



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

# SIMCHAT TORAH 5774 • 2013

Prepared By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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September 27, 2013  
Simchat Torah

**Simchat Torah in Hell  
and in Heaven**



# Meaningful Sermons

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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5774

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## **Simchat Torah in Hell and in Heaven**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Simchat Torah is not a time for talk, and certainly not for drawn-out sermons. It is a time to dance and celebrate with the Torah.

Instead of studying the Torah, on this day we dance with it, thus testifying to our essential connection with the Torah which transcends words.

And yet, sometimes the unspoken has to be spoken. Sometimes we have to describe what seems indescribable and express what seems inexpressible.

Simchat Torah was not always a happy time for the Jews – throughout our history we often faced intensified persecution at holiday times. The Nazis in particular relished rounding up and exterminating Jews during the Jewish holidays – anything to further brutalize and demoralize the people they considered sub-human. For example, Simchat Torah 1941 was particularly brutal, as the Germans massacred entire Jewish communities, including tens of thousands in various Ukrainian cities.

A few remarkable stories about Simchat Torah in “hell” teach us volumes about our indestructibility and how we should be celebrating Simchat Torah in the relative “heaven” we now live in – considering the freedom and comfort that we have been blessed with in our day.

For like the eclipse of the sun which reveals deeper dimensions of light, the blackest darkness uncovers deepest truths and strengths, which otherwise would have remained hidden.

## SIMCHAT TORAH IN HELL AND IN HEAVEN: HOW WE BECOME INDESTRUCTIBLE

### 1. Heaven and Hell (Humor)

Heaven Is Where:

The French are the chefs  
The Italians are the lovers  
The British are the police  
The Germans are the mechanics  
And the Swiss make everything run on time

Hell is Where:

The British are the chefs  
The Swiss are the lovers  
The French are the mechanics  
The Italians make everything run on time  
And the Germans are the police

### 2. Not a Time for Talk

Simchat Torah is not a time for talk, and certainly not for drawn-out sermons. It is a time to celebrate!

Simchat Torah is the most joyous day of the year, when we dance without limits with the Torah, and the Torah dances with us. For Simchat Torah captures the essence of Jewish immortality.

Instead of studying the Torah and using our minds, we dance with a wrapped up Torah scroll and use our hearts and very bodies, down to our dancing legs, to testify to our essential connection with the Torah which transcends time and transcends words.

And yet, sometimes the unspoken has to be spoken. Sometimes, we have to speak up to describe what seems indescribable and express what seems inexpressible.

And so, just a few words ...

### 3. Not Always a Happy Time

Simchat Torah was not always a happy time for the Jews – throughout our history we often faced intensified persecution at holiday times. The Nazis in particular relished rounding up and exterminating Jews during the Jewish holidays – anything to further brutalize and demoralize our people. For example, Simchat Torah 1941 was particularly brutal, as the Germans massacred entire Jewish communities, including tens of thousands in various Ukrainian cities.

A few remarkable stories about Simchat Torah in “hell” teach us volumes about our indestructibility and how we should be celebrating Simchat Torah in the relative “heaven” we now live in – considering the freedom and comfort that we have been blessed with in our day.

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### 4. Simchat Torah in Auschwitz: Saved by the Dance

It was a cold autumn day; the skies covered with the perpetual cloud of ash that hovered daily over Auschwitz. A group of fifty young yeshiva students were herded into the gas chambers, ostensibly for a cold shower.

This was far enough into the history of Auschwitz that the cold truth of the cold showers was well known to the young men. They all knew that the nozzles would soon open and bathe them in a cascade of noxious fumes that would choke off their air supply and drain them of life.

The Nazi guards – gleefully awaiting the usual onset of panic, the frantic banging on the doors, the desperate efforts to reach the sealed windows and futile clawing against bare walls – were surprised by this unique group.

Just before the showers released their poison a young man addressed his friends.

