



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SIMCHAT TORAH 5772 • 2011

Prepared By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Simchat Torah

**Soulful Soles**



# Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5772 Enter the Heart"*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Sukkot - Simchat Torah >

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## ABSTRACT

There is a story told by the Baal Shem Tov about the morning of Simchat Torah when the angels find strange objects – torn shoes and broken heels – scattered in heavenly Paradise. Perplexed, they came seeking clarity...

We can all appreciate the dramatic moments in our lives. Pleasure and excitement can be found in glorious events and magnificent vistas. Joy and celebration are easily experienced in times of grandiosity. But can we expect to discover anything of significance in the doldrums of daily life? During the “regular,” dull moments, which occupy most of our lives, when nothing spectacular or breathtaking is happening – does any of it matter? Does anybody care? Is anybody watching?

We know how the awesome power of prayer can pierce the heavens and change destiny. But what about our simple, mundane activities? Can we ever hope to relieve the monotony of the daily wear and tear and experience transcendence?

The surprising answer to these questions is captured in the Simchat Torah morning story about the perplexed angels in Paradise. The explanation given to the bewildered angles teaches us to have a new perspective on even the seemingly most banal aspects of our lives. It shows us the enormous power generated by the simplest of acts and by the lowest of objects. After all, what can be more pedestrian and uninspiring than a ... pair of worn soles?

Declares the Baal Shem Tov: Precisely in our sub-ordinary life experiences can we experience the extra-ordinary. The tattered heels and frayed soles – when infused with passion – can move worlds.

And as we learn, the morning after Simchat Torah, the usual crown is not fashioned for the Almighty out of the lofty prayers of holy men, but a quite different, yet more glorious crown is fashioned out of the dance-worn shoes of Jews.

So let's dance.

Soulful Soles

## SOULFUL SOLES: THE POWER OF SIMCHAT TORAH

### 1. Strangers in Paradise

This is a Chassidic Simchat Torah story. It was told by the great mystic, the Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, to his disciples:

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. But 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 however, since it is the law of heaven that human beings must pray first,<sup>1</sup> 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 get up there as a result of the devotion of their owners. But what's this? Worn shoes? Torn soles? They had never come across anything like that before.

The angel Michael stepped forward. "This is my sechorah (material). It 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 daily job of angel Matat is to fashion a crown for God out of people's fervent prayers.<sup>2</sup>) 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."

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<sup>1</sup> Chulin 91b.

<sup>2</sup> See Zohar III 37b.

That is how the Baal Shem Tov told the story. And he concluded: “This is the power of the dance of a Jew on Simchat Torah. Even his torn soles pierce heaven.”

## 2. Charming Story, Thorny Questions

Nice story. But this story, as charming as it is, raises some thorny questions:

For one – every Jewish holiday is a time of joy and celebration, with singing and dancing. What is unique about the dancing on Simchat Torah, that only on this day do the angels find the soles and heels in heaven?

For another – why were the angels mystified by the physical shoes more than the prayer shawls and *tefillin*, which are also physical items?

To answer these questions, we must first explain what makes Simchat Torah so unique.

## 3. The Uniqueness of Simchat Torah

Simchat Torah is a unique day in the year, and its joy and dancing goes beyond the admittedly joyful standards of other holidays. Indeed, the joy during other holidays cannot even be compared to the unbridled and ecstatic celebration of Simchat Torah.

The question is: Why? Especially considering that Simchat Torah, unlike all other holidays, is not mandated in the Torah, not in the written Torah (like Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot) and not even in the oral Torah (like Purim and Chanukah)!

Chassidic teachings explain that precisely because it is not mandated – and is not obligatory – Simchat Torah has a power greater than all other holidays. When one fulfills a mitzvah, an obligation commanded by God, as deep as that fulfillment may be, it is driven and defined by divine law. And the joy, therefore, is somewhat constrained by the legal parameters of the mitzvah.

But joy and devotion that comes from the heart – which is initiated not out of obligation or expectation but simply by choice and out of sincere love – is the greatest joy of all. Since it is not in response to a command and not defined by the parameters of a mitzvah, this joy is boundless and limitless.

The celebration of Simchat Torah is initiated by Jews themselves – without any commandment obligating them to do so – with the sole intent of celebrating with the Torah that was given to them (in the second set of tablets) on Yom Kippur.

Thus, the exultation is unbridled and unlimited – beyond the joy of any other holiday.

#### 4. The Key Difference

The key difference is this:

All the mitzvahs are driven by divine mandate and revelation. They are an expression of Divine will and wisdom translated into laws and commands which instruct us how God wants us to live and celebrate. We study these Torah laws with our minds, and we learn to relate to them with our hearts.

By contrast, the Simchat Torah dance stems from the guts of the soul – the essence of our beings – and thus transcends the intellect and emotions. On this day we don't immerse ourselves in study and meditation, nor do we celebrate with open Torah scrolls that can be read and understood. We dance with our feet ... with the lowest part of ourselves ... with our heels and soles which lift up our entire bodies as we lift up the wrapped up Torah to unprecedented heights.

Simchat Torah is the day when the essence of our souls connects with the essence of the Torah and with the essence of God.

