



SUKKOT

Simchat Torah

Water and Fire: The Indestructible Power of Torah

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WATER AND FIRE: THE INDESTRUCTIBLE POWER OF TORAH

ABSTRACT

What is the most powerful day in the Jewish calendar? Most would say: Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year. Or Rosh Hashana – the birthday of existence. Or Passover – when the Jews were freed from Egypt and became a nation. Or Shavuot – when we received the Divine mandate: the Torah.

It's actually Simchat Torah. Though this day isn't even mentioned in the Torah, it contains a power and strength that is unmatched by any other day of the year. As great as the other days are, nothing parallels the way we dance and celebrate on Simchat Torah.

What is the secret of Simchat Torah?

The answer is illuminated by a heartbreaking yet awe-inspiring story of a young father of five children dancing with transcendent joy on Simchat Torah – just five days after the passing of his wife.

The song he sang: "Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v'agniom nye s'gorim – We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn" – captures the indestructible power of Simchat Torah.

Torah is compared to both water and fire. But water and fire are opposites. How then do they come together in one Torah?

In truth, Torah is greater than both fire and water, and on Simchat Torah we reach that level – empowering us with the indomitable and immortal strength to never drown and never get burned, no matter how daunting the challenge; no matter how great the flood or the fire.

1. What is the Most Powerful Day of the Year?

What is the most powerful day in the Jewish calendar?

Most would say: Yom Kippur – the holiest day of the year. Or Rosh Hashana – the birthday of existence. Or Passover – when the Jews were freed from Egypt and became a nation. Or Shavuot – when we received the Divine mandate: the Torah.

It's actually Simchat Torah. Though this day isn't even mentioned in the Torah, it contains a power and strength that is unmatched by any other day of the year. As great as the other days are, nothing parallels the way we dance and celebrate on Simchat Torah.

What is the secret of Simchat Torah?

We can find the answer in a heartbreaking yet awe-inspiring story of a young father of five children dancing with transcendent joy on Simchat Torah – just six days after the passing of his wife.

2. Simchat Torah Story: Through Water and Fire

49 years ago, on the second day of Sukkot 1969/5730, a young 37 year-old woman, Mrs. Rasha Gansbourg, tragically succumbed to leukemia, leaving behind a grieving husband and five children, the eldest 16 years old, the youngest a mere 7 year old.

However, since it was Sukkot, when we are supposed to celebrate and not sit *shiva* (in this instance the *shiva* begins after the holiday), the widower, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Gansbourg, a truly dedicated chassid, somehow mustered up the strength to dance and sing with his family throughout the holiday.

As is the custom among Chabad Chassidism to visit and celebrate with other synagogues on Simchat Torah eve, Rabbi Gansbourg took his children to a nearby shul in East Flatbush to dance with the Torah together with the congregants gathered there. The children's grandmother, their late mother's mother, dressed them in their finest clothing and sent them off with their father to the shul.

One young 14-year old in attendance witnessed the scene: He saw the man dancing as if there are no worries in the world. His legs pumping in a rhythm only his soul could produce. He looked like a flame, flickering on and on, reaching for a place beyond anything he had ever known. Wow, how could that man be so happy?

"Which man?"

Startled, the 14-year-old boy didn't realize he'd asked that question aloud.

"Which man?" His father asks him again.

"That man," the young boy points to the whirling man. "He must be the happiest man on earth."

As his father looks to where his son is pointing and sees the black-bearded man with five children in tow, his eyes fill with tears and he sighs. "That man just lost his young wife six days ago."

"But then how can he be so happy, how can he possibly dance like that?"

"Because today is Simchat Torah and it is a mitzvah to dance and to be happy. This is what a Jew does; this is what a real Chassid does."

After the dancing in East Flatbush ended, the young man and his five children walked back to Crown Heights. He dropped his younger children off at home with their grandmother and hurried to 770 where the Lubavitcher Rebbe was in middle of a farbrengen (a chassidic gathering). Every year on Sim-

chat Torah, before the dancing would begin, the Rebbe would speak for a number of hours, discussing the intricate lessons of Simchat Torah and the esoteric beauty of *hakofos*. At intervals throughout the talks, the Chassidim would say *l'chaim* to the Rebbe and sing a festive niggun, a Chassidic melody.

Rabbi Gansbourg of whom we speak had the privilege to begin the niggunim at the Rebbe's *farbrengens*.

