

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Shmini Atzeret & Simcha Torah
October 24 – 25, 2024

[Shimini Atzeret & Simchat Torah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/357073/jewish/In-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Immediately following the seven-day festival of Sukkot comes the two-day festival of Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. (In the Land of Israel, the festival is "compacted" in a single day).

Shemini Atzeret means "the eighth [day] of retention"; the chassidic masters explain that the primary purpose of the festival is to retain and "conceive" the spiritual revelations and powers that we are granted during the festivals of the month of Tishrei, so that we could subsequently apply them to our lives throughout the year.

The "Four Kinds" are not taken on Shemini Atzeret. We still eat in the sukkah (according to the custom of most communities), but without making the special blessing on the sukkah. On the second day of Shemini Atzeret (i.e., the ninth day from the beginning of Sukkot)--and in the Land of Israel—we go back to eating in the home.

The second day of Shemini Atzeret is called Simchat Torah ("Rejoicing of the Torah"). On this day we conclude, and begin anew, the annual Torah reading cycle. The event is marked with great rejoicing, especially during the "hakafot" procession, in which we march, sing and dance with the Torah scrolls around the reading table in the synagogue. "On Simchat Torah," goes the chassidic saying, "we rejoice in the Torah, and the Torah rejoices in us; the Torah, too, wants to dance, so we become the Torah's dancing feet."

Other festival observances include the special prayer for rain included in the musaf prayer of Shemini Atzeret, and the custom that all are called up to the Torah on Simchat Torah.

[Food For Thought](#)

[Simchat Torah: Planting Seeds of Tears by Rabbi Lee Moore](#)

[https://truah.org/resources/lee-moore-simchat-torah-moraltorah_2024_ /](https://truah.org/resources/lee-moore-simchat-torah-moraltorah_2024_/)

Like much of life, our Torah does not have a happy ending.

At its seeming conclusion, we are left with the image of Moses on the mountaintop, gazing into the promised land and dying without ever being able to enter it. This is a moment of tragedy for him and of grief for his people. Every year on Simchat

Torah, Rav Ebn Leader offers up this sacred moment as one full of intense yearning. He invites us to make contact with our own inner unfulfilled longings, and then together we all walk around the *bima* in circles while singing. In that liminal space between endings and beginnings, a full range of emotions moves through us, the power of which then creates space for something new to emerge, *bereshit*.

Yet of course this year, Simchat Torah is not only Simchat Torah. How can we possibly dance and sing with this much sadness, rage, pain, and even terror possibly gripping our nervous systems on this first yahrtzeit? Where is the *simcha*? Should we even try to feel joy?

A mindset that pervades much Hassidic literature teaches that intense emotions like these can actually serve as unparalleled fodder for inviting *simcha* — on condition that we allow them to move through us. When our emotions keep looping and are not expressed, we stay in a cycle of reactivity that brings more pain. Contemporary trauma experts, such as Dr. Resmaa Menakem, echo this sentiment when defining trauma as a “stuck” aspect that keeps an experience or pattern on repeat. Because of this, the instruction to physically move underlies many effective therapies. Psalm 126 offers a poetic image of such a transformation:

The ones who plant with tears will harvest with joyous song.

The goer goes (*halokh yelekh*) and weeping (*u'vakho*), carries the trail of seed
Will indeed come with songs of joy, carrying his sheaves. (Psalm 126: 5-6)

When we can move (*halokh yelekh*) and weep (*u'vakho*), we plant seeds of the highest order — sowing an inner field where we tend to our most tender parts. This planting of tears is an investment in our inner life that brings concrete results — here described as sheaves, bundles of nourishment. When we can move through it — Rebbe Nachman recommends dancing, and tears also work — our grief softens in a way that nourishes us. When metabolized like this, our strong emotions naturally invite *simcha*. We need not try to do anything.

