

The Torah Is Waiting for Us

Three questions for tonight's Simchas Torah

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A few hours ago, we stood together for Yizkor. For many of us, that meant thinking of the people who placed a Torah in our hands long before we knew what to do with it. Perhaps it was a father who brought us to shul, a mother who made Shabbos unmistakably different from the rest of the week, a grandparent whose voice we can still hear, or a teacher who took us seriously when we were young. Not everyone had that experience. But every one of us has received something, and every one of us can decide what happens to it next.

Now we are sitting at a Yom Tov lunch. Later tonight comes Simchas Torah. We will take out the sifrei Torah, keep them covered, and go around and around the bimah. This is a most unusual way to celebrate a book. We will not open it to display an especially beautiful passage. We will not spend the evening proving how much we know. We will hold it shut and rejoice.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe asks us to take that picture seriously. Why close the Torah on the very day called Simchas Torah? Why use our feet? And why circle the place where the Torah is opened and read? The answers give us three things to carry into tonight: **the Torah is ours; the Torah can travel with us; and our joy must grow into learning.**

I. Whose Simchah Is It?

There is a story the Rebbe brings about a simple Jew who was celebrating Simchas Torah with tremendous enthusiasm. A scholar asked him, in effect: You are not a learned man. What is your personal reason for such a celebration?

The man answered with a question. If your brother married off his daughter, would you dance at the wedding? Of course you would, said the scholar. So why should I not celebrate? The scholars have completed the Torah, and all Jews are brothers. Their simchah is mine, too.

It is a lovely answer. He refuses to be excluded because he knows he belongs to the family. But the Rebbe asks us to go further. On Simchas Torah, this man does not have to borrow his brother's invitation. This is his Torah. Its deepest bond with him is present before he has mastered a page.

The first verse we teach a child, when that child begins to speak, is Torah tzivah lanu Moshe, morashah kehilas Yaakov: the Torah Moshe commanded us is the inheritance of the congregation of Yaakov. What an extraordinary first lesson. We do not begin with an examination. We tell a child: this is yours.

Think of a family home that has passed to the next generation. The youngest grandchild might know almost nothing about the house. An older sibling might know the names of everyone who lived there, the repairs it needs, and the story of every photograph on the wall. That knowledge matters. But the younger child does not become an heir only after passing a test about the house. The relationship comes first. Knowledge lets the child inhabit what already belongs to the family.

That is only a mashal. The Rebbe's point is greater. The Torah is Hashem's wisdom, and its holiness reaches beyond even the finest mind. If the most learned person cannot contain its essence by intellect alone, then the least learned person is not shut out from that essence by an unfinished education. We each have something more intimate than an academic claim on Torah: a relationship with Hashem through His Torah.

This is why the scroll is covered when we dance. The mantle is not concealing the Torah out of embarrassment. It tells us that its essence cannot be reduced to what is visible on an open page or measured by how much we know. When the Torah is closed, the scholar and the beginner stand before that gift together. Tomorrow, their learning may differ greatly. Tonight, neither has to ask permission to rejoice.

And notice the distinction: inheritance is the beginning of responsibility, not a substitute for it. If you inherit a home, you do not prove your love for it by leaving the door locked forever. You go inside. You care for it. You discover what has been entrusted to you. The Rebbe will bring us back to that open door before we finish.

The joy comes first because the relationship comes first.

II. Where Can the Torah Go?

The Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe gave a memorable description of Simchas Torah: the Torah itself wants to dance. But a sefer Torah has no feet. We become its feet and carry it. The Rebbe develops that image. Feet respond to the direction of the head; they also bring the head to places it could never reach by itself. Tonight's movement around the shul rehearses the movement Torah asks of us during the year.

Here is a story about the kind of place to which Torah can travel. In 2013, Rabbi Noach Muroff of New Haven, Connecticut, needed a desk for a study in his home. He and his wife, Esther, searched Craigslist for several weeks until they found one that suited them. Noach and a friend collected it from a woman who lived outside the city. It fit into their minivan perfectly. Then they tried to bring it into the study. The doorway was a quarter of an inch too narrow.