The shul at 770 Eastern Parkway was packed from wall to wall, and floor to ceiling; people were clinging to bleachers and rafters just as they did to the Rebbe's every word. As the Rebbe finished the one part of his talk, he turned to Rabbi Gansbourg and motioned for him to say *l'chaim* (to life!) on a small cup of wine. The crowd, watching with awe, all knew that he had just lost his wife and they were wondering what his choice of song would be.

Through the hush of thousands of people, Rabbi Gansbourg's small but defiant voice rose up: *Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v'agniom nye s'gorim*, a hope-filled Chassidic song, sung in Russian words, meaning, "We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn."

The Rebbe looked intently at the young widower, and leaped up from his chair, and began swinging his arms emphatically, leading the packed crowd in a frenzy, all together singing: *Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v'agniom nye s'gorim*, "We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn; we in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn." Faster and faster they chanted, as if in a trance. Those present could not believe this slight man, swinging back and forth, raising his voice from the depths of his soul, "we in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn," as if G-d had not just taken his beloved wife, as if he was truly the happiest man alive...

3. Twenty Years Later

Fast-forward twenty years:

A phone call comes in to *Tzivos Hashem*, an international Jewish children's organization based in Brooklyn.

"Hello," the voice on the other end of the line says. "My name is so-and-so and I'm wondering if you could send some manpower to assist me with a Simchat Torah program I am hosting for the children of my community."

"Sure," the man working in the organization happily replies. "But, if I may ask, why are you hosting a children's program for Simchat Torah – are you a youth director at a synagogue?"

"No, I'm not, but when I was growing up, my father and I would go to a small shul in East Flatbush to

celebrate Simchat Torah. When I was fourteen years old, as I stood watching the people dancing in a circle, I noticed one man who looked so happy, as if everything in the world was perfect. I stood there transfixed, wondering how this man could exude so much joy. I asked my father this question, and my father told me that I should know this man just lost his wife but, because he is a real Chassidic Jew and the Torah says to be happy on Simchat Torah, he is happy.

This made an indelible impression on my 14-year-old mind – that a Jew could put aside all his pain and suffering and be happy just because it's a mitzvah was unbelievable to me – so on that day I made myself a promise: in the future, when I have the means to do so, I will help other Jewish children celebrate the true happiness and joy of Simchat Torah."

4. Seventeen Years Later

Fast-forward another seventeen years:

On the 23rd of Cheshvon, 5767/2006, the hero of our story, Rabbi Tzvi Hirsch Gansbourg, the young man who lost his wife in 1969, completed his mission down on earth and rejoined his wife in heaven.

Yet, his life – and the life of his wife – is as true and vibrant as ever. His children and grandchildren have built families and communities, bringing light into this universe; the people he has influenced continue to influence many others.

5. Beyond Water and Fire

The Simchat Torah story with Rabbi Gansbourg teaches us the true power of this day:

The song he sang: *Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v'agniom nye s'gorim* – "we in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn" – captures the indestructible power of Simchat Torah.

It teaches us that Simchat Torah infuses us with a power that is stronger than fire and water, empowering us with the indomitable and immortal strength to never drown and never get burned, no matter how daunting the challenge; no matter how great the flood or the fire.

6. Torah is both Water and Fire

A bit more explanation:

Torah is compared to both water and fire.

As we read in today's Torah portion, in the conclusion of the Torah, V'zot Habracha, followed by the beginning of the Torah, Bereishit.

V'zot Habracha begins:

*And this is the blessing with which Moses, the man of G-d, blessed the children of Israel [just] before his death. He said: The Lord came from Sinai and shone forth from Seir to them; He appeared from Mount Paran and came with some of the holy myriads; from His right hand was a fiery Law for them.*¹

His right hand – chesed – refers to water. And *fiery law* refers to Torah² as it relates to fire (gevurah).

Bereishit begins:

*Bereishit bara Elokim et hashamayim v'et haaretz – In the beginning of God's creation of the heavens and the earth.*³

The sages explain⁴ that *shomayim* is a combination of the words *soh mayim*, bear water,⁵ and *som mayim*, there is water. He mingled them with one another and made the heavens from them.⁶ From this we derive that Torah, which comes from *shamayim* (heaven) is compared to fire and water.⁷

But this presents a paradox:

Water and fire are opposites. Water is cool and expansive. Fire is hot and constricting. Water causes growth and expansion. Fire condenses and concentrates. Water naturally flows downward. Fire naturally rises. Water quenches thirst. Fire warms and illuminates. Water extinguishes fire. Fire dries up water.