"Brothers," he cried, "today is Simchat Torah, when the Jewish world rejoices having concluded their annual reading of the Torah. During our short lives we have tried to uphold the Torah to the best of our ability and now we have one last chance to do so. Before we die let us celebrate Simchat Torah one last time. We have nothing; no clothes to cover us or Torah with which to rejoice. But we have God who is surely here among us today. So let us dance with God Himself before we return our souls to Him."

With this, he placed his hand on his fellow's shoulder and fifty young men broke out in joyous dance, a song on their lips: *Vetaher libeinu leavdecha be'emet* ("Purify our hearts to serve you in truth").

The bewildered Nazis stood just beyond the gas chamber and could not understand the meaning of this incongruous celebration. The commandant, who was accustomed to humiliated, broken Jews, could not countenance this spectacle of Jewish pride and flew into a rage. Bursting into the chamber he grabbed the first boy and demanded to know the reason for the dance. Calmly, the boy replied, "We are celebrating our imminent escape from a world ruled by beasts such as you."

The commandant decided to put an immediate end to the festivities with a cruel announcement: "You think you are about to escape this world? Think again! I will grant you a truly painful departure. Get out of here! Tomorrow I will torture every bone in your bodies; I will cut your flesh till you expire."

The commandant ordered the boys released from the gas chambers and housed in a barrack overnight. Despite their fate, the boys celebrated Simchat Torah all night with joyous song and dance. They sanctified God's name by dedicating their last night to expressing gratitude for the privilege of their Jewishness and for the precious gift of the Torah.

The next morning, a miracle happened. A high-ranking Nazi official, who was not aware of their "crimes," selected the boys for slave labor at another camp, and they were miraculously saved.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This story is dramatically related by Yitta Halberstam and Judith Leventhal, in *Small Miracles of the Holocaust*, Lyons Press, March 2008, pp. 179-181. It is also related by Rabbi Meisels, a survivor who witnessed this event in person, author of *Sefer Mekadshei HaShem*.

## 5. Another Holocaust Story: This Child is My Torah Scroll

Another story:

Henryk Foxman was but a small Jewish child in 1945, when the war ended and solitary survivors tried frantically to trace their relatives. He had spent what seemed to be most of his life with his Christian nanny, who had hidden him away from the Nazis at his father's request. There was great personal risk involved, but the woman had readily taken it, as she loved the boy.

When the Vilna Ghetto was destroyed, the nanny did not think for a moment that the father, Joseph Foxman, had survived. He had surely been transferred to Auschwitz, and everyone knew that nobody ever came back from Auschwitz. Therefore, she had no scruples about adopting the boy, having him baptized into the Catholic Church and teaching him catechism.

But his father had survived. And it was Simchat Torah when he came to claim his son. The heartbroken nanny had packed all his clothing and his small catechism book, stressing to the father that the boy had become a good Catholic. Joseph Foxman said nothing. He took his son by the hand and led him directly to the Great Synagogue of Vilna. On the way, he told his son that he was a Jew and that his real name was Avraham.

Not far from the house, they passed the church and the boy reverently crossed himself, causing his father great anguish. Just then, a priest emerged who knew the boy, and when Henryk rushed over to kiss his hand, the priest spoke to him, reminding him of his Catholic faith.

Everything inside of Joseph wanted to drag his son away from the priest and from the church. But he knew that this was not the way to do things. He nodded to the priest, holding his son more closely. After all, these people had saved his child's life. He had to show his son Judaism – living Judaism – and in this way all these foreign beliefs would be naturally abandoned and forgotten.

They entered the Great Synagogue of Vilna, now a remnant of once-vibrant Jewish era. There they found some Jewish survivors from Auschwitz who had made their way back to Vilna and who were now rebuilding their lives and their Jewish spirits. Despite the stark reality of their suffering and terrible loss, they were singing and dancing with real joy while celebrating Simchat Torah.

Avraham stared wide-eyed around him and picked up a tattered prayer book with a touch of affection. Something deep inside of him responded to the atmosphere, and he was happy to be there with the father he barely knew. He held back, though, from joining the dancing.