Simcha is not like other Hebrew descriptions of joy — *gila* or *ditza*, for example — which have a more active connotation. *Simcha* brings a felt sense of aliveness, regardless of what life circumstances we weather. And *simcha* is not only a feeling. It's a commitment to receiving our experiences of the world with an open heart.

When we give our strong emotions the attention they seek and honor them, they spiral us into a state of being more open to new perspectives. This new place is like the empty space after the end of our written Torah scroll that, on this day, cosmically links to the empty space preceding the beginning of our Torah scroll. This creative processing births new worlds. It is, literally, a genesis. *Bereshit*.

In the 14th century, authors of *Tikkunei HaZohar* so loved the possibilities brought through new frames that they offered 70 interpretations of this first word of the Torah. They play with its letters, rearranging them to find more and more

innovative ways to understand creation. In their 10th arrangement, the letters form the phrase *shir ta'ev*, which means “song of longing.” (Tikkunei Zohar 24b) “In the beginning” becomes synonymous with a universal song. We, too, sing this song when we feel our desire to belong, or we feel our grief upon losing what we’ve loved and we cry out.

Can we sing our longings this year in a way that lets all the feelings come through? Can we allow our heartbreak to summon us toward something new?

While working for social justice, we typically direct our efforts toward doing. Yes, action is important. Yet, sometimes we must slow down for what can be even more challenging: to feel our feelings. Have we truly moved through what we experienced last year on this day? That’s one gift of this yahrtzeit... to continue to grieve our loss communally.

As we sing and dance in circles this Simchat Torah, may we embrace our pain and its gifts. As we move together and weep, may those tears plant seeds for a new world to emerge. *(Rabbi Lee Moore is a ritualist, applied theologian, and facilitator of embodied prayer. A student of Rav Ebn Leader, she can be found moving on dance floors from the Cuyahoga River Valley to the Sinai Desert to northeastern Appalachia. More on her offerings can be found at knowinglee.org.)*

[El Malei Rachamim by Sharon Cohen Anisfeld](https://truah.org/resources/el-malei-rachamim/)

<https://truah.org/resources/el-malei-rachamim/>

In the wake of the events of October 7, 2023, many of us in the global Jewish community have found ourselves longing for liturgical language to speak to the sense of loss, hopelessness, and heartbreak we have felt over the past year. The following words are an adaptation of El Malei Rachamim (“God full of compassion”), a prayer traditionally recited over the dead at funerals and during Yizkor on Yom Kippur, created by Rabbi Sharon Cohen Anisfeld, President of Hebrew College.

אל מלא רחמים

God full of mercy,
Womb of the world,
In whom there is room enough
for all life to flourish
From whom there is blessing enough
For all life to be nourished –
We call out to You, broken-hearted.

שוכן במרומים

You who dwell on High
Beyond the borders of loyalty and love
that make us human —

Hearing what we cannot
Holding what we cannot
Healing what we cannot —
Help us.

המצא מנוחה נכונה תחת כנפי השכינה

Grant perfect rest
Beneath the wings of Your Presence
To the precious innocent souls —
Israeli and Palestinian,
Jewish and Muslim, Christian,
Bedouin, and Druze —
Who have lost their lives
to the ravages of war
during this past year.

“עת ספוד ועת רקוד”

“A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance”

<https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/time-mourn-and-time-dance>

Reflections from Israeli communities on how to observe Simhat Torah in 5785 The verse, “A time to weep, and a time to laugh; a time to mourn, and a time to dance,” poignantly encapsulates the complexities and myriad emotions of life. However, reality is messier than this binary division suggests. Conflicting times and emotions often intertwine. The true challenge lies in our ability to navigate this complexity and to find a way to experience and express overlapping contradictory feelings. How can we approach Simhat Torah this year when a raging storm has swept over our land? How much sadness, silence, or remembrance should we include in the synagogue, in our prayers, and in our practices on a Yom Tov? How can we celebrate when the Jewish people has lost so many hostages, soldiers, siblings, and friends, when we in Israel have sat shiva too many times? Can we dance with Torah scrolls whose embroideries now bear, for a lasting memory, the names of our murdered loved ones? We asked Hadar community leaders to address these difficult questions and to offer practical and halakhic guidance. Their thoughts are presented in these pages. Wishing you a shanah tovah and praying for the return of our loved ones. *The Hadar Israel Team*