Anyone who has moved furniture knows this moment. You angle it. You turn it. You take the door off its hinges. They tried that, too. Finally Noach, Esther, and their friend began to take the desk apart. They removed the file drawers. Behind them was a plastic shopping bag. Noach thought he could see a bill inside. Perhaps, he thought, there was a hundred dollars. The bag felt heavier than that. They opened it, counted the bundles, and found \$98,000.

Pause there. They had bought the desk. The seller was gone. A person could invent reasons for keeping such a windfall. But Noach later said the thought of keeping it never occurred to them. He remembered something the seller had told him: she had bought the desk at Staples and assembled it herself. The money almost certainly belonged to her.

When they reached her, the story came out. The money was an inheritance from her parents, who had recently died. In her distress, she had hidden it in the desk rather than taking it to the bank. Later she could not find it and searched the house, unaware that the bag had slipped behind the drawers. Imagine what it meant for her to hear from the couple who had bought the desk.

Noach and Esther brought their four children when they returned the money. The seller was grateful and gave them a reward. Noach taught at a yeshivah, where he could explain the mitzvah of returning what belongs to another person. Here his children watched their parents put that lesson into the back of a car and drive it to someone's door.

Then the story began to travel. The seller wrote them a note: she could hardly thank them enough for their honesty and integrity; they had strengthened her belief that good people still existed. For a while the Muroffs had thought of this as simply the right thing to do. Months later, when the story became public, strangers began to call and write. One man from Idaho told Noach that he had thought of Jews as greedy. This family's act had made him reconsider. A father told Noach about a son who ordered a camera online and received a much more expensive model by mistake. The son wrote to the company, explained that he had been raised as a Jew to be honest, and said he would send it back. He had been moved by what the Muroffs had done.

Think about the distance Torah traveled there. It went from the Muroffs' home to the seller's doorstep; from that doorstep to a man in Idaho who had to examine an ugly prejudice; and from a news story to a young man's own decision about a camera. Noach and Esther could choose what to do with the money. They could not have planned the lives their choice would touch.

There is a delicate echo here of Yizkor. The woman's money was an inheritance from parents she had lost. Our Torah is described as an inheritance of an altogether different kind. Yet both stories make us ask what it means to receive something from those who came before us. For the Muroffs, Torah did not remain an idea spoken in a classroom. It shaped what they did when a stranger's inheritance turned up in their home.

Most of us will never find \$98,000 in a desk. But almost all of us will face a smaller moment that nobody else sees: a mistaken charge in our favour, credit someone else deserves, an opportunity to speak truthfully when an easier sentence comes to mind. At that moment, the Torah needs feet. It can travel into an office, a kitchen, a telephone call, a family disagreement. A person who has danced with it tonight can ask tomorrow: where is it asking me to take it?

And when I say we become the Torah's feet, I mean every one of us. The hakafos have a particular shape in our shul. The Torah's journey extends far beyond the shape of the circle. Think of the women and men whose learning, integrity, and choices carried Torah into places it would not otherwise have reached. Their part in its joy is neither borrowed nor dependent on where they stand during the hakafos. Their inheritance is their own, and so is ours.

The Torah needs feet wherever an ordinary choice can become a holy one.

III. Why Circle the Bimah?

We could stop there, but the Rebbe notices something strange. We have just said that tonight's joy reaches beyond what we can understand. We deliberately keep the Torah covered. If so, why dance around the bimah, the very place where it will be opened and studied? And before a single hakafah begins, why do we recite a series of pesukim, known by their opening words as Atah Horeisa? If the celebration is expressed through our feet, why begin by putting words of Torah into our mouths?

Listen to the first of those words: Atah horeisa lada'as ... ein od milvado - 'You were shown, in order to know ... there is none else besides Him.' The pasuk joins two movements. First, something is shown to you, a truth greater than what you could have worked out on your own. Then you are meant to know it. The first experience is not the end of the journey; it asks to become part of your mind and your life.