A Jewish man wearing a Soviet Army uniform could not take his eyes off the boy, and he came over to Joseph. "Can this child be ... Jewish?" he asked, a touch of awe in his voice. "This is the first live Jewish child I have come across in all this time..."

The father introduced his son. As the soldier stared at Henryk-Avraham, he fought to hold back tears. "Over these four terrible years, I have traveled thousands of miles, and this is the first live Jewish child I have come across in all this time. Would you like to dance with me on my shoulders?" he asked the boy, who was staring back at him, fascinated.

The father nodded permission, and the soldier hoisted the boy high onto his shoulders. With tears now coursing down his cheeks and a heart full of real joy, the soldier joined in the dancing.

"This is my Torah scroll," he cried.

Abe Foxman, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League – the Henryk-Avraham in our story – remembers this as his first conscious feeling of a connection with Judaism and of being a Jew.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.detroitnews.com/article/20100409/OPINION03/4090372/Soldier--survivor-have-emotional-reunion>. <http://www.kosherspirit.com/Article.asp?Issue=29&Article=34>.



## 6. From Hell to Heaven: A Historical Overview

Compared to the “hell” of the Holocaust, we are living today in heavenly times, where we have the liberty to be as Jewish as we like. Today we can gather together on Simchat Torah and dance away, celebrating our rich heritage, without fear of being watched or arrested. No one is standing outside of our *shul* spying on us, let alone trying to burn down our synagogue, *chas v’shalom* (heaven forbid).

This was not always the case. Indeed, this was hardly ever the case. Since the dawn of our history, for thousands of years (with a few short spans of respite), the Jewish people have suffered one form of persecution or another:

- The Egyptian bondage, the battles with Amalek and the Canaanites, the destructions wreaked upon us by the Babylonians and the Romans, who destroyed our two temples, sandwiched in between occupations by the Assyrians, Persians and Greeks.
- Following the destruction of the Second Temple things only got worse as European and Christian anti-Semitism ravaged Jewish communities. Expulsions, killings, discrimination of every sort defined Jewish history. First the Crusades, then the medieval massacres and burnings, followed by the Spanish Inquisition and the pogroms in Eastern Europe and Russia.
- And if that was not enough, then came the worst of all – six million Jews killed and millions more orphaned and displaced in the horror of the Holocaust.

But throughout this entire painful history one constant remained with us: The Torah.

Every Simchat Torah, no matter the circumstances – even when our ancestors were on the brink of the abyss – they would dance and celebrate with the Torah. Knowing, believing that *Am Yisroel Chai*, the Jewish people will prevail.



Throughout the history of Jewish persecution, Jews time and again responded not by wringing their hands and cowering in fear. Instead, they intensified their scholarship, prayer and spiritual growth. They deepened their commitment to virtue and chesed. They increased their good deeds and adherence to tradition. Indeed, some of the greatest works of Torah scholarship were composed “under the gun,” whether it was Rabbi Akiva during the occupation of the Roman Empire, Rashi in France, or the Abarbanel following the Jewish expulsion from Spain.

The most powerful response to tragic events was never resignation, fear or defeat, but always a defiant demonstration of the power of the human spirit. All the terrible events in history led to unprecedented growth and enormous contributions in scholarship and virtue. And the gains – not the losses – are what live on forever.

The greater the persecution, the stronger our attachment to the Torah. The happier the Simchat Torah celebration, the more vibrant the dancing, the louder the song. For our ancestors always knew: Hold on to the Torah, preserve it, keep it, and the Torah will hold on, preserve and keep you.

And indeed it did.

## 7. Unprecedented Freedom

While all our former persecutors are long gone, we stand tall, perhaps limping a bit, but alive and well enough to tell the story.

Now, for the first time in our long history, we have unprecedented freedom. The freedom to celebrate Judaism as we see fit. To send our children to any Jewish school we wish. To provide them with the best possible Torah education. To dance the unbridled dance of Simchat Torah.

