



## Meaningful Sermons

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*"Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart"*

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Simchat Torah 5771 > Why Do We Dance?  
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Why Do We Dance?

### ABSTRACT

On Simchat Torah, we Jews dance with the Torah scrolls. But what about the Torah should cause us to dance?

Let's be honest: How many here think of Torah as a "tradition" – one of which we are all very fond – but which harkens back to another time and place and has little to do with our modern lives, and little to say to the world at large?

Today, on Simchat Torah, let us take a look at what the Torah has given the world and how we can apply its message to help heal the wounds of this country. Because it badly needs healing.

A combination of a tottering economy, political unrest, the growth of Islam and its impact on Europe and the United States – all that and more, are contributing to profound unrest and uncertainty. People everywhere and of all political persuasions are restless, wondering where this country is headed. The economic meltdown, with no signs of abating, has only driven the point home that greed destroys, and that regulators cannot be trusted. And so, many are asking: What will be? What should we do?

Yet, sadly the Torah perspective is not in any way part of this discourse. And we, ourselves, are not looking into the Torah for the answers.

It is time to change that, and today is the best day to start.

This sermon presents an overview of the key values that the Torah has given the world – the key values upon which the United States of America was founded – and shows how the Torah's core principles hold the solution to what ails America and the cure for the wounded world. Now, that is something worth dancing with.

Note: Key themes of this sermon were included in the Rosh Hashana sermon titled, The Jewish State of the Union Address. Here there are presented through the lens of Simchat Torah – appreciating the universal force of Torah.

## THE UNIVERSAL VALUE OF TORAH VALUES

### 1. A Hassidic Story

This is a hassidic story:<sup>1</sup>

On Simchat Torah morning, Jews traditionally sleep in a little because they are more tired than usual. The night before, they had put out a lot of energy dancing, joyously celebrating with the Torah scroll in their arms. The angels in heaven don't dance all night, so they are up early as always, ready to chant their morning prayers.

On one particular Simchat Torah morning, the angels found that they could not begin praying. You probably don't know this, but it is the law of heaven that human beings must pray first, and only then can the angels join in.

So with no one praying down below, the angels had some extra time on their hands, and they decided to use it productively by doing... what angels do... which is sweeping up the Garden of Eden. When they entered, they were shocked to find it littered with strange objects – torn shoes and broken heels.

Now, the angels are accustomed to finding holy objects in Paradise – prayer books, candles, prayer shawls, *tefillin*... which make it up there as a result of the devotion of their owners. But what's this? Shoes? Torn soles? They had never come across anything like that before.

The angel Michael stepped forward. "This comes from my people – the Jews," he admitted. "These are the remains of last night's Simchat Torah celebrations. The Jews practically danced their feet off."

He then began to count the shoes and arrange them according to the communities of origin. When he finished he had a big smile on his face. "Today I am going to best the angel Matat." As everyone knows, the

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<sup>1</sup> The great mystic, the Baal Shem Tov, who in the 18th century founded the Hassidic Movement, told this story to his disciples.

daily job of angel Matat is to fashion a crown for God out of people's fervent prayers. But, said Michael, "today I am going to fashion the crown. I will make a glorious one out of the torn shoes of these holy dancers."

## 2. Stereotyping Torah

On Simchat Torah, we Jews dance with the Torah scrolls. We dance our shoes off. We embrace the Torah with joy. But do we really appreciate it? What about the Torah should cause us to dance?

Now, let's be honest:

How many here think of Torah as a "tradition" – one of which we are all very fond – but which harkens back to another time and place and has little to do with our modern lives, and little to say to the world at large?

You know the joke about two fellows who get lost flying in a hot air balloon. Down below they suddenly see a group playing golf. The two lost passengers yell down: "Where are we?" And one golfer yells back: "You're in a hot air balloon." Before they know it, a gust of wind abruptly whisks their balloon away. They look at each other with a bewildered expression. "Who was he?" one asks the other. "I have no clue, but one thing is for sure – he was a rabbi." "How do you know that?" "Simple. Because what he said was true, but irrelevant..."

That is how many view Judaism – as irrelevant.

Another distortion about Judaism is that it is a parochial religion, insular and exclusionary, addressing only Jews.

Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Judaism, above all, offers a global vision to the world – to people of all races, nations and religions. The Torah is a blueprint for life for all of the citizens of this planet, presenting a universal vision of peace, justice and social responsibility, of a whole world living as one under One God.

