



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

# SIMCHAT TORAH 5776 • 2015

Prepared By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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October 6, 2015

Simchat Torah

**Not a Time to Sermonize  
but a Time to Dance**



# Meaningful Sermons

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

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Sukkot - Simchat Torah >

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Not a Time to Sermonize

## ABSTRACT

Do you know how to dance?

Why do Jews dance in circles?

Sometimes our legs hurt because we dance too much. Sometimes our legs hurt because we don't dance enough.

On Simchat Torah our legs hurt if we don't dance enough.

Simchat Torah is not about speeches or sermons but about joy and movement.

This sermon is about the "dangers" – the limitations – of sermons. So see this Simchat Torah missive as a non-sermon sermon – or the anti-sermon – extolling the power of dance over words.

There are two types of dances, the finite dance and the infinite dance – the give and take tango of two dancing partners, and the unified circle of one seamless dancer.

This sermon will teach you how to *really* dance. It will transform the way we see the dancing circle, the circling of the *bimah*, and the unity and joy of Simchat Torah.

Sometimes in life we have to tango; but in the most joyous of times it is time to circle.

## NOT A TIME TO SERMONIZE BUT A TIME TO DANCE THE NON-SERMON

### 1. A Leg Up (Story)

The Kosover Rebbe, Rabbi Chayim Hager of Kosov (1755-1854), author of *Toras Chayim*, was the father of the founder of the Vishnitzer Chassidim, Rabbi Menachem Mendel, the author of the *Tzemach Tzaddik*.

The Kosover Rebbe had a custom to dance every Friday night, Shabbat Eve, with such joy and ecstasy until his face would burn with a fire of soul and spirit.

Once, dancing with such fervor, a synagogue bench fell on his leg and the Kosover Rebbe ceased dancing for a few moments. Not long after, the Kosover Rebbe continued dancing with renewed vigor, as if nothing had happened.

His Chassidim, worried for their master, attempted to pause his dancing, so that the Grand Rebbe's leg could fully heal. To which the Kosover Rebbe responded:

"Do you think I stopped dancing because my leg hurt? Not so! My leg hurt because I stopped dancing."<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Simchat Torah, Not a Time for Sermons

Simchat Torah is not a time for speeches, neither is it a time for sermons – not even a time for words. Simchat Torah is a time to dance.

Though the Torah is filled with words and profound scholarship, on Simchat Torah we dance with wrapped Torah scrolls.

On Simchat Torah we express ourselves not with our words but with our movements. Not with our minds, but with our souls. On Simchat Torah we articulate truths not with our letters but with our feet. On Simchat Torah we speak not with our mouths but with our legs.

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<sup>1</sup> See *Sippurei Chassidim* (Zevin) For the Festivals, p. 141.

On Simchat Torah, when we dance and rejoice with the Torah, we never stop dancing because we get tired. On Simchat Torah we get tired because (and only if) we stop dancing.

So let's never stop dancing.

But to dance really well let us explore – in this non-sermon – the nature, the meaning and the power of dance.

Did you know that the mystics teach that there are two types of dances?<sup>2</sup>

### 3. A Tale of Two Dances

The conventional Hebrew word for dance is *rikkud*. But in few places in the Torah we find another interesting term for dance, *machol*.<sup>3</sup>

In Jeremiah: *Then shall the innocent rejoice in the round dance with music (machol), and the young men and the old men together, and I will turn their mourning into joy and will comfort them and make them rejoice from their sorrow.*<sup>4</sup>

In Psalms: *They will praise His name in dance (machol); with timbrel and harp they will play music to Him.*<sup>5</sup>

*Praise Him with timbres and dance (machol), praise Him with stringed instruments and flute.*<sup>6</sup>

What's the difference between these two types of dancing, conventional dance (*rikkud*) and *machol*?

<sup>2</sup>See Likkutei Torah, Shemini Atzeret 86c; Maamarei Admur Ha'emtzo, Drushei Chasunah, p. 600-1; Torat Shmuel 5639 vol. II, p. 619ff.

<sup>3</sup>See Shir Hashirim Rabba 7:1.

<sup>4</sup>Jeremiah 31:12.

<sup>5</sup>Psalms 149:3.

<sup>6</sup>Psalms 150.

#### 4. Dancing In Exile: Two to Tango

Conventional dance is a partnership; the tension between the two dance partners is palatable. There is a tango going on: one dancer stands at one end of the room while the other stands at the other end of the room. Slowly, hesitantly, shyly, they make their way across the room, tentative steps bringing them ever closer to one another.

Then they pull away. Stepping back and creating distance. There is a push and pull, a give and take, a tension and resolution, what the mystics call *rotzoi* and *shuv*.<sup>7</sup>

The metaphor for this is the dance between the sun and the moon. Two partners always circling and orbiting each other, the sun gives his light to the moon then pulls away; the moon peeks out at night and then hides once again. This is a dance that can leave you at the edge of your seat; you don't know what's coming next.