How will we observe Simhat Torah this year? How can we celebrate Simhat Torah this year when our hearts are broken? The war is not over, and the pain is still fresh. How can we rejoice when friends and loved ones were murdered, when the hostages have not yet returned and are crying out for freedom, and when the wounded are enduring painful and difficult recoveries, carrying their injuries in body and soul? How can we begin a new cycle of the Torah when we are still immersed

in mourning? Is there a place for joy in these difficult days?

I propose three central ideas that can be incorporated into the observance of Shemini Atzeret/Simhat Torah. These ideas provide a framework that can be adapted to different communities.

Proposal A:

This year, let Shemini Atzeret be a time for reflection and remembering Shemini Atzeret, which concludes the holiday of Sukkot, was originally a holiday without special celebration. Over time, it became Simhat Torah, a festival of joy and dancing with the Torah. However, this year, in light of the difficult reality, we should observe the day differently.

We will conclude the book of Devarim and begin Bereishit. But instead of the Simhat Torah Haftarah, we will recite the Haftarah for Shemini Atzeret, which includes the verse, “May the Lord our God be with us as He was with our ancestors; may He never leave us nor forsake us.” There will be no celebrations, no dancing, and no hakafot—neither in the evening nor in the morning. We will add Psalms and prayers for the return of the hostages, for the safety of the soldiers, and for the healing of the wounded. We will expand the Yizkor prayer to include a memorial for the victims of the October 7 th massacre and offer a heartfelt prayer for rain—for blessing, and not for a curse.

“Their children whose blood was spilt for You like water. Turn to us for woes engulf our souls like water.”

Proposal B: The night of Simhat Torah and the morning of Shemini Atzeret And yet, some will say, in honor of the Torah, we must rejoice in the good that has been revealed, in the Torah and its study. We must give thanks for those who were saved, for those who healed, and recognize the acts of kindness and care for the other, and dance with devotion and faith.

This year, we could separate the tone of the holiday between the evening and morning tefillot. On Simhat Torah night, as we did last year, we will still celebrate—but differently. The hakafot will be less exuberant, dedicated to the hostages, the soldiers, the wounded, the volunteers, the reservists, and the displaced. But only in the evening.

In the morning, during the time of the massacre and the disaster, we will not be able to celebrate, and we will observe Shemini Atzeret as suggested above.

Proposal C: Simhat Torah—a different kind of mourning

And perhaps there are those who will argue that it is precisely in times like these that we should continue the traditions of Simhat Torah as usual, to strengthen our hearts and rise above the sorrow and the destruction. To continue Simhat Torah as it has always been, with hakafot and festive readings, and just as we celebrated Pesah during this time of crisis, upholding the tradition even amidst the pain, but in a different way. As the Tosefta teaches, “We cannot refrain from mourning.” But how do we do it differently? We will dance with more somber melodies, reciting the

names of the hostages (if, God forbid, they have not yet returned) before each procession, dedicating the processions to the fallen and the wounded, the soldiers and the displaced, and dedicating the processions to the communities that were attacked. Children will carry flags with the names of the attacked communities, and Psalms will be recited between each procession. We can finish reading the Torah and begin again, but without the ceremony of the hatan and kallat torah. A special expanded Yizkor will be recited for the victims of the massacre, and prayers offered for the soldiers, for the healing of the wounded, and for the return of the hostages. This year, it may even be appropriate to forego the festive Kiddush, in order to remember what has happened on this day.

Each approach has a place in our synagogues and communities, and perhaps, from this devastation and sorrow, we can find new ways to enhance tradition and strengthen our hearts.