During his lifetime, our forefather, Abraham – the pioneering founder of monotheism – sat in an open tent in the heat of the day to welcome strangers and tell them about that vision. During his lifetime, Moses – the founder of the Nation of Israel – refined that vision according to the precepts of the Torah. During his lifetime, the Prophet Isaiah, and the Prophet Ezekiel, and the Prophet Zachariah and many other prophets (some of whom we just read during Sukkot) reiterated the Torah's universal message for all human kind.

While it is true that at times we all – and especially children in their formative years – need spiritual insulation to reinforce a strong value system that can withstand fluctuating social norms... And while it is true that Judaism emphasizes the importance of building a home and a personal life of integrity, which should never be compromised by involvement in global projects (save the whales, but don't forget to save your children, right?)... While all that is true, *at the same time*, the Torah's message is distinctly global, not just local, not just reserved for the Jews.

It is a vision that has transformed the world when it first made its appearance more than five millennia ago, and it is meant to transform the entire universe. So, certainly the Torah has what to say about the current state of things – about the teetering economy, about the political unrest, about the uncertainty that grips the world.

How many of us appreciate that?

### 3. The Torah's Impact on Civilization

Today, on Simchat Torah, let us take a look at what the Torah has given the world and how we can apply its message to help heal all the wounds of the Planet Earth.

When the Torah made its appearance on the world stage, circa 3300 BCE, law codes did exist (for example the Code of Hammurabi) but they were strictly concerned with the orderly function of society and the protection of the wealthy upper classes. Might makes right was the motto of every great civilization – the Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, Roman.

Reverence for life? Are you kidding? Kill or be killed. Conquer, seize and pillage.

Save the children? Forget it. Unwanted children were dumped alive to die slowly on a trash heap and scores of such mass baby graves have been found by archeologists.

Charity to the poor? Unheard of. Free education of the masses? Unheard of.

Noble ideas of the Golden Age of Greece? Here is Aristotle writing on handicapped children: "There must be a law that no imperfect or maimed child shall be brought up, and to avoid an excess of population some children must be exposed [that means 'discarded on the dump'] for a limit must be fixed to the population of the state."<sup>2</sup>

Pax Romana? It's a break the Romans took to catch their breath because they conquered it all. Incidentally, *tens of thousands* of people died during that peaceful age, savaged by wild animals or massacred by others in the amphitheaters of which the Roman Coliseum is but one example. Talk about blood thirst! Talk about brutality!

And then consider what the Torah says: "Love your neighbor as yourself... love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt... protect the widow and the orphan... render equal justice to the rich and the poor... set slaves free every seven years...

Just *one* chapter – chapter 19 of the Book of Leviticus – has more groundbreaking laws for kindness and love between people than anything heard of before. And that's just *one* chapter of the Torah.

Do you have any idea how wild that was? Revolutionary. Absolutely revolutionary.

To live by the Torah, the Jews had to know how to read it. And thus they – men, women and children – had a literacy rate of nearly 100 percent,<sup>3</sup> when the world literacy rate was less than 1 percent!

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<sup>2</sup> Aristotle, *Politics* VII.16.

<sup>3</sup> World Perfect: The Jewish Impact on Civilization by Ken Spiro.

Jews established charitable organizations – because *tzedakah* means justice. Even a beggar had to contribute. They established free loan societies. They helped those down and out get on their feet again. They set up hospitals and cared for the sick, often free of charge, whether they were Jews or not.

Now, I am a rabbi and so maybe you suspect me of being partial to Judaism and coloring the truth a bit.

So let me refer you to just three of many books – all written by non-Jews – that set forth these facts: *Gifts of the Jews* by Thomas Cahill, *The Jewish Mystique* by Ernest Van den Haag, and *The History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson.

Paul Johnson, by-the-way, an eminent historian and a Christian, set out to write a definitive history of Christianity, when he realized he could not do so without writing about Judaism. The result is the admittedly dry History of the Jews in which he concludes:

Certainly the world without the Jews would have been a radically different place... To them [that is, to their Torah] we owe the idea of equality before the law, both divine and human; of the sanctity of life and dignity of human person; of the individual conscience and so of personal redemption; of the collective conscience and so of social responsibility; of peace as an abstract ideal and love as the foundation of justice, and many other items which constitute the basic moral furniture of the human mind... It is almost beyond our capacity to imagine how the world would have fared if they [the Jews and their Torah] had never emerged.<sup>4</sup>

#### 4. Torah and the Founding of America

It is a historical fact that all the values we hold dear in the Western World today originate with the Torah – reverence for life, social responsibility, peace, justice, equality, free education, etc.