As such, we are all united as one in this infinite circle dance. During other holidays and other times of revelation, there is a distinction between one person and the next, there is a vertical hierarchy versus a circular unity. For example, scholars are clearly on a different level than laypeople, devout *tzaddikim* are beyond the simple folk. But on Simchat Torah – just as the feet unite the entire body, without distinction between head, heart and the other faculties – all segments of the people are united as one, with no distinction between the leaders, the scholars, the devout and the simple laypeople. Our feet unite us as we all dance as one.

## 5. Perplexed Angels

Now we can appreciate why the angels were so perplexed by the strange objects they found in the Garden of Eden: torn shoes and broken heels.

The Garden of Eden is a spiritual world saturated with divine light and energy.

The angels were thus accustomed to seeing there only the spiritual energy generated by the mitzvahs performed by humans on earth. They could even relate to the physical items associated with holy acts – like prayer shawls and *tefillin* – because, despite their physicality, they had been transformed into sacred items by virtue of their use.

But when the angels saw torn soles and broken heels in Paradise, they were utterly mystified. Because these objects were not transformed into holy items by a mitzvah; they remained in the material domain – something completely foreign to the sacred space of the Garden of Eden, where there is only sanctity and holiness. So how could anything other than a mitzvah object find itself there?

The confused angels turned to the angel Michael, who understood the power of the Simchat Torah dancing, and he explained to them: “These are the remains of last night’s Simchat Torah celebrations. The Jews practically danced their feet off.”

## 6. The Power of the Dance

The power of the Simchat Torah dance – a celebration not mandated from heaven, but one which is initiated by the people below – is rooted in the essence of the Divine, and is even beyond the comprehension of the celestial angels who can only relate to mitzvahs and holy objects. This dance, therefore, has the power to transport even soles and heels, which remain physical objects, into the spiritual environs of the Garden of Eden.

Not only is the dancing of Simchat Torah on this essential level, but it even affects the shoes of the dancers and elevates them to Paradise!

One would think that the tattered shoes would lose their individual personality and their “source of origin” once they get transferred to Paradise. But no. Even as they are in the Garden Eden they retain their earthly identity, for the angel Michael was able to arrange them according to their communities of origin.

## 7. The Soul of the Sole

This explains why of all joyous holidays, only the Simchat Torah dance lands our soles and heels in the heavenly garden. Because nothing can compare to the intensity of the Simchat Torah dancing which comes from the depths of our essence which is rooted in the essence of God.

And for this reason it is specifically our tattered shoes that end up in Paradise and *not any other* object. The heels and soles of our *shoes* are the lowest part of our beings. Indeed, they cover and protect the lowest part of our bodies – the heels and soles of our feet, and as such are our lowest extremity, the part of us that touches and treads on the ground beneath us.

In other words, our torn shoes epitomize the lowest level of our material engagement with the physical world. Therefore, the earthly dance of Simchat Torah, initiated by us humans, has the power to elevate our heels and our soles and our *souls*.

On all other holidays (those mandated by Torah), we generate divine revelation that the heavenly angels can identify with, just as they identify with all mitzvahs. But on Simchat Torah a whole new dimension is accessed – the Divine Essence, which transcends the difference between matter and spirit.

## 8. Beyond Prayer

This Simchat Torah power is captured in the words of the angel Michael: “Today I am going to best the angel Matat [who fashions a crown for God out of people’s fervent prayers]. Today I am going to fashion the most glorious crown out of the torn shoes of these holy dancers.”

It is true that prayers contain enormous potency.

For one, prayers have the ability to change destiny. When we pray and beseech God, saying, “May it be Your will (*yehi ratzon*) ...” we actually have the power to create a new will, a new future!

When we bless someone, we can only draw down energy that has already been pre-designated for this person – that is, energy from the source – but when we pray for that person, we can draw down new energy, from beyond the source.

This is why the angel Matat is able to fashion crowns out of people’s prayers.

And yet ... there is a power that is even greater than that.

The tattered soles from the Simchat Torah dancing create a crown that is even more glorious than the one shaped by prayers!

How is that possible?

Because the dance of Simchat Torah reaches the Divine Essence, which is higher than all the greatest revelations in heaven.



## 9. Baal Shem Tov's Lessons

Many lessons can be gleaned from this Baal Shem Tov's story.

First, it teaches us that we should cherish and appreciate each and every individual, no matter what level he or she stands or does not stand.

Above all, it teaches us the awesome power that each of us has to transform even our most mundane activities and lowliest objects – even our worn shoe soles and torn heels – and turn them into divine items worthy of the Garden of Eden and worthy even of the being formed into the most glorious crown for God!

When we immerse ourselves in a simple dance – infusing it with complete passion and sincerity from the essence of our souls – even our tattered shoes have greater value than holy prayers and greater power to pierce heaven and beyond.

Through this story, the Baal Shem Tov teaches us to have a new perspective on even the seemingly banal aspects of our lives. After all, what can be more pedestrian and uninspiring than a ... pair of worn soles?

Drama and excitement can be found in glorious events and magnificent vistas. Joy and celebration can be easily experienced in times of grandiosity. But what can we expect to discover in the dullness and doldrums of daily life?

Declares the Baal Shem Tov: Precisely in our sub-ordinary life experiences can we experience the extra-ordinary. The tattered heels and frayed soles – when infused with passion – can move worlds.

So as we prepare to dance this Simchat Torah, never should we underestimate what a simple pair of shoes can accomplish.

And now ... let's dance!