That gives the question its answer. Tonight we receive and celebrate the Torah at a level deeper than our learning. We say pesukim at the start, and dance around the bimah, because that joy is meant to give life to the learning that follows. The circle has a centre. Our feet return us, again and again, to the table where a closed scroll can be opened. Tishrei gives us the foundation for the year; the year asks us to build on it.

Jay Litvin once wrote about the first time he was given an aliyah. He was thirty-six years old, in a Chabad house in Milwaukee. He knew Rabbi Yosef Samuels, who had invited him, but scarcely anyone else. The walk from his seat to the reading table was short. In his mind it was enormous.

Jay remembered the shul of his childhood as formal and distant. He had thought aliyos belonged to important or wealthy people. He had never, in thirty-six years, seen the inside of a Torah scroll. As he approached the men around the bimah, he saw their backs beneath their tallisos and expected stern faces. Instead, they turned and smiled. One man, with whom he had spoken briefly before davening, gave him a gentle nudge with his shoulder.

Someone showed him how to touch the Torah with his tallis and kiss the cloth. Jay struggled through the transliterated berachos. When the reading ended, he was moved gently to the side for a mi shebeirach. The man he had met put an arm around him and joked with him as they waited. Jay had walked toward the bimah expecting to be exposed as a stranger. He found people acting as though the Torah already knew him.

Rabbi Samuels told him, 'The Torah is no stranger. We live with it every day.' Jay says that only in the months and years that followed did he understand how much those words could mean. He began learning. Torah entered his work, his relationships with his parents and children, his marriage, and even the way he met anger and sadness. Eventually he could describe dancing with a sefer Torah on Simchas Torah and embracing it with affection. The man who once had not seen the inside of a scroll came to see his own life inside Torah's reach.

Jay's first aliyah makes the Rebbe's point almost visible. The smile at the bimah told him, before he knew the words, that he belonged. But nobody left him there with a smile alone. They helped him say the berachos. He came back and learned. Belonging opened the door to knowledge; knowledge gave that belonging a place in his work, his family, and his inner life.

That is why we circle the bimah. We hold the covered Torah and say: my bond with you is older than my understanding. Then we circle the place where it will be opened and say: I want that bond to enter my understanding. If I only dance and never open it, I leave the inheritance sealed. And if I study without remembering that these are Hashem's words addressed to my life, I may know the material while keeping the relationship at a distance. Simchas Torah joins the two: the joy gives our learning its starting point; the learning gives our joy a lasting home.

Jay's story also gives us a very gentle way to begin. He did not walk to the bimah as the person he would become years later. Someone smiled, helped him with the words, and left room for him to grow. One verse with a child, one page with a friend, one honest question brought to a shiur: beginnings count. Perhaps this year we can make it easier for someone else to take that short, enormous walk.

Tonight: An Invitation to the Whole Kehillah

So when tonight comes, I hope we will come to shul with more than a plan to watch the hakafos. Enter the simchah in the way that is possible for you and true to our shul's practice. Join the singing. Stand with the community as the Torah passes. Dance if you are able and that is your place in our hakafos. Bring a child or a friend close enough to feel that this is their celebration too. A person can participate deeply without taking the same physical steps as someone else.

But please, let none of us leave it at being a spectator. In our hearts we can all move with the Torah. We can all make a choice tonight: one place where we will take it, and one way we will learn it.

What might that mean? Perhaps a regular few minutes with a sefer, a shiur we will finally join, a pasuk to discuss at the Shabbos table, or a question we have been putting off asking. Perhaps a moment in business or at home where we already know what Torah asks of us, and we resolve to answer more readily.

This morning at Yizkor we remembered lives that have shaped ours. Tonight we can carry forward what was best in those lives - and add something of our own. The child who was told, morashah kehilas Yaakov, grows up and becomes the person who gives that inheritance its next journey.

Three questions, then, as the Torah goes around the bimah: **Whose simchah is this?** It is ours. **Where will the Torah go?** Where we take it. **What will grow from tonight?** The learning and living we begin when we open it again.

May we come tonight with the joy of heirs, carry the Torah with willing feet, and build a year of learning worthy of the gift we have received. Chag sameach.

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