

Simchat Torah



Immediately following Sukkot, we celebrate Simchat Torah, a fun-filled day during which we celebrate the completion of the annual reading of the Torah and affirm Torah as one of the pillars on which we build our lives. The symbolic message of the customs associated with Simchat Torah emphasize that the Torah is the prized possession of the Jewish people, representing our heritage and history, and linking Jews to each other over many generations. The words recited at the end of each book of the Torah inspire and represent this history: *Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazeik*. "Be strong, be strong, and we will strengthen each other," building a living Judaism through study, action, and commitment.



As part of the celebration, the Torah scrolls are taken from the ark and carried or danced around the synagogue seven times by the congregants. During these seven circuits or *hakafot* those not carrying a torah will wave brightly colored flags and sing Hebrew songs. The *hakafot* are accompanied by singing and dancing and flag waving, all which symbolize the collective joy of Torah study and a lifelong

commitment to Jewish learning. As part of the Torah service, the concluding section of the fifth book of the Torah, *D'varim* (Deuteronomy), is read, and immediately following, the opening section of Genesis, (or *B'reishit* as it is called in Hebrew), is read. This practice represents the cyclical nature of the relationship between the Jewish people and the reading of the Torah. The Torah service is the focal point of the Simchat Torah celebration. The rabbi, cantor, or a member of the congregation opens the Torah and reads the last section of the fifth and final book of the Torah, *D'varim* (Deuteronomy). A second person then opens another Torah scroll and reads the opening section of the first book of the Torah, *B'reishit* (Genesis). The selection from *D'varim* tells of the death and legacy of Moses, the prophet and leader of the Jewish people. The reading from *B'reishit*, the very first words of the Torah, recounts the story of God's creation of the world.



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In many synagogues on Simchat Torah, each member of the congregation is called to the Torah for an *aliyah* (going up, which refers to the honor of ascending the *bimah* to recite the blessing before and after the Torah is read). Other synagogues may call all children who have not yet reached the age of bar or bat mitzvah to the Torah. Before the entire congregation, with a *tallit* (prayer shawl) spread above their heads, the children receive a special blessing from the rabbi. In Reform synagogues, Simchat Torah also is a time when children just entering religious school are blessed. This custom is called consecration.