



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SIMCHAT TORAH 5773 • 2012

Prepared By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 9, 2012

Simchat Torah

**Why Do We Love the Torah?**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart 5773 Enter the Heart”*

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

Sukkot - Simchat Torah >

## **Why Do We Love the Torah?**

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Why Do We Love the Torah?

### **ABSTRACT**

What would you think of a group of Shakespearean scholars suddenly jumping up and dancing with the book of *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*? And what about a team of philosophers skipping and swaying with Aristotle's *Ethics* or *Metaphysics*? Or stomping their feet and hopping up and down with Homer's *Illiad* or *Odyssey*?

How would you react to any community designating a day to dance and sing with any work of literature?

Clearly such behavior would be considered very strange, if not outright mad! Seeing such a sight would make you think that there must be something very wrong with the people involved.

And yet this is exactly what Jews do on Simchat Torah – they clutch Torah scrolls close to their bodies and dance the night away to the point of frenzy and ecstasy!

What is it about the Torah that we Jews love so much? Why is our relationship with the Torah so unique and different in its passion – even compared to other passionate religions relationship with their texts?

In a fascinating talk to a group of European Cardinals – who came to find out the secret power of Jewish scholarship – a rabbi asked: “What is unique about the number 304,805? And how about 5,888”? Then he proceeded to explain to them the specialness of these numbers, how they capture the uniqueness of the Torah, and why we dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah.

As Arabs rage in the streets because they feel their religion has been blasphemed, Simchat Torah offers us a fascinating contrast in the way we Jews react to our faith being persecuted, humiliated and attacked for over 2000 years. While they rage, we dance.

This is a two-part sermon:

Part I: Why Do We Love the Torah?

Part II: We Dance While They Rage

## PART I: WHY DO WE LOVE THE TORAH?

### 1. Dancing with a ... Book?!

The Jewish playwright Arthur Miller, legendary author of such American classics as “Death of a Salesman,” describes in his memoir, *Timebends: A Life*, a time he was taken to the synagogue by his father and placed in the back row. This was in the middle of the night and he wondered why his father was taking him at such a late hour. Suddenly, he saw grown and elderly men dancing with a large *Sefer Torah*, laughing and acting like men decades younger. He felt shocked by this sight, and at the same time fascinated, because he never saw his father dance or rejoice in such a way before or since.

What would you think of a group of Shakespearean scholars suddenly jumping up and dancing with the book of *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*? And what about a team of philosophers skipping and swaying with Aristotle’s *Ethics* or *Metaphysics*? Or stomping their feet and hopping up and down with Homer’s *Illiad* or *Odyssey*? How would you react to any community designating a day to dance and sing with any work of literature?

Clearly such behavior would be considered very strange, if not outright mad! Seeing such a sight would make you think that there must be something very wrong with the people involved.

And yet this is exactly what Jews do on Simchat Torah. They clutch the Torah scrolls close to their bodies and dance the night away to the point of frenzy and ecstasy!

### 2. Love Affair

Lest you think that this is a once a year occurrence, consider that whenever a Torah scroll is brought out of the ark, Jews all rush to kiss it!

Have you ever seen anyone kissing even their most precious books?

This love affair we Jews have with the Torah is all consuming. We don’t just read the Torah, we study and pore over its every word. We study it day and night, and we take care to teach it to our children. Like obsessive love, it consumes virtually every aspect of our lives, at all times, in all places.

And that's how it is supposed to be. Just read the *Shema*:

You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be upon your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise. You shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for you a reminder between your eyes. And you shall inscribe them upon the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.

### 3. The Count

And we just don't venerate the words. We count them ... and we even count the letters.

In fact, this is why a Torah scribe is called a *sofer*, as the Talmud explains: "The early sages were called *sofrim* (meaning 'those that count') because they counted all the letters of the Torah."<sup>1</sup>

The Talmud describes how they would calculate the exact half-way point of the letters of the Torah, as well as the half-way point of the words and the verses of the Torah.

I mean, what type of obsession is this?

The love Jews show for the Torah is simply unfathomable!

### 4. Burning Synagogues

Indeed, throughout history, when anti-Semites would torch synagogues, many a Jew risked his own life to run into a burning building to save a Torah scroll!

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<sup>1</sup> *Kidushin* 30a.

A skeptic may point out that the Torah is only a book – and one which is not irreplaceable. There are many thousands of Torah scrolls out there, and you can always write another one if needed. Why risk your life for a book?

I can understand if it were a life you were trying to save in that burning building. But a mere ... book?!