How then can water and fire come together in one Torah? How does Torah encompass both? To the point that we read them both in today's same Torah reading!

¹ Deuteronomy 33:1-2.

² *Aish* dat. Dat, daled tof, is also an acronym for Divrei Torah, words of Torah.

³ Genesis 1:1.

⁴ Rashi Genesis 1:8.

⁵ Genesis Rabbah 4:7.

⁶ Chagigah 12a.

⁷ Taanit 7a, citing Isaiah 21:14; 55:1; Proverbs 5:15.

The answer is clear from the Simchat Torah story with Rabbi Gansbourg:

In truth, Torah is greater than both fire and water, and on Simchat Torah we reach that level – empowering us with the indomitable and immortal strength to never drown and never get burned, no matter how daunting the challenge; no matter how great the flood or the fire.

7. Two Dimensions of Torah

In a seminal discourse built upon the verse in today's Torah reading (*Torah tzivah lanu Moshe morasha kehilat Yakov*)⁸ the Alter Rebbe explains how water and fire describe and manifest profound metaphors for two essential aspects of Torah.⁹

Torah (specifically, the written Torah), like water, draws down the infinite wisdom of G-d into this world (and specifically into the oral Torah). As the Tanya¹⁰ explains:

The Torah has been compared to water, for just as water descends from a higher to a lower level, so has the Torah descended from its place of glory, which is His blessed will and wisdom; [for] the Torah and the Holy One, blessed be He, are one and the same and no thought can apprehend Him at all. Thence [the Torah] has progressively descended through hidden stages, stage after stage, with the descent of the worlds, until it clothed itself in corporeal substances and in things of this world, comprising almost all of the commandments of the Torah, their laws, and in the combinations of material letters, written with ink in a book, namely, the 24 volumes of the Torah, Prophets and Hagiographa; all this in order that every thought should be able to apprehend them, and even the faculties of speech and action, which are on a lower level than thought, should be able to apprehend them and be clothed in them.

The written Torah, the *Tanach*, is composed of 24 books. 24 is the numerical value of the Hebrew word *kad* (*chof daled*), which means “jug” or “pitcher.” The written Torah is like a *kad*, a pitcher containing a drop of the infinite divine wisdom, “pouring” the “pure waters of Torah knowledge”¹¹ below.

Torah is also called fire, *aish dat*, “fiery law.” Because, like fire, Torah's infinite “water” flow needs to be limited, harnessed and distilled to focus and concentrate its impact in the finite containers of our existence. That is why Torah is also called *fiery law*, contracting and condensing the unconfined divine

⁸ Deuteronomy 33:4.

⁹ Likkutei Torah, V'Zot Habracha 94a-b.

¹⁰ Chapter 4.

¹¹ Rambam end of Laws of Mikvaot. See also Isaiah 11:9 (cited by Rambam, end of Mishne Torah): filling the world with Divine knowledge as the waters cover the sea.

wisdom, like laser energy.

8. Conclusion: We Are Water, We Are Fire

This is why indeed, “We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn,” even a negative form of water and fire. Water cannot drown us and fire cannot burn us, because through Torah we transcend both water and fire, while also embodying both true water (*chesed*) and true fire – *fiery law* (*gevurah*)!

When we connect and attach ourselves to Torah, it serves as a “tree of life for those who grasp it.”¹² Torah – which we celebrate in its full glory on Simchat Torah – imbues us with a power that is stronger than fire and water.

Simchat Torah 49 years ago, Rabbi Gansbourg sang – accompanied by the Rebbe and thousands of chasidim: *Mi vadiom nye patonyem, ee v’agniom nye s’gorim*, “We in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn; we in water will not drown, and in fire will not burn.”

We too sing that song today – not out of tragedy (may G-d protect us all) but in joy and celebration.

We are indestructible!

We are Torah! We water the world with Torah, quench its thirst; and we warm and illuminate the world around and within us with Torah.

Now, let us pick up the Torah, drink the water, feel the fire, and dance with joy like we’ve never danced before!

Chag Sameach and good Yom Tov!

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¹² Proverbs 3:18.