[Dr. Renana Ravitzky Pilzer, Kehillat Shirah Hadashah, Jerusalem](#)

It was natural to connect the Yom Kippur War to the traditional Yom Kippur, a day of introspection, judgment, and asking for forgiveness. However, it is more challenging to connect the October 7 th disaster to Simhat Torah, a holiday characterized by holiness, communal celebration, and a renewed love for the Torah. This year, we knew how to observe Yom HaZikaron and Tisha B'Av, but as Purim and Yom Ha'Atzma'ut arrived, we struggled deeply for a balance between emotion and tradition. How, then, will we dance in the hakafot this year, and how can we balance these conflicting emotions? It is unthinkable for synagogues to hold a joyous celebration as usual while the secular streets observe a national day of mourning. The war drums still echo, and the future remains uncertain, but the end of a year of mourning is a Jewishly significant time to pause, and to shape memory, commemoration, and longing.

[First Hakafah: Silence](#)

Aaron's response to the death of his sons on the day of the mishkan's inauguration was silence, "[And Aaron was silent](#)" (Leviticus 10:3).

The interpretations of the grieving father's silence are varied and seem to reflect the different positions of the commentators on loss and tragedy in general.

The midrashic Aaron is an example of accepting divine judgment: "[Even though He causes you to lose countless lives, remain silent](#)" (Zevahim 115b), and we imagine him standing in the midst of the mishkan's celebration, making a supreme effort to understand, forgive, and justify; for silence, according to the Talmud, is "like an admission" (Yevamot 87b). R. Eliezer, when comforting his master, suggests that he accept comfort like Aaron, "[for silence is a form of consolation](#)" (Avot de-R. Natan 1:14), yet the master refuses to be consoled, perhaps rejecting this interpretation of the paradigmatic silence. Aaron, according to the Rashbam (Leviticus 10:3), is silent because he feels an unbearable gap between his personal emotional grief, which crushes him, and the prohibition to mourn in the

mishkan. The silence serves as a barrier against the inner voice threatening to break out: “And he was silent—although he wanted to mourn and cry.” For the Ramban, the silence is the final chord of a great cry, as the grieving father “wept loudly before becoming silent.” The echoes of sobbing are still heard in the silence. The Abarbanel describes Aaron as turning to stone in his sorrow, frozen, unable to utter a sound: “His heart turned to stone, and he could not raise his voice in crying and lament... for no life remained in him, and he had no strength to speak.”

This year, I propose opening the Simhat Torah hakafot with a hakafah of silence. Let us use it to express justification or protest, shock or weeping, the inability to accept contradictions, or acceptance. We will be torn together between the mishkan’s inauguration and the tragic disaster of Nadav and Avihu, between Simhat Torah and the grief of the massacre, between priesthood and fatherhood. Let us recognize that members of our community have diverse and opposing interpretations of both the ancient and current silence, and we will share a moment of silence together.

Second Hakafah: Healing

The Torah does not tell us what became of the tablets Moses shattered upon descending from Mount Sinai to the sight of the Golden Calf, but Rabbinic literature presents a bold claim: “Which you broke and you shall put them in the Ark’—Rav Yosef recites: This teaches that both the tablets and the broken fragments were placed in the Ark” (Menahot 99a). Not only does the whole and divine find its place in the Ark of the Covenant, but so too does the broken, the partial, the living testimony to spiritual failure—it too has a place in the Ark, which goes out before the people in battle. The Talmud’s human and vivid imagery used to illustrate this idea is that of a scholar “who has forgotten his learning due to circumstances” and is no longer a whole tablet with Torah engraved upon it. Nonetheless, “we do not treat him with disrespect” (see also Berakhot 8b).

On Simhat Torah 5784, the holiday was tainted, and we are left with shattered tablets, shattered prayers. Over the past year, we ourselves have become fragments and parts of a whole, seeking healing. The broken tablets are also an invitation for innovation and creativity in relation to the Torah, which is not sealed and complete but has cracks that invite us in through side entrances. Rav Yosef’s revolutionary statement invites all of us into the sanctuary, to connect and heal, to find our place in the Ark of the Covenant, each according to their strength.