The answer, of course, is that the Torah was never seen by the Jews as “another book,” or for that matter, as a book at all.

Jews see the Torah as nothing short of their life and their sustenance.<sup>2</sup>

The Torah is the mandate God gave us all – it is our blueprint for life. We equate it with life itself, for what is life without direction and purpose? The Torah outlines our divine mission which we were sent to this earth to fulfill and because of which we were given life in the first place.

No, for a Jew the Torah is not a book.

“If you burn my Torah,” a Jew is saying, “you are, in effect, destroying my identity ... my past and my future.”

## 5. Chain of Transmission

Several months ago, a group of Roman Catholic cardinals visited various Jewish communities in New York City, with the aim of learning the secret of Jewish endurance throughout history. The group included cardinals from Paris, Marseilles, Cologne, Hamburg and other major European cities. They were particularly fascinated with how Jewish scholarship and its values were passed on intact and preserved over the millennia.

One of the rabbis they encountered [Rabbi Simon Jacobson] began his presentation with the following question: “What is unique about this number, 304,805?” The cardinals shook their heads. “How about 5,888?” They shook their heads again. No clue.

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<sup>2</sup>As we say in every evening service: *Ki heim chayeinu v'orech yomeinu*.

So the rabbi explained:

This number 304,805 is the exact number of letters in the written Torah. And 5,888 is the precise number of verses in the Torah<sup>3</sup>

From the time of Moses, when he wrote the first Torah scrolls – 3,284 years ago – to this very day, every single Torah scroll has had that exact number of letters and verses!

Can you imagine: for over thirty centuries, with all the upheavals and genocides, the Jews were able to preserve the Torah exactly as it was first transmitted, down to its very last letter!

Do you know the game called “Telephone,” in which one person begins a chain of communication by whispering a message in his neighbor’s ear, who in turn repeats it in the next person’s ear. Each person continues the chain as they go around the room, until the last person says out loud what he was told. In most instances, the message that he heard is very far from what was initially uttered by the first person! Because as the message gets passed on from person to person it gets distorted, up to the point that it completely changes. And this happens to people sitting together in the same room at the same time.

How much more mystifying is it that the Jews passed on 304,805 letters over 90 generations while dispersed across the globe – and under the harshest of circumstances – exactly as these letters were first transmitted to them by Moses over three millennia ago!!

“How did they do it?” asked the rabbi staring deep into the eyes of his Christian audience. And then he told them what I am about to tell you.

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<sup>3</sup> *Kidushin* 30a.

## 6. Down to the Last Letter

To understand how we Jews preserved the Torah's integrity down to its last letter, we need to first understand *why* the Jews did it.

Because for us, the Torah is life itself – the essence and source of life.<sup>4</sup> And so it is not a mere book, nor does it consist of plain words. The Torah is called “life” – *etz chaim hi l'machazikim bo* – “the tree of life to those that embrace it.”<sup>5</sup> And every letter of the Torah is a living soul,<sup>6</sup> a flame of burning energy.<sup>7</sup>

Now it becomes clear why we adore the Torah down to its every letter: Because we are madly in love with our life and sustenance!

Every letter in the Torah is a life. Every letter is a live child, whom we love with all our hearts. No matter how many children you have, you love each one of them equally.

304,805 letters are 304,805 children, each one loved in its own right.

And when you have so many children to love, you count every one of them.

A mother of 17 children was once asked by a cynical journalist: “With so many children how do you spread out your love? Do you give each child 1/17th of your affection?”

The mother replied: “Apparently you never had children of your own. But when you do, you will understand that love cannot be divided into pieces. It's like the sun reflected equally in every drop of water. If you have 17 drops not a 1/17th of the sun is reflected in each drop, but the entire sun.”

<sup>4</sup> See Talmud *Shabbat* 105b; *Moed Katan* 25b: the death of every individual, and especially a *tzaddik*, is compared to the “burning of a *Sefer Torah*.” See also *Avodah Zarah* 18a: The parchment is burning, and the letters are soaring.

<sup>5</sup> Mishlei 3:18.

<sup>6</sup> See *Megaleh Amukot*, Section 186: *Yisrael* is an acronym for *Yesh shishim ribiu oisiyos l'Torah* (“There are 600,000 letters in the Torah”), for each soul corresponds to and is an embodiment of the letters of the Torah.

<sup>7</sup> See Jeremiah 23:29. Tanchuma Bereishit 1. Jerusalem Talmud Sotah 8:3. Rashi Deuteronomy 33:2.

