach
The JSN Team