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<sup>4</sup> *History of the Jews* by Paul Johnson.



How did these values become part of our lexicon – how did they become the values of democracy?

They were brought to the New World by the Puritans, who sought to outdo the Jews in their observance of the Old Testament (as they called it). This is why nearly every colony established in what would become the United States of America had codes of law all sourced in the Hebrew Bible.

By-the-way, this is why the early universities – like Harvard and Yale – taught Hebrew, and there was even a proposal among the founding fathers to make Hebrew the official language of the new nation.

It is no accident that when they penned the Declaration of Independence in 1776, they wrote: “We hold these truths to be self evident that all men are created equal, that they are endowed *by their Creator* with certain inalienable rights, that among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

Once they took root in America and became wedded to American-style democracy, these Torah values spread like wild fire throughout the world. This, too, is documented in a book written by a Christian scholar: *On Two Wings* by Michael Novak.

So now, let me ask you: How many of us know this? And even if we do know it, how many of us are turning to the Torah to find a solution to the huge problems that face us today?

A few academics were mocking an elderly Jew for being ignorant of American history. The Jew insisted that they test his knowledge. So one of the scholars began reading off names of the founding fathers that signed the Declaration of Independence: John Hancock, Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Adams... As he mentioned Adams, the Jew knowingly smiled, and with a confident chuckle said: “Yes, I knew that man, Sam Adams. He lived down the block from me. But I bet that you don’t know his real name! His original name was Shmuel Odom...” The academics began laughing. “What’s the joke?” asked the Jew. “Samuel Adams died.” “Really!” said the Jew, “how sad.” After a short pause, he added: “Ahh, you’re right. Now I remember. I was at his fu-

neral..." The scholars burst out into gales of laughter. "And now, what's so funny?" "Samuel Adams died 200 years ago." Without missing a beat the Jew cried out: Oy! Vi di zeit loyft. ("Oh my, how time flies!")

## 5. A Specter is Haunting America

To borrow a phrase: A specter is haunting America and the Western World.

A combination of a tottering economy, political instability, distrust in our leaders, the growth of Islam and its impact on Europe and the United States – all that and more, are contributing to profound unrest and uncertainty in our country.

This is not exclusive to a global upheaval. The impact is affecting every one of us – our livelihoods, our futures, our children.

No wonder that close to a half million people gathered recently at the Lincoln Memorial to demand restoration of America's values. Whether you agree or disagree with the Tea Party, Glenn Beck and the company, the fact is clear – the entire country (as well as the world) is in the grips of a serious transition.

People everywhere and of all political persuasions are restless, wondering where their country is headed. A large segment of the population recognizes that there is something seriously wrong with our value structure – with the deep erosion in trust in our institutions, government, education systems, and the usually reliable infrastructures that we have built our confidence upon.

The economic meltdown, with no signs of abating, has only driven the point home that greed destroys, and that regulators cannot be trusted. And so, many are asking: What will be? What should we do?

Yet, sadly the Torah perspective is not in any way part of this discourse. Indeed, most people you will ask will unequivocally state that Judaism



has nothing – and should not have anything – to say about our current state of affairs.

This is sad, even tragic, indeed.

## 6. Back to the Point of Departure

When a business is floundering, the first thing we do is return to the point of departure – revisit the initial mission and assumptions of the business. When a tree is struck by a storm and its moorings are in question, we look to the roots of the tree to ensure that they are intact, and that the tree remains strongly attached to these roots.

Why should we not do the same when our country is reeling?

And indeed, when we return to the roots of the founding of this country, we find it firmly rooted in the Torah's *unwavering* principles.

Man-made principles sway with public opinion, but the Torah's never.

Marx – Groucho, that is, not Karl – once met an adversary, and adamantly declared: "I have my principles!" When the other fellow frowned, Groucho continued: "If you don't like them, I have other ones."