## 7. Why and How

Once you know the “why” (that is, why we love each letter of the Torah), it’s easy to understand the “how” (that is, how we preserved it without any alteration for all these millennia):

If the words of the Torah were just mere words, then we might have valued them, read them, respected them. But we may not have preserved them, like people don’t preserve the words in the “Telephone” game. The reason the message gets changed in the game is because the players don’t particularly love the words they are repeating.

But as our beloved children, we count the Torah’s letters again and again, and know that there are exactly 304,805 letters and 5,888 verses. So we do everything in our power to preserve our “beloved children,” and we do everything possible to ensure that they are transmitted intact from one generation to the next!

## 8. Simchat Torah after the Holocaust (Inspirational Story)

And we do this no matter what ...

Let me tell you a story:

It was the first Simchat Torah after the Holocaust.

The men in this particular DP camp had lost their wives and children, and had lived through unspeakable horrors, but were determined to celebrate Simchat Torah with joy.

A little child wandered into the camp synagogue. The men were fascinated to see a young Jewish child, since most of the young children did not survive the Holocaust. So, instead of picking up the *Sefer Torah*, they picked up the little boy and danced with him.

It is well known that every Jewish child is considered to be a *Sefer Torah*. And that every *Sefer Torah* is like a child.

But there was one man standing in the corner who refused to dance ... at first.

Later he was seen dancing ... while crying and clutching a Torah scroll. When asked what changed his mind, he said:

“I can’t live with the Torah, but I can’t live without it. When you danced with the child I realized that the only thing that keeps me connected to my parents and grandparents who perished – and with all my ancestors back in time – is this Torah scroll. So yes, I feel as if God has forsaken me and the Jews, but I cannot bring myself to forsake God and the Torah He gave us. I dance and I cry. That’s the story of my life.”

## 9. Divine Letters

Yes indeed, the Torah is our life and sustenance. Every word, every letter is for us a life – a child.

And even more than that: The letters and words of the Torah are actually an inscription of God’s “soul,” so to speak. The first word of the Ten Commandments, *Anochi* – meaning “I” as in “I, God” – is an acronym for *Ana Nafshi Ketovit Yehovit*, which means literally: “I wrote down My very soul and gave it to you.” Or more poetically: “My soul is inscribed in these words that I gave you.”

By inscribing His spirit in His words, God imbued every word of Torah with Godliness and sanctity.

And so, beyond loving the letters of the Torah as their children, the Jews are in love with the soul/essence of God that is embedded in the Torah.

## 10. In Love

When you are in love, every detail counts. Nothing can be too small, too insignificant. Because each detail is essential!

When you have a divine blueprint for life, imbued with the very soul of God, you commit every ounce of energy, every breath, to preserve every minute aspect of it.

Think even of a pedestrian computer program – it may have millions of lines of code, yet every last dot is necessary. Take out or add one period and the entire program is jeopardized.

The same goes for the 75 trillion cells in our body. Despite the multitude, even a single mutant cell can wreak terrible havoc.

How much more so when it comes to the divine “soul” within each letter of the Torah.

When there’s love, when there’s sanctity, when there’s life – quantity doesn’t matter, for it’s all about quality. Every last detail is as important as the whole.

## 11. Why We Count

This is what the rabbi told the cardinals. And he ended with:

This is why we Jews count and know every single letter and verse in the Torah of life. This is why we Jews run into burning synagogues to save A ‘life’ (the Torah scroll).<sup>8</sup> This is why we dedicate an entire day – Simchat Torah – simply to dance in ecstasy with the living Torah.

On this day we don’t study the Torah, we don’t discuss it. We just give in to the joy and dance the day and night away with these “beloved living words” as we would dance with our beloved children. And we actually dance with our children as well.

Our relationship with the Torah is profoundly intimate and intensely personal. And this relationship is the secret of Jewish scholarship’s eternal endurance and why the Torah’s timeless values were passed on and preserved over the millennia without being compromised.

The cardinals were astounded, and left with their mouths agape.

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<sup>8</sup>See note 4.

## 12. What Were They Thinking?

I wonder:

What were the cardinals thinking after they heard the rabbi's explanation of the Jews' devotion to the Torah and the secret of its perseverance through the eons?

Were they thinking that they could replicate this commitment and conviction? Could they inspire their constituents to begin counting the letters of the Bible with the same love and passion as Jews have been doing?

Were they thinking how crazy the Jews must be to love words with such intensity?

We can only speculate.

