



Starting Over

The completion of any significant portion of Torah learning is always an occasion for celebration. Any *siyum* (completion of a tractate of Talmud or Mishna) is usually accompanied by a festive meal to commemorate the happy event. There is a great sense of satisfaction and accomplishment at having seen a difficult intellectual and time-consuming task to its successful conclusion.

Therefore, it is naturally understandable that the occasion of our completing the annual cycle of Torah readings with the reading of *Vezot HaBracha* on the final day of Sukkot makes it the most joyful day of the entire magnificent holiday season. Simchat Torah affirms our faith in Jewish continuity and our unshakable belief in the Divinity of the Torah Moshe brought down to Israel from Mount Sinai.

It is the holiday basically created by the Jewish people itself, replete with customs and nuances developed over the ages that have hardened into accepted practice and ritual. Here in Israel, where Simchat Torah and Shemini Atzeret occur on the same day, Simchat Torah, the folk holiday, has almost pushed Shemini Atzeret, the Biblical and *halachic* holiday, aside in thought and practice.

This is a practical example of how sometimes Jewish custom based upon intense love of and attachment to Torah overwhelms the Torah ritual itself. What makes Simchat Torah so special is the fact we begin to read immediately from the beginning of the Torah again, symbolizing no gaps in our study or our devotion to it. This is usually the case

with all *siyum* ceremonies, in which the completion of one tractate immediately leads to the beginning of the study of another one.



However, despite the elation, the Torah ends on an apparently sad note, poignantly describing the death of our great teacher Moshe. He will never enter the Land of Israel but will only be able to glimpse it from afar. The generation he shepherded for 40 years has passed away, his sons will not inherit his position or power, and with his great gift of prophecy, he is aware of the terrible problems his beloved people of Israel must yet face and overcome through their long journey of history and destiny.

Nevertheless, the joy of the presence of the Torah within our nation overcomes these feelings of melancholy. As long

as Moshe's words and ideals still live amongst the Jewish people there is great reason to rejoice. It means we have not lost our way and the eternity of Moshe and Israel is guaranteed. The nations of the world resent the fact we still have a chance to rejoice or attempt to live normal productive lives under terrible duress and distress.

Simchat Torah comes to teach us that we should rejoice when we are able to do so and celebrate our existence and accomplishments even if things are not exactly as we would wish them to be. Completing the Torah reading is a matter of perseverance, as is all of Jewish life.

The Torah's description of Moshe's death is meant to impress us with the fact that Judaism is not the cult of the personality. Even when Moshe, the greatest ever Jew ever, dies and leaves us bereft and alone, we are not to overly mourn and certainly not to despair.

We may yet continue to rejoice because the eternal Torah is still present within us with great vigor and vitality. As far as we are concerned, the game is never over. We suffer and fall but we are never defeated. That is the power the Torah grants us. It is the source of our great joy in celebrating the completion and simultaneous beginning of the reading of the Torah this year. So be it for all of the years yet to come.

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