

# CEREMONY & CELEBRATION

FAMILY EDITION

WITH RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS



**SHEMINI ATZERET & SIMCHAT TORAH 5781**

## Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah in a Nutshell

**SHEMINI ATZERET** is a strange day in the Jewish calendar. It is described as the eighth day, and thus part of Succot, but it is also designated by a name of its own, Atzeret. Is it, or is it not, a separate festival in its own right? It seems to be both. How are we to understand this?

What guided the Sages was the detail that whereas on the seven days of Succot seventy young bulls were offered in the Temple, on Atzeret, the eighth day, there was only one. Connecting this to Zechariah's prophecy that in the Messianic time all nations would celebrate Succot, they concluded that the seventy sacrifices of Succot represented the seventy nations of the world as described in Chapter 10 of Bereishit. Even though Zechariah's vision had not yet been realised, it was as if all humanity were in some sense present in Jerusalem on the festival, and sacrifices were made on their behalf. On the eighth day, as they were leaving, God was inviting the Jewish people to a small private reception. The word *Atzeret* itself was interpreted to mean, "Stop, stay a while." Shemini Atzeret was private time between God and His people. It was a day of particularity (between God and His people) after the universality of the seven days of Succot (a festival for all the nations, at least in Messianic times).

In February 1997, then-President of the State of Israel, Ezer Weizman, paid the first, and thus far the only, state visit to Britain as the guest of Her Majesty the Queen. The custom is that on the first night of such a visit the Queen hosts a state banquet at Buckingham Palace. It was, for the Jews present, a unique and moving moment to hear *Hatikvah* played in the banqueting hall of the Palace, and to hear the Queen propose a toast to the President with the word *lechayim*.

There is a protocol for such visits. Present are many representative figures, ambassadors, members of the Government and other

members of the Royal Family. At the end of the evening, after most of the guests have taken their leave, there is a small and intimate gathering of just a few individuals – on that occasion the Queen, Prince Philip, the Queen Mother, the Prime Minister and a few others – for a more relaxed and personal conversation with the guest of honour. It was this kind of occasion, with its Royal protocol, that best illustrates how the Sages understood Shemini Atzeret.

**SIMCHAT TORAH** (celebrated the day after Shemini Atzeret in the Diaspora, and combined into one day in Israel as there is only one day of Yom Tov) is unique among festivals. It is not mentioned in the Torah, nor in the Talmud. Unlike Purim and Chanukah, it was not formalised by any decision on the part of the religious authorities, nor does it commemorate any historical deliverance. It grew from the grassroots, slowly developing over time.

It was born in Babylon, probably at the end of the period of the *Amora'im*, the rabbis of the Talmud, in the fifth or sixth century. The Babylonian custom – now universal – was to divide the Torah into fifty-four portions to be read in the course of a year (in Israel there was a three- or three-and-a-half-year cycle). On the second day of Shemini Atzeret in Babylon (there was no second day in Israel), the custom was to read the last portion of the Torah, in which Moshe blessed the nation at the end of his life.

It had long been the custom to make a celebration on completing a section of study, a Talmudic tractate, or an order of the Mishnah (Shabbat 118b). Thus, the custom evolved to make a celebration at the completion of the Mosaic books, and it was considered a great honour to be called to the Torah for this last portion. The celebration became known as Simchat Torah.



## Points to Ponder

- 1 What themes of Succot are universal and relevant to all of humanity?
- 2 Does Shemini Atzeret mean that God loves the Jewish people more than His other creations?
- 3 Do you think that the source of Simchat Torah (not the Torah, or the Talmud, but the people) makes it less or more meaningful as a *chag*?

# What Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah Teach Us Today

## SHEMINI ATZERET

**SUCCOT REPRESENTS** more clearly than any other festival the dualities of Judaism. The Four Species (lulav, etrog, hadassim and aravot) are a symbol of the land of Israel, while the succah reminds us of exile. The Four Species are a ritual of rain, while eating in the succah depends on the absence of rain. Above all, though, there is the tension between the universality of nature and the particularity of history. There is an aspect of Succot – rainfall, harvest, climate – to which everyone can relate, but there is another – the long journey through the wilderness – that speaks to the unique experience of the Jewish people.

This tension between the universal and the particular is unique to Judaism. The God of Israel is the God of all humanity, but the religion of Israel is not the religion of all humanity. It is conspicuous that while the other two Abrahamic monotheisms, Christianity and Islam, borrowed much from Judaism, they did not borrow this. They became universalist faiths, believing that everyone ought to embrace the one true religion, their own, and that those who do not are denied the blessings of eternity.

Judaism disagrees. For this it was derided for many centuries, and to some degree it still is today. Why, if it represents religious truth, is it not to be shared with everyone? If there is only one God, why is there not only one way to salvation? There is no doubt that if Judaism had become an evangelising, conversion-driven religion – as it would have had to, had it believed in universalism – there would be many more Jews than there are today. As I write, there are an estimated 2.3 billion Christians, 1.8 billion Muslims and only 14 million Jews. The disparity is vast.

Judaism is the road less travelled, because it represents a complex truth that could not be expressed in any other way. The Torah tells a simple story. God gave humans the gift of freedom, which they then used not to enhance creation but to endanger it. Adam and Chavah broke the first prohibition. Cain, the first human child, became the first murderer. Within a remarkably short space of time, all flesh had corrupted its way on earth, the world was filled with violence, and only one man, Noach, found favour in God's eyes. After the Flood, God made a



covenant with Noach, and through him with all humanity, but after the hubris of the builders of the Tower of Babel, God chose another way. Having established

a basic threshold in the form of the Noachide Laws, He then chose one man, one family, and eventually one nation, to become a living example of what it is to exist closely and continuously in the presence of God. There are, in the affairs of humankind, universal laws and specific examples. The Noachide covenant constitutes the universal laws. The way of life of Avraham and his descendants is the example.