In the second hakafah, we will connect in large, moving circles, standing with hands on each other’s shoulders, singing together songs of unity and elevation, rising up on the wings of spirit; soft, life-affirming songs, full of hope; songs of healing and optimism, untying the bonds of sorrow.

Third Hakafah: Empathy

A fascinating mishnah in Massekhet Middot (2:2) governs behavior on the Temple Mount during the pilgrimage festivals: “All who enter the Temple Mount enter from

the right and circle around, exiting from the left," but there is an exception to this rule: "except for someone to whom something has occurred, who circles to the left." Why create a deliberate obstacle by sending pilgrims to move in the opposite direction of the crowd? The Mishnah, in touching language, explains that the purpose of this reversal is empathy. The leftward circling creates a departure from the norm and the rule in order to make the others pause and inquire about the sorrow of the mourners and the excommunicated (and in a parallel in Semahot 6:11—even the sick and those who have lost something), to console them and pray for them. The words "What has happened to you?" express humanity, attentiveness, concern, and even inclusion of the "temporarily weak" within the community, inviting them to join the celebration and urging the public to learn about their circumstances. The responses of the community are sensitive and comforting, and the responsibility for consolation is placed, in varying degrees, on the mourners and the excommunicated, on God, and on the community, which bears a fraction of their sorrow.

What is the status of a mourning community that cannot exclude itself from the collective, as all together have experienced loss and are in need of consolation? In the third hakafah, we will acknowledge our grief and ask each other: "What has happened to you?" And we will listen to the answer. Notes with names, engaging in pairs, or spontaneous conversations—this will not be just a communal dance or collective prayer, but attentive listening to individuals, empathy, a departure from routine, a leftward hakafah.

Fourth and Fifth Hakafot: Nevertheless, despite everything

In Purim 1940, the Piasezner Rebbe (the "Esh Kodesh") delivered a sermon in the Warsaw Ghetto about joy. He taught that the comparison between Purim and Yom Kippur ("פורים-כ" ("stems from the necessity to force emotion: "Just as on Yom Kippur, fasting and repentance are not something a person chooses to do, but they fulfill them because of God's decree, so too with the joy of Purim—even if a person is in a state of dejection and heartbreak, with mind and body crushed, it is a law that they must bring some spark of joy into their heart." Joy in the Warsaw Ghetto is a difficult image to imagine, and yet, despite everything, the Esh Kodesh demanded that his community rejoice and assured them that the effort will be worthwhile, just as the essence of Yom Kippur atones even for incomplete repentance, so too the essence of Purim acts: "Even though the person was not as joyful as they should have been... nonetheless, the salvation and joy that Purim brings to the people of Israel still works and acts, even now." And if this is true on Purim, how much more so on Simhat Torah.

Let us see in the fourth and fifth hakafot, hakafot of "nevertheless, despite everything," an effort to override emotion, to find great joy, even if it is incomplete, for בא לשמה שאינו מתוך לשמה from "not for its own sake" one will eventually come to "for its own sake."

Sixth Hakafah: Hope

The piyyut "ה' אגא", "which opens each of the Ashkenazi hakafot on Simhat Torah, is an ancient piyyut, possibly originally part of the hoshanot, divided into seven parts. It contains various names for God, arranged alphabetically, as well as repeated pleas for salvation. The recurring expressions are verses from Psalms that call out to God: "עֲהֵשִׁיבָנוּ ה' הַיּוֹם נִשְׁעָרָנוּ...נָא - Please, God, save us now; please, God, bring success now" (Psalm 118:25), with the congregation's response: "Answer us, answer us on the day we call." Psalm 118, which forms a significant part of the Hallel prayer, is a psalm of praise and thanksgiving for victory, but it also contains supplications and requests, a little that holds a lot. In the Mishnah, these pleas are described as accompanying the circling of the altar during Sukkot: "Each day, they would circle the altar once and say: Ana HaShem hoshiyah na, ana HaShem hatzlihah na" (Mishnah Sukkah 4:5). It seems that the uniqueness of these powerful words lies in their perspective on both the present and the future—they seek immediate salvation from distress, but also turn their gaze to tomorrow, hoping for success and prosperity. To God are attributed both the distress and the salvation, and God's outstretched hand is called to save in the future, not just in the current predicament.

