



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

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Prepared By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Simchat Torah

Can Love Conquer All?



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart 5775 Enter the Heart"*

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Can Love Conquer All?

ABSTRACT

What has the power to save us even when all seems lost? What remains intact no matter what we experience and where we travel? No matter how far or low we have wandered?

It's one thing and one thing only: Love.

We and God are beloveds. But sometimes we don't feel the love. Every Jew owns and breathes the Torah. But like breathing, sometimes we forget that we do it.

Simchat Torah reminds us, and thus we dance like we have never danced before.

A poetic Zohar on the verse in Song of Songs captures the sentiment. We ask God, *Place me like a seal upon Your heart*. For a seal leaves an indelible impression, even once it is removed. Even if the seal itself may travel far and wide from the heart, the impression and love always remains.

On Simchat Torah we read the end and beginning of the Torah. The last and first letters of the Torah are *lamed* and *bet*, spelling *lev*, "heart."

So tell me, when the sealing of the Torah is placed upon God's heart, how could we not dance?

As a heartfelt story of Rabbi Meir of Premishlan demonstrates, when we are joyous on Simchat Torah, anything is possible - even outwitting heaven itself!

So clutch that Torah as tight as you can: It is your most powerful life-saver.

CAN LOVE CONQUER ALL? Touching God's Heart

1. Heavy Lifting (Joke)

In their infinite wisdom, the *gabbaim*, the masters of ceremony at the synagogue, gave *hagbah* – the honor to open the Torah and raise it up for the entire congregation to see at the conclusion of the reading – to Moshe, the puniest guy in the *shul*. The Torah is heavy, in more ways than one. With great effort, puny Moshe managed to complete the act but nearly fainted while doing so. He then vowed that he would never be embarrassed like that again. He joined a local gym and commenced a six-month heavy-training course – push ups, sit ups, chinning, weight lifting, 10Ks – the whole thing.

Six months later, Moshe was back in synagogue and the *gabbaim* called him up again. This time Moshe picked up the Torah scroll like it was no ones business, did a *hagbah* that would make Samson proud, and sat down with a big, confident smile of satisfaction on his face.

Moshe then turned to one of the *gabbaim* and said sanctimoniously, “What do you think of that, then?”

To which the *gabbai* replies, “That was all good, but we called you up for the sixth *aliyah* – we gave you *shishi!*”

2. Different Relationships With Torah

God gave His holy Torah to every single Jew. Religious or secular, tall or short, fat or skinny, Sephardi or Ashkenazi, American or Israeli, man, woman, or child – the Torah was given at Mount Sinai to every Jew equally.

However, as the humorous tale of Moshe's *hagbah* demonstrates, every Jew relates to the Torah differently. Some think it is too heavy; some think it is too light. Some believe they are meant to lift the Torah up; some believe the Torah is meant to lift them up. Some do not know the difference between making *aliyah* to Israel and getting called up for an *aliyah* to the Torah. Some believe God gave us the Torah, while others prefer to think that the Torah gave us God.

Ask a Jew, “Which Jews own the Torah?” and every Jew will give you the same answer: “Every Jew owns the Torah.” But then ask a Jew, “What is the Torah?” and every Jew will give you a different answer.

In this, Torah very much resembles life. Life is owned by nobody and is intrinsic to everybody, yet no two people will agree upon what exactly the definition and purpose of life is.

Sometimes we forget the Torah, the way we forget to be awed by the miracle of life, or the way we sometimes take for granted the fact that we can walk, think or speak.

Like breathing, the Torah is so much a part of our intrinsic fabric that often we take it for granted. Because the Torah is ours no matter where we stand, and it cannot be removed from us no matter how we fail, all too often we neglect to embrace it.

Like the intrinsic nature of life, all too often we forget to cherish it and only appreciate its beauty once it is endangered. Only when something goes terribly wrong, do we begin to appreciate life and its essentiality. But when everything is going right – and may it do so always – then we don’t really spend much brainpower on it (unless one is a philosopher, and then one has bigger problems).

And here’s where Simchat Torah enters the picture.

3. Simchat Torah – Celebration of the Torah

My fellow *yidden*, my dear friends, today is Simchat Torah, the celebration of the Torah, a most joyous occasion, a day when it is a mitzvah to dance, a day when dancing is our natural state.

Why are we dancing? What are we celebrating?

We are dancing and celebrating with the Torah, for today we are reminded of what it represents.

The Torah represents romance. The Torah reminds us of a relationship. The Torah is a testament to an undying love.

4. Seal Your Heart

In Song of Songs, King Solomon writes: *Simani k'chosom al libecha* – “Place me like a seal upon your heart.”¹

Song of Songs, *Shir Hashirim*, is a romantic poem between man and woman. The commentaries teach that *Shir Hashirim* is an analogy for the relationship between Israel (the woman) and God (the man). We and God are in a romantic relationship.

We, Israel, are beseeching our beloved, God: *Simani k'chosom al libecha* – “Place me like a seal upon Your heart.”