But what I can tell you is that we Jews have much to be proud of, especially as we celebrate Simchat Torah today. *Ashreinu mah tov chel'keinu, u'mah naim goraleinu u'mah yafah y'rushateinu*, "How fortunate are we, how good is our portion, how pleasant is our destiny, how beautiful is our inheritance."

YOU CAN SKIP TO #19 (LET'S DANCE) AND CONCLUDE WITH THAT. ALTERNATIVELY, YOU CAN CONTINUE WITH #13 (SIMCHAT TORAH IN AUSCHWITZ) OR WITH #16 (WHO IS LIKE YOUR NATION ISRAEL?)

**PART II: WE DANCE WHILE THEY RAGE****13. Simchat Torah in Auschwitz (Inspirational Story)**

In the fall of 1944, in the Auschwitz concentration camp, a group of fifty Hungarian Jewish boys under the age of 18 had been selected for the gas chambers. They had been told they were to take showers, but as this was later in concentration camp history, these boys knew the truth.

Inside the bathhouse, one boy shouted out, "Brothers! Today is the day of Simchat Torah! Before we die, let us celebrate Simchat Torah one last time! We don't have a Torah Scroll to dance with, so let us all dance with God Himself – Who is surely here among us – before we return our souls to Him."

Fifty young voices were raised in song, and fifty pairs of feet stamped in joy before God, singing:

*Ashreinu mah tov chel'keinu, u'mah naim goraleinu u'mah yafah y'rushateinu.* "How fortunate are we, how good is our portion, and how pleasant our destiny, and how beautiful is our inheritance."

The commandant came and was infuriated. One boy told him, "Leaving a world where Nazi beasts reign is a cause for celebration." To teach them a lesson, the commandant pulled them out of the line for the gas chambers and put them in a holding block overnight, threatening them that horrible punishment awaited them the next day.

But, the next morning, a high-ranking Nazi officer arrived, needing to conscript a large number of workers. He saw the group of boys and ordered them, along with several hundred other inmates, to be transferred to his work camp.

All fifty boys survived the war.

## 14. One Jew or Another

Talking about the cardinals and Jewish pride, allow me to share with you another similar related story:

A rabbi was once invited to deliver a talk for a group of Protestant pastors about the Jewish view on Messiah and the Redemption. He discussed the spiritual transformation the world would undergo in the near future. A world filled with Divine knowledge, in which all nations stand united under one God while maintaining their diversity. At the end of his talk, one of the hosts thanked him on behalf of the group, and asked him this question:

"We all agree with your eloquent presentation of the world unity that will prevail in the Redemption. Yet, one dilemma remains: the identity of the Messiah. We Christians believe that is Jesus, someone that Jews have categorically rejected. How will we ever be united on this hotly contested point?"

What was the rabbi going to say? Here are the words that came to him at the time:

"Let's put it this way. The Messiah will be one Jew or another..."

The crowd laughed awkwardly, uncomfortably, and they left it at that.

## 15. Upgrade

On a Northwest Airways flight from Atlanta, GA , a well attired middle-aged woman found herself sitting next to a man wearing a kippa ("yarmulke" in Yiddish).

She called the attendant over to complain about her seating.

"What seems to be the problem, Madam?" asked the attendant.

"You've sat me next to a Jew!! I can't possibly sit next to this strange man. Please find me another seat!"

"Madam, I will see what I can do to accommodate," the attendant replied, "but the flight is virtually full today and I don't know if there is another seat available."

The woman shoots a snooty look at the snubbed Jewish man beside her (not to mention the surrounding passengers).

A few minutes later the attendant returned and said, "Madam, the economy and club sections are full, however, we do have one seat in First class."

Before the lady had a chance to respond, the attendant continued, "It is only on exceptions that we make this kind of upgrade, and I had to ask permission from the captain. But, given the circumstances, the captain felt that no one should be forced to sit next to an unpleasant person..."

The flight attendant turned to the Jewish man sitting next to her, and said: "So if you'd like to get your things, Sir, I have a comfortable seat for you in First class..."

At this point, the surrounding passengers stood up and gave a standing ovation while the Jewish man walked up to the front of the plane.

The lady then said indignantly, "The Captain must have made a mistake.."

To which the attendant replied, "No Ma'am. Captain Cohen never makes mistakes."

## 16. Who is Like Your Nation Israel?

Yes, we Jewish people are fortunate ... there is no other way to explain it.

And today, on Simchat Torah, we are unabashedly proud of this fact. Not out of arrogance, but humble responsibility for the unique role we play ... for the living example we offer the world in how to love and celebrate life.