In the sixth hakafah, we will sing Psalms of Hallel, which include cries, supplications, and requests for the future; they contain a call to God's strength for salvation, a plea for the raising of the downtrodden from the dust, the breaking of bonds, and an answer from the narrows. I choose to maintain the traditional division of the piyyut into seven and to begin each hakafah with its words. The sixth hakafah will conclude with the Jewish utopian hope: "Next year in rebuilt Jerusalem."

Seventh Hakafah: Incompleteness

In his dispute with the ascetics, who refrained from joy and indulgence after the destruction, R. Yehoshua proposes moving away from sorrow and returning to normalcy and life, even daring to celebrate joyous and significant family moments without feelings of guilt. However, "From all toil there is some gain," (Proverbs 14:23). The festive moments should be celebrated in all their glory, but they should include a minor omission that casts light on the world's lack of completeness due to the destruction. "A person plasters their house with plaster but leaves a small part unfinished... A person prepares all the necessities for a feast but leaves a small part unfinished... A person adorns themselves with all their jewelry but leaves a small part unfinished..." (Bava Batra 60b; and see Tosefta Sotah above). A new house is bought and plastered, but a cubit-by-cubit area remains visible to remind of the past; elaborate meals around significant celebratory events are held with many guests, but a portion is omitted to draw attention to the missing; jewelry is worn with splendor but not in full. A detail of this practice from the amoraic discussion of this tannaitic tradition adds another transformative event: marriage.

The ashes of the Temple's destruction placed on the heads of grooms—or, in our variation: the breaking of the glass at the wedding—also symbolize the memory of loss and the lack of completeness, a touch of sorrow at the height of joy. In this spirit, I suggest forgoing the seventh hakafah, stopping the piyyut before its end, symbolically breaking the completeness, the routine, the typological number, and acknowledging the reality of brokenness.

Yizkor

In Israel, unlike in the Diaspora, Simhat Torah coincides with Shemini Atzeret, the biblical holiday that concludes Sukkot and carries the gravitas of the High Holidays. In the prayer experience, the yearning prayers for rain blend with the joyous hakafot, the holiday blessings envelop the reading of the Torah from Bereishit, the somber Yizkor prayer is woven into the blessings for the hatan and kallat torah, and the melodies of repentance shift into the shouts of dancing. The atmosphere of the day oscillates, intertwining joy and solemnity. In the Israeli experience, each of the two holidays completes and overshadows the other—but, until now, Simhat Torah has taken precedence. Perhaps the time has come to give Shemini Atzeret its due place, to extend the farewell from the Days of Awe a little longer.

The missing hakafah can be completed by advancing the Yizkor prayer to the closing moment of the hakafot. After we have been silent together, healed wounds, shown empathy, rejoiced with a refined joy, and offered supplications, there comes the need to dedicate a moment to remembering faces and names, to pray for the souls of family members, the martyrs of the Shoah, the fallen soldiers of Israel, and the victims of the October 7th massacre; and also to plead for the swift return of the hostages and the displaced to their homes.

I note that this suggestion pertains to Simhat Torah 5785, which bears the burden of the anniversary of the massacre. We must also consider the difference between this upcoming Simhat Torah and the Simhat Torahs of the future, which will grow further away from that day and may carry the weight of remembrance with a different balance, much like the difference between “Pesah in Egypt” and “Pesah for the generations.”