What does this mean? What is this seal? Where is God's heart? And what does it mean for Israel to be a seal upon God's heart?

5. The Zohar Explains

The Zohar, the seminal work of Kabbalah authored by Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, elaborates on this verse from *Shir Hashirim*:

Simani k'chosom al libecha – “Place me like a seal upon Your heart.” At the time when the Assembly of Israel cleaved to its husband, God, it said, “Place me like a seal.” The nature of a seal is that it leaves its indelible impression upon whatever it is placed. And even after the seal leaves the place, and may go here, or may go there, nevertheless the impression itself remains and is retained. So says the Assembly of Israel to God: Ever since I cleaved to You, I left my indelible seal engraved upon Your heart. And though I may travel here or there, remember the impression that I, the Assembly of Israel, left stamped upon Your heart, and by this please remember me.²

At the marriage of Mount Sinai, when heaven married earth, when God married Israel, we (the bride) left our indelible impression engraved upon the heart of (our husband) God.

¹ Shir Hashirim 8:6.

² Zohar, Mishpatim 114a.

Since then, we have traveled to many places. Some journeys were willingly made, some were forced upon us. Some journeys brought us closer together, some broke us apart. But no matter where we went, no matter where we were, we always asked God to remember the seal we made at Sinai – the marriage contract between us – and the impression we made upon His heart.

Though the seal itself may travel through the pits of Auschwitz ... though the seal may travel to ungodly places, too shameful to mention ... though the seal may go so far from the heart that it seems it will never find its way back ... know that the impression always remains. No matter how far the seal may fall, the impression it made on God's heart at the time of our cleaving is engrained and engraved there, and the impression can never fade away.

This, says the Zohar, is the meaning of *Simani k'chosom al libecha* – “Place me like a seal upon Your heart.” The impression is indelible; it always remains.

Now we can perhaps understand the indescribable joy of the Simchat Torah celebration.

6. Three Scrolls

On Simchat Torah, three Torah Scrolls are taken out of the ark. From the first scroll, we read the conclusion of the Torah, the final portion, called *V'zot Habracha*, “This is the blessing.” For the final section of this reading, we call up the *Chatan Torah*, “The Torah Groom,” with a beautiful poetic introduction recited to a haunting melody.

After this, we call up the *Chatan Bereishit* with another such haunting poem, and from the second scroll we read the opening of *Bereishit*/Genesis, describing the six days of creation and the seventh day, Shabbat.

Then, from the third Torah scroll, we read the *Maftir*, which is a selection from the Book of Numbers³ that describes the Shemini Atzeret offerings.

³Numbers 29:35-30:1.

So we see that on Simchat Torah we read the end of the Torah, and then immediately restart is once again.

Now, the final verse of the Torah states: *Asher asa Moshe l'einei kol Yisrael* – "...which Moses did before the eyes of all Israel." And the first verse of the Torah begins, *Bereishit bara...* "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth."

The final word of the Torah is, *Yisrael*, Israel. The final letter of the Torah is the letter *lamed*. And the first word of the Torah is *Bereishit*, "In the beginning." The first letter of the Torah is the letter *bet*.

When we put the last letter of the Torah, *lamed*, together with the first letter of the Torah, *bet*, it spells the Hebrew word *lev*, meaning "heart."⁴

Thus when we conclude the Torah with a *lamed*, and immediately begin it once again with a *bet*, we touch God's heart. And this is what the celebration of Simchat Torah is all about.

7. Completed and Sealed

Now if we read our verse from *Shir Hashirim* we can finally begin to understand the incredible joy of Simchat Torah.

Simani k'chosom al libecha – "Place me like a seal upon Your heart." On Simchat Torah, the Torah is completed and sealed. And how is the Torah completed and sealed? By fusing the final letter of the Torah *lamed*, with the first letter, *bet*, creating *lev*, reminding us of the perpetual impression and eternal mark that we the Assembly of Israel have engraved into the heart of our beloved, God Almighty!

This is why today, on Simchat Torah, the joy is complete and the celebration is contagious. When we conclude the Torah, it is sealed, signed, complete. And by so doing, we touch the heart of God, and it is the most joyous of celebrations.

⁴ Bnei Yisachar, Tishrei, Maamar 13, Yichuda Shlim (p. 55b)

On Simchat Torah, when we finish the Torah with the *lamed* of *Yisrael*, and begin the Torah once again with the *bet* of *Bereishit*, we are showing our beloved, God, that the seal hasn't gone anywhere and that it is right here, engraved into the very the heart of our existence.

The Torah in our hands today is as vibrant and as holy as it was on day one. Our marriage is as exciting and romantic as the day of our *chuppa* – only more: for look at all the beautiful fruit this marriage has produced.

And this is why we dance. And this is why we hoist up the Torah to the heavens. We dance below on the ground to celebrate our undying love for our better half, God. And surely God too dances above, in the heavens, to the angelic ensemble, celebrating His undying love for us, the Assembly of Israel.