What are we doing with this unprecedented freedom? Are we celebrating with the same passion, and even greater passion, than our ancestors? Or is our celebration pro-forma and lackluster?

Our challenge today lies on the other end of the spectrum than the challenges of the past. Today, our greatest adversary is not persecution but complacency – the apathy that naturally arise from comfort.

But, with our newfound freedom our Simchat Torah should be the greatest of them all – considering the blessings that have been bestowed upon us today.

But is it?

## 8. Torah's Journey (Optional)

Perhaps an inspirational song will help. Abie Rotenberg<sup>3</sup> composed this beautiful song about the Torah's journey from darkness to light and to darkness again, vividly capturing our responsibility today:

I was made way back in 1842,  
By a humble man, a real God-fearing Jew.  
Who did his work with honesty, feeling and with pride,  
He was known in Kiev as Yankele the Scribe.

With loving care, his hand so sure and still,  
He formed me with some parchment, ink and quill.  
Each day he'd slowly add to me just a few more lines,  
With words to last until the end of time.

And on the day that I was finally complete,  
The whole town came and filled the narrow street.  
And they sang and danced and held me high and carried me  
away,  
To the little wooden shul where I would stay.

And as the Rabbi held me close against his chest,  
He spoke out loud and clear to all the rest.  
He said, "No matter if you're very young, or even if you're old,  
Live by the words you'll find inside this scroll."

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<sup>3</sup>The song can be heard here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W69CYkOTdng>

Three days a week they read from me out loud,  
It filled my soul with joy, it made me proud.  
They followed each and every verse with fire in their eyes,  
The words that told them how to live their lives.

I watched the generations come and go,  
I saw the old men die, the children grow.  
But never in a century, did I miss my turn once,  
For the fathers they had left me with their sons.

But the hatred from the west came to Kiev,  
And they rounded up the Jews who had not fled,  
But Moishele the Shammos, he was brave and he was bold,  
He hid me in his cellar, dark and cold.

And for years and years I waited all alone,  
For the people of my town to take me home,  
And they'd sing and dance and hold me high when they carried  
me away,  
To my little wooden shul where I would stay.

But it was someone else who found my hiding place,  
And to America he sent me in a crate.  
And the men who took me off the boat, they said I was a prize.  
But they were Jews I did not recognize.

And in a case of glass they put me on display,  
Where visitors would look at me and say,  
"How very nice, how beautiful, a stunning work of art,"  
But they knew not what was inside my heart.

And across the room I saw upon the shelf,  
Some old friends of mine who lived back in Kiev.  
A silver pair of candlesticks, a menorah made of brass,  
We'd all become mere echoes of the past.

So if you hear my voice, why don't you come along,  
And take me to the place where I belong,  
And maybe even sing and dance when you carry me away,  
To some little wooden shul where I could stay.

And as the Rabbi holds me close against his chest,  
He'll speak out loud and clear to all the rest.  
He'll say, "No matter if you're very young, or even if you're old,  
Live by the words you'll find inside this scroll."  
Live by the words you'll find inside my soul.

## 9. Let's Dance

My friends, it is Simchat Torah today. A day when we speak less and do more. So let's dance like we never danced before. Let us remember how Jews danced with the Torah through thick and thin throughout the generations. Even as they faced their deaths they would not allow, Simchat Torah to be killed.

Now it is our turn to carry the baton in this long marathon.

Let us resolve to hold on to the Torah throughout the year and to teach it to our children.

Let us show our ancestors that the price they paid and the lives they sacrificed were worth it.

Let us learn from Simchat Torah's past how to appreciate our blessings of freedom and rise up this Simchat Torah in a divine dance of body and soul, lifting ourselves and the entire world to new heights of transcendence.

Come, join me in the glorious dance of the Torah, in which we rejoice with the Torah and the Torah rejoices with us.

[Begin a Simchat Torah *nigun*].