May we merit to celebrate and rejoice together with the hostages, who will return to Zion with joy, and may the words of the Psalms be fulfilled for all of us.

[R. Mishael Zion, Kehillat Klausner, Jerusalem](#) In my childhood, when people would ask, “How were the tefillot on Rosh Hashanah” the traditional response was, “We’ll see how the year turns out, and then we’ll know.” According to this logic, the prayers of Tishrei 5784 were a colossal failure. So, how do we approach this year’s prayers knowing we failed last year?

In normal years, the key to opening the gates of the new year is the prayers of previous years. The knowledge that we can rely on the melodies of previous generations, surrendering ourselves to the familiar tunes on our lips, is what

makes the High Holiday prayers “work” on our souls so effectively. Even for those who don’t particularly enjoy the prayers of the High Holidays or the dancing of Simhat Torah, there is a word or a note that unlocks the rusty lock on the heart, breaking down the wall between us and our Father in Heaven, even for just a moment. In times of spiritual slumber, the nusah of the hazzan and the melody of the paytan (poet) awaken us from our sleep. In times of confusion and disorientation, the holiday prayer traditions provide an anchor. And when the melody returns once again, the gates of heartfelt prayer open, and with them, the gates of the new year. This is the contract between us and the prayer cycle of the High Holidays.

But not this year. The silence that was shattered at 6:29 AM on Simhat Torah 5784, at the height of 21 intense days of Jewish prayer, constitutes a breach in the covenant between the Jewish people and its prayers. Perhaps the events of Yom Kippur 5784 in Tel Aviv should have been a sign for us. Even after them, it was difficult to return and lean on prayer.

Out of this confusion, prayer leaders, hazzanim, gabbaim, and rabbis approach the prayers of Tishrei 5785—with a trembling and awe like never before. And from the confusion and frustration, we must find a way to creativity and renewal.

Fortunately, Simhat Torah already contains within it the lessons of creativity in times of crisis. In 1942, during the height of the destruction of European Jewry, R. Yitzhak Yedidya Frankel instituted that, in place of the hakafot that were not taking place in Poland and Germany, they would hold hakafot in Tel Aviv. Last year in 2023 (5784), some synagogues managed to hold hakafot on Simhat Torah, but there were no hakafot shniyyot anywhere. So, what shall we do and innovate this Simhat Torah?

Before we embark on this journey, some things are already clear: Simhat Torah will never be the same. And yet: we will continue to dance, and we will continue to rejoice with the Torah. But nothing will be taken for granted anymore. Just as there is no Yom Kippur without the memory of the war, just as there is no Tisha B’Av without remembering the expulsion from Spain and the deportations from the ghettos, a new layer of Jewish memory has been added to the story of the holiday. And especially this year, if there is joy on Simhat Torah, it will be joy that emerges from sorrow and mourning. Shemini Atzeret, which the midrash tells us is entirely based on God’s desire for “one more day of intimacy” with the Jewish people, is no longer a day of peak closeness and love. It is a wounded day, and any joy that occurs on it must be built from within that wound.

In the following, I would like to outline three paths for the hakafot of Simhat Torah. They differ from the “obvious” customs of Simhat Torah in our communities, but their logic lies beneath the surface of the familiar traditions. Each proposal is tied to a well-known verse from Simhat Torah, a verse that, when revisited through the new eyes we received in 5784, helps us draw renewed strength from it. [“אלוקי”](#)

“הושיעה נא!” – הרוחות “God of the Spirits—save us!”: [Hakafot as a plea for this world](#)

In the synagogue of my childhood, as in the synagogue where I now raise my children, Simhat Torah is a day of tremendous joy and dancing in the sacred space of the synagogue, in the presence and honor of the holy Torah. Yet the words of the hakafot were often at odds with the joyous melodies sung afterward. A renewed listening to the ancient words of the piyut, introduced in the Mahzor Vitry in the Middle Ages, clarifies that what should be sung here are not songs of levity and joy, but cries of request and plea: “God of the spirits—save us!” or “Living and eternal, grant success!” or “Strong Redeemer, answer us on the day we call!” The hakafot of Simhat Torah are the eighth circle, overlapping with the seven circles of the hoshanot recited throughout Sukkot, during which we are judged for water. The wilting willow branches on the ark join the cry spoken in the presence of the Torah scrolls, taken out in a ceremony with elements of the public fast prayer: all the Torah scrolls are brought into the town square, and the people cry together: “Save us now!”