8. Joy Expands Boundaries (Story)

When we dance on Simchat Torah, sealing once again the Torah, and sealing once again our indelible impression upon God's heart, we are celebrating our indestructible nature. We are celebrating the very fact that no matter where we may go, or whatever challenge may confront us, our joy can bust through – our joy is so palpable and complete that it leaves no room for anything else, for anything contrary, for anything but utter joy itself.

The following story describes the power of what the joy of Simchat Torah can accomplish:

One year around the time of the High Holidays, the daughter of the well-known *tzaddik*, Rabbi Meir of Premishlan, fell severely ill. As Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur passed, her condition worsened, and she seemed closer to death than life.

On Simchat Torah, Rabbi Meir was fulfilling the commandment to dance and rejoice with the Torah, doing so with great enthusiasm, as every year. Great happiness prevailed among all the dancers.

But then, a small delegation of Chassidim hurried into the synagogue and approached him to disclose that his daughter appeared to be in her final moments, and that he must do something.

Rabbi Meir hastened home and entered his daughter's room. When he perceived how critical the situation was, he immediately stepped out and raised his eyes to the heavens. Then he addressed God (referring to himself in the third person by his nickname, Meirel):

"Ribono Shel Olam – Master of the Universe! You commanded us to blow the *shofar* on Rosh Hashanah, so Meirel blew the *shofar*. You commanded us to fast on Yom Kippur, so Meirel fasted on Yom Kippur. You commanded us to live in a sukkah on the Festival of Sukkot, so Meirel lived in a sukkah on Sukkot. You commanded us to be joyous on Simchat Torah, so Meirel is joyous on Simchat Torah.

"But now Ribono Shel Olam –you have made my daughter to be critically sick, and Meirel is obligated to accept this tragedy with joy, as it is written in the Talmud,⁵ 'A person is required to make a blessing on something bad that happens to him in the same way as he is required to make a blessing on something good,' and the Talmud explains that this cannot refer to the wording of the blessings since their texts are different, so it must be that it is our attitude that has to be the same – that is, a person must be joyful towards the bad event just as towards the good. So Meirel accepts his daughter's illness with joy, as You have commanded.

"However, Ribono Shel Olam, there is also an explicit law *ayn mearvin simcha b'simcha,*⁶ that we are not supposed to mingle one joy with another..."

At that moment, they called out from the sick room that the young woman had broken into a heavy sweat. Before everyone's eyes her condition began visibly to improve.

After a reasonable time she recovered completely.⁷

It is true that the Talmud teaches that we must accept the negative occurrences with joy the same way we accept the positive. What does this mean?

⁵ Brachot 60b.

⁶ Moed Katan 8b.

⁷ Translated and freely adapted by Yrachmiel Tilles from Sipurei Chasidim by Rabbi S. Y. Zevin. Copyrighted © by Ascent-of-Safed, 2004.

If we are celebrating life, there is a law that *ayn m'arvin simcha b'simcha*, we do not mix one joy with another. For this reason, one does not make a wedding on a Yom Tov festival, so as not to mingle one joy with another.

When we are completely at joy, when we dance with the Torah wholeheartedly, when there is nothing in our realities but utter happiness, then there is no way God could ever allow anything negative to happen to us or our loved ones, for we cannot mix another joy with this one.

When (heaven forefend) something negative happens, then the Talmud says we are obligated to bless God with the equal joy that we would if something positive happens. But if we are already celebrating all the positivity in life, if we are celebrating our indestructible nature and our indelible impression on God's heart as we are on Simchat Torah, then how is it possible for God to expect us to celebrate anything else, in violation of the principle *ayn m'arvin simcha b'simcha*?

If we are joyous for all the positive things in life, then surely God will never give us a negative anything, so that we won't have to worry about mingling one joy with another.

The challenge is for us to ensure that we do, in fact, celebrate all of the positive things, that we busy ourselves with always being happy, and that we leave no time for any other "celebration."

9. The Challenge (Conclusion)

Every single Jew, no matter where she comes from or where he is standing, owns the Torah, is an heir to the Torah, hoists the Torah up high to the heavens. The Torah is the natural state for every Jew.

The challenge of life is that God created a world with many, many distractions and threw us into it. Who could then blame us if, once in a while, we forget the heart, we forget the Torah, and we forget to celebrate what we have?

But that's why we have Simchat Torah, where we are told to celebrate, where we are commanded to remember, when we seal the marriage contract once again and are reminded of the impression we have left upon the heart of God - and of the impression we are meant to leave upon the heart of the world.

This is truly a reason to dance. So let us dance like never before. Let us dance until we leave such an impression that the dance will never end. Let us dance in such a way that we won't just leave an impression upon God's heart, but that the seal *itself* will remain forever on God's heart.

As we take the *lamed* from the end of the Torah and bind it together with the *bet* from the beginning of the Torah, let us truly and sincerely see the *lev*, the heart of our beloved Creator and let us celebrate with the movement of our legs and the dance moves of our souls.