*Mi k'amcho Yisroel, goy echod b'aretz*, who is like your nation Israel, one unique people on Earth.<sup>9</sup> As God told Abraham: I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you great... I will bless those who bless you... All the families of the earth will be blessed through you.<sup>10</sup>

Our unwavering love for the Torah offers an indispensable lesson to all nations of the world:

When you are absolutely and unconditionally committed to your divine mandate and calling, nothing can faze you and nothing else can define your identity.

The Jewish love for Torah expresses itself in a celebration of life, regardless of the circumstances. Even if and when Jews were tortured – their total devotion to Torah and its values, as their unwavering compass, defined their identities, not the pain and suffering they endured.

### 17. Klausenberger Rebbe (Inspirational Story)

One of the many great heroic personalities to emerge from the Holocaust was the Klausenberger Rebbe, Rabbi Yekusiel Yehuda Halberstam. Before, after and even during the most hellish experiences he suffered at the hands of the Nazis – and this including losing his eleven children and many other members of his family – the Rebbe was loved and revered for his sheer genius, his selfless devotion to the welfare of the most unfortunate, his piety and his courageous leadership.

Due to his pre-war reputation as a great rabbi, people sought his advice and guidance even within the camps. This was not lost on the Germans, and they treated the Rebbe with particular cruelty.

It once happened that the Rebbe was able to avoid working on the last days of the Sukkot holiday due to the creative designs of his devoted bunk-mates. But somehow the Germans got word of the ruse and forced

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<sup>9</sup>Chronicles I 17:21.

<sup>10</sup>Genesis 12:2-3.

his followers to watch as they proceeded to administer a savage beating so violent that no one thought the Rebbe could survive its ferocity. The Nazis would not allow anyone to go to the Rebbe's assistance, even after they were done with him, and they marched everyone out to work, leaving the Rebbe in a broken heap on the barrack floor.

As night fell, the Jewish prisoners were marched back into their barracks expecting to mourn the Rebbe's untimely passing. Instead, they found that he had miraculously dragged himself over to a post, clawed his way up until he was standing and was swaying back and forth while moving his lips in the hoarsest of whispers.

"Rebbe what are you doing?!" they exclaimed. "Let us help you lie down so you can rest!"

The Rebbe waved them off. "Children, tonight is Simchat Torah," he murmured. "Come dance with me."

## 18. Arab Rage vs. Jewish Pride

Contrast this incredible loving devotion to the Torah – one that transcends and is more powerful than Nazi torture – with Arab rage that has recently popped its ugly head again (with the killings in Libya and elsewhere). And you walk away with a lesson for all peoples.

While the Muslims kill to avenge the insults to their religion, we Jews can only look on incredulously as we remember how much humiliation and insults we have endured throughout our history.

But what has been our response? Instead of raging and killing, we dance and celebrate with the Torah.

The difference is – self-definition.

We define ourselves by what we love. While these raging mobs define themselves by what they hate.

So says Salman Rushdie, who has been persecuted by the Muslim world for blasphemy because of his novel, *The Satanic Verses*. For years he had to hide out to escape a *fatwa*, a clerical death sentence, which has since been rescinded. But he still lives in fear.

Explaining the latest spate of violence, Rushdie opines that the Islamic world places a disproportionate emphasis on honor and shame, and in recent decades this includes a paranoid sense of the world conspiring against it. Rushdie accuses the fundamentalists: "You define yourself by what offends you. You define yourself by what outrages you."

In stark contrast, we Jews do not define ourselves by what offends us – and this includes the words and deeds of our enemies and oppressors. Yes, we have suffered, but we are not sufferers. Yes, we have been victimized, but we are not victims. Our identities are defined by God and His Torah and our love for both.

Thus, we dance while they rage. We love while they hate. We celebrate while they kill.

That is why we are still here today, and we will be here forever.

## 19. Let's Dance

Everything we have discussed – our love for Torah; why we dance with the Torah scrolls, and adore its every letter – is important to know and is vital in helping us feel proud as Jews. But the most important thing on Simchat Torah is our actions.

Today we commit to hold on strong to our "tree of life" that is the Torah. To ensure that we dedicate time to study Torah, recognizing and applying its relevance to our lives. To strengthen our connection to its eternal power.

But above all, Simchat Torah is not a time to speak. It is not a time to count. It's a time to dance – to clutch our beloved Torah scrolls to our hearts and explode into unbridled song and celebration.

This is our passion. This is our devotion. This is how we express our appreciation for all our blessings, and this is how we channel our pain.

So my friends, let's dance!

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