The plea for physical water becomes a plea for the waters of Torah, that they come and renew us, that they bring us comfort, that they open new gates of understanding, and from them new paths to fulfilling its commandments in this world. This is an invitation to perform the hakafot of Simhat Torah as a plea for this world, hakafot that aim to build the strength, resilience, faith, and joy—both personal and communal—that we will need in the coming year, as expressed in the prayer for rain: “for blessing and not for a curse, for life and not for death, for plenty and not for famine.”

“לולי תורתך שעשועי” “Had Your Torah Not Been My Delight”: [Hakafot as a Joy Beyond This World](#)

There is no ordinary joy on Simhat Torah this year. How can we sing and dance when families around us have lost their loved ones, children have been uprooted from their homes, and family members are worried about their soldiers? But this year is an invitation to a joy not from this world but rather an invitation to a joy from Sinai. It is said of R. Eliezer and R. Yehoshua that when they were learning and connecting Torah to Prophets and Prophets to Writings, the fire surrounded and enveloped them, and the words were as joyful as they were at Sinai. In the simple and sincere dance of communities on Simhat Torah, one can sometimes feel this fire. On Shavuot, we reignite the fire of Torah through study; on Simhat Torah, we rejoice in the very existence of the Torah, even without opening it, and the words are as joyful as they were at Sinai. Our dancing on Simhat Torah is a reenactment of the joy of the giving of the Torah itself at Sinai. This is joy that does not stem from the state of this world but from the knowledge that we have been given an anchor beyond this world, and it is our task to draw it into our world. The Torah has sustained us, the Jewish people, even when history slapped us in the face

repeatedly. Sometimes these slaps were due to our sins, and sometimes through no fault of our own, but we are always returned to hold on to the Torah, to find joy in it. This is the joy we must seek in the Torah this year.

[\(ולבנותיך\) \("Live to See Your Children's Children": Hakafot as education for the love of Torah for the next generation\)](#)

Who, after all, truly rejoices on Simhat Torah, many will ask? Isn't this the perfect opportunity to return to the critique of Western European communities in the 19th century, who cried out against the dancing customs of Simhat Torah when they first arrived from Poland? How many members of the community mutter that out of all the holidays, they would happily skip Simhat Torah? Isn't this the year to cancel the hakafot altogether? In a conversation we had in our community in preparation for the holidays, one of the gabbaiot said: "I don't want to dance on Simhat Torah, but for our children, we must do it. This year, we have already worn costumes on Purim, sung on Hanukkah, and danced on Yom Ha'Atzma'ut for the children—all the more so on Simhat Torah," she declared. Indeed, the logic behind many customs of Simhat Torah is rooted in the desire to instill a love of Torah in the children. Whether through the hakafot, the silliness of the dance, the endless distribution of candies, or the custom of having children read the Torah, we go out of our way to educate the next generation to love the Torah.

For the older generation, the hakafot this year are less about them. Those whose hearts do not allow their feet to dance would do well to leave to study Torah or recite Psalms in another room. This year, more than any other, the hakafot are for the next generation. Perhaps the elders will join in the final hakafah, singing slowly and gradually strengthening the chorus of "[May the Lord bless you from Zion; may you share the prosperity of Jerusalem all the days of your life, and live to see your children's children. May all be well with Israel!](#)"

In response to our confusion about Simhat Torah 5785, a worthy and fruitful confusion, I have suggested finding within the words of the piyyutim and verses of Simhat Torah, which have always been on our lips.