The modern world – its freedom and prosperity – presents us with major issues and fundamental schisms that need to be bridged: balancing faith and modernity, individuality and the common good, freedom and anarchy, virtue and secularism, capitalism and greed, church and state.

Judaism offers a global vision that the world is in need of now more than ever. Unfortunately, Judaism has become marginalized, and in many minds is no more than a series of ancient rituals irrelevant to the modern age and its challenges. We must reinsert ourselves into the discourse.

I submit that the challenge for us Jews from this day hence is to look closely into our heritage – our timeless Torah which we embrace with

such joy today – and we will surely come up with real time-tested solutions to our current challenges.

## 7. Key Universal Principles

When we do, we will find that the answers lie in the Torah's vital core principles – and we need to reclaim and reinforce these in order to save our society. Consider that:

- *We are all created in the divine image.* This is the foundation of a healthy society and the force that allows diversity and individuality to flourish, while maintaining harmony between different interests. Because we were all “endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights... among them are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”
- *Our lives have a divine purpose.* We, humans – collectively and individually – were sent to this earth on a mission, to “serve and protect,” to reverse the otherwise natural tendency toward selfishness and self-interest, and to illuminate an otherwise narcissistic world with integrity and morality. We do this by living according to the universal moral laws given to Adam and Noah (known as the seven Noahide Laws), which honor God and all of life on this earth.
- *We are all individuals with unique destinies.* Our lives progress forward toward a destination, and this vision inspires our hopeful belief in progress and the sense that tomorrow can be better than today.
- *The bedrock of a nation's success is recognizing the divine rights of all human beings.* The mission of a healthy country and community is not economic prosperity or comfort or free commerce or financial success. These are by-products, not causes, of freedom. The Founding Fathers of the United States (and of other countries as well) acknowledged that the bedrock for all success is the country's recognition of the God-given rights of its citizens.
- *Leaders must lead by example.* They must be driven and inspired by the mission of their country, not by personal glory, money

and power. They must not govern by polls or public favoritism. A divine ethos of integrity gave birth to this mighty nation and created the climate for its thriving economy.

- *Confidence and trust derive from faith.* That is, trust between people is rooted in a belief that an unseen Divine Providence is directing the forces at work in our society. This is the essential basis for healthy, honest relationships and successful businesses. Without faith – without a Higher Authority that gave us all the gift of life and liberty – what is there to protect one greedy man from another?

- *We all answer to a Higher Authority.* Capitalism, which is driven by personal gain, can survive only through temperance – the wisdom derived from a fundamental responsibility to the customer. All the regulation in the world won't make capitalism work without the understanding that God watches us all and calls us to account. This is what instills responsibility and integrity, and what directs individual aspirations toward a higher good.

- *In God we trust.* Our economic experts and our leaders should look at the money in their own pockets. Engraved on every coin, etched on every bill, are the words *IN GOD WE TRUST*, and *E PLURIBUS UNUM*, ("From the many, one"). Because we trust in God, we can trust each other, and become one despite our diversity. Without this common bond, our system cannot endure.

Some may argue that it is wrong to invoke the Torah's God-given values as guidelines for national behavior, but we need only look at the Founding Fathers and their repeated references to the Divine – and to those very same Torah values – as the bedrock that guarantees our rights.

This, I submit, is the call of our times: Will our leaders rise to the occasion and write a new chapter of this country's history? Will they creatively develop a "new" sophisticated capitalism and built upon a higher trust?

In the times of hardship, we gain strength from each other and from God. As the Declaration of Independence concludes: "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor."

## 8. Call to Action

On this Simchat Torah, let us all firstly celebrate our great heritage – the vision that we were given, a vision that has literally shaped our world. But even more importantly, let us commit to making the Torah’s relevant message the center of our lives – and look *to it* for ways to address our present challenges, both globally and personally.

How do we begin?

I propose a few steps here:

- Learn Jewish history
- Read some of the books I’ve mentioned about the Jewish contribution to civilization in general and to America in particular
- Study the Torah and its ground-breaking ideology!
- Study the Jewish prophets and their vision for the future.
- Share what you learn with others, be they Jews or non-Jews, your next door neighbors or your seat-mates on the train
- Most of all, ensure that your children know their proud history, know how to access the Torah, and are armed with its insightful teachings for the hard road that is surely facing us and them.

Now, let us dance: Let us gather our children and celebrate the Torah and the gift it has given us and the world.