Sometimes the partners are close, sometimes they are distant. Sometimes they touch, sometimes they do not. The relationship of spouses is similar to this dance, where at times they are close and at times they take a step back and need their individual space.<sup>8</sup>

This dance is how the world dances during exile – when there is dissonance and tension between matter and spirit, and thus a struggle ensues between our self-absorbed survival needs and our transcendent aspirations. At one moment we pine and yearn to connect with the divine which is beyond us, the next moment we are drawn back by the gravitational pull of our material lives. A tug of war between heaven and earth: At times heaven and earth are so close they can see themselves in each others' eyes; but at times they are so distant that life seems dark and cold.

This is “normal” dancing. A dance of partnerships, of giving and taking, of *rotzoi* and *shuv*. The finite dance.

But there is another type of dancing, one that is totally different.

The dance of the circle. The circular dance. *Machol*. The infinite dance.

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<sup>7</sup> See Torat Shmuel *ibid* for a vivid description of this “dance.”

<sup>8</sup> See *ibid*.

## 5. Dancing In Redemption: Circular Logic

Why do Chassidim dance in a circle? It seems so boring!

A circle has no beginning and no end. It consists of one seamless whole. There is no tension and resolution, no *rotzoi* and *shuv*. Every dancer is equal. This idea is conveyed in the above-cited verse, *the innocent...and the young men and the old men together* – there are no differences in the circle. All dancers are one.

*Machol* is a chorus of dancers, an ensemble in one closed circle. The word *mochol* comes from the word *mechila*,<sup>9</sup> meaning forgiveness. After the tango of Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur when all tensions have been forgiven and resolved, when all tension and resolution have melted into one whole, we reach a place of a complete circle. In this circle there is no partnership, no dancing partners, there is only one dance, one circle, one complete whole, and indivisible unit.

And in this complete circle, *the innocent...and the young men and the old men together* are all one and the same.

This is why on Simchat Torah we all dance *hakofot*, which means circling – we dance in a circle, a *machol*, circling the *bimah* while clutching the Torah scrolls and dancing away. And we all dance as one – young and old, layperson and scholar: here there are no dance partners, but only one dancer – you and I and the Torah and God in one circle.

## 6. Hearing The Song (Story)

Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760), the founder of the Chassidic movement, was once asked: “Why is it that Chassidim burst into song and dance at the slightest provocation? Is this the behavior of a healthy, sane individual?”

The Baal Shem Tov responded with a story:

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<sup>9</sup> See Likkutei Torah, Shemini Atzeret ibid.

Once, a musician came to town -- a musician of great but unknown talent. He stood on a street corner and began to play.

Those who stopped to listen could not tear themselves away, and soon a large crowd stood enthralled by the glorious music whose equal they had never heard. Before long they were moving to its rhythm, and the entire street was transformed into a dancing mass of humanity.

A deaf man walking by wondered: Has the world gone mad? Why are the townspeople jumping up and down, waving their arms and turning in circles in middle of the street?

"Chassidim," concluded the Baal Shem Tov, "are moved by the melody that issues forth from every creature in God's creation. If this makes them appear mad to those with less sensitive ears, should they therefore cease to dance?"<sup>10</sup>

## 7. Time To Dance The Cosmic Dance (Conclusion)

To dance in a circle sometimes you first have to dance the tango. Indeed, what makes the world go round is the first type of polar dance of tension and resolution: The dance of the sun and moon, of heaven and earth, of body and soul, of the human and the divine – dancing partners in perpetual motion seeking to join together, but divided by their inherent identities.

That is the how we dance all year round.

But on Simchat Torah we enter into another zone – the *machol* dance of the endless and infinite circle – a singularity. We get a taste of the essential divine unity, *Hashem echod*, that connects all into one seamless unit – *ein od milvado*, there is none besides You (as we recite in the opening verse<sup>11</sup> before we dance the Simchat Torah *hakofot*).

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<sup>10</sup> From Be'er HaChassidut, by Eliezer Steinman.

<sup>11</sup> Deuteronomy 4:35.

The ultimate *machol* dance is described at the conclusion of the Talmudic tractate of Taanit, depicting the cosmic dance of the final redemption (*geulah*),<sup>12</sup> when the perfect oneness of the divine will prevail:

Said Ulla Birah in the name of Rabbi Eliezer: In the days to come the Holy One, blessed be He, will hold a dance (*machol*) for the righteous and He will sit in their midst in the Garden of Eden and every one of them will point with his finger towards Him, as it is said,<sup>13</sup> *And they shall say on that day, "Behold, this is our God: we hoped for Him that He would save us; this is the Lord for Whom we hoped; let us rejoice and be happy with His salvation."*

On Simchat Torah we get a taste of this great dance. We dance in a circle, a *machol*, around the *bimah* with the Torahs in hand.

On Simchat Torah there is no tango, no give and take, push and pull between dance partners. On Simchat Torah there are no partners but only one singular circle.

Simchat Torah is a taste of the days to come, when we all will dance together as one, one with each other, one with the Torah, and one with God.

May our joyous dance today lead us right into the ultimate and eternal dance of the redemption.

Enough using our mouths; it is time to use our legs. Enough words; it is time to dance!

Gather your children, and let us all join together in one great eternal dance!

Good Yom Tov!

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<sup>12</sup> See also Likkutei Torah Vaetchanan 7b.

<sup>13</sup> Isaiah 25:9