**REFLECT:** If the national mission of the Jewish people is to model the universal values of the Torah, are we doing a good job?

**WHAT THIS MEANS** in Judaism is that the righteous of all the nations have a share in the World to Come (Sanhedrin 105a). In contemporary terms it means that our common humanity precedes our religious differences. It also means that by creating all humans in His image, God set us the challenge of seeing His image in one who is not in our image: whose colour, culture, class and creed are different from our own. The ultimate spiritual challenge is to see the trace of God in the face of a stranger.

Zechariah, in the vision we read as the Haftarah for the first day of Succot, puts this precisely. He says that in the End of Days, "The Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One and His name One" (Zechariah 14:9), meaning that all the nations will recognise the sovereignty of a single transcendent God. Yet at the same time, Zechariah envisages the nations participating only in Succot, the most universal of the festivals, and the one in which they have the greatest interest since they all need rain. He does not envisage them



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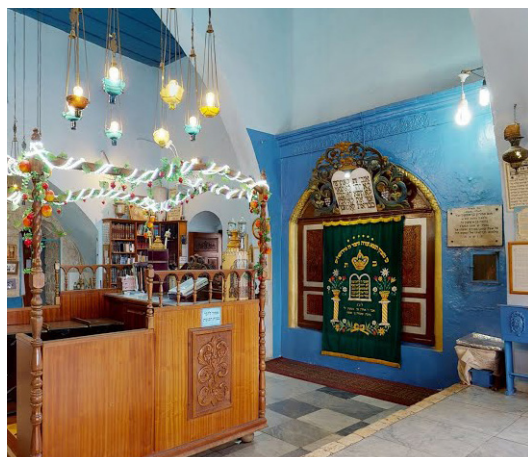
Adapted from the introduction to the *Koren Succot Machzor* with commentary and translation by Rabbi Sacks

becoming Jews, accepting the “yoke of the commands”, all 613 of them. He does not speak of their conversion. The practical outcome of this dual theology – the universality of God and the particularity of Torah – is that we are commanded to be true to our faith, and a blessing to others, regardless of their faith. That is the Jewish way.

Shemini Atzeret reminds us of the intimacy Jews have always felt in the presence of God. The cathedrals of Europe convey a sense of the vastness of God and the smallness of humankind. The small shuls of Tzfat, where the Arizal and Rabbi Yosef Caro prayed, convey a sense of the closeness of God and the greatness of humankind. Jews, except when they sought to imitate other nations, did not build cathedrals. Even the Temple reached its greatest architectural grandeur under Herod, a man better known for his political ruthlessness than his spiritual sensibilities.

So, when all the universality of Judaism has been expressed, there remains something that cannot be universalised: that sense of intimacy with, and closeness to, God that we feel on Shemini Atzeret, when all the other guests have left. Shemini Atzeret is chamber music, not a symphony. It is quiet time with God. We are reluctant to leave, and we dare to think that He is reluctant to see us go. Justice is universal, love is particular. There are some things we share because we are human. But there are other things, constitutive of our identity, that are uniquely ours – most importantly our relationships to those who form our family. On Succot we are among strangers and friends. On Shemini Atzeret we are with family.

... **REFLECT:** What makes all of humanity the same? What makes Jews different?



The Yosef Caro shul in Tzfat

## SIMCHAT TORAH

**THE EMERGENCE OF** Simchat Torah signals something remarkable. You may have noticed that Succot and Shemini Atzeret are both described as *zeman simchateinu*, the season of our joy. The nature of that joy was clear and signalled in different ways both by the succah and by the Four Species. The succah reminded the people how blessed they were to be living in Israel when they recalled how their ancestors had to live for forty years without a land or a permanent home. The lulav, etrog, hadasim and aravot were a vivid demonstration of the fruitfulness of the land under the divine blessing of rain. The joy of Succot was the joy of living in the Promised Land.

But by the time Simchat Torah had spread throughout the Jewish world, Jews had lost virtually everything: their land, their home, their freedom and independence, the Temple, the priesthood, the sacrificial order – all that had once been their source of joy. A single devastating sentence in one of the *piyutim* of Ne’ilah (at the close of Yom Kippur), summed up their situation: *Ein shiur rak haTorah hazot*, “Nothing remains but this Torah.” All that remained was a book.

... **REFLECT:** How could we find joy if we had lost everything as a people?

**SA’ADIA GAON**, writing in the tenth century, asked a simple question. In virtue of what was the Jewish people still a nation? It had none of the normal preconditions of a nation. Jews were scattered throughout the world. They did not live in the same territory. They were not part of a single economic or political order. They did not share the same culture. They did not speak the same language. Rashi spoke French, Rambam Arabic. Yet they were, and were seen to be, one nation, bound by a bond of collective destiny and responsibility. Hence Sa’adia concluded: Our people is a people only in virtue of our Torah (*Beliefs and Opinions*, 3). In the lovely rabbinic phrase about the Ark which contained the tablets, “It carried those who carried it” (Sotah 35a). More than the Jewish people preserved the Torah, the Torah preserved the Jewish people.

It was, as we say in our prayers, “our life and the length of our days”. It was the legacy of their past and the promise of their future. It was their

*Shemini Atzeret reminds us of the intimacy Jews have always felt in the presence of God.*



marriage contract with God, the record of the covenant that bound them unbreakably together. They had lost their world but they still had God's word, and it was enough.

More than enough. On Simchat Torah, without being commanded by any verse in the Torah or any decree of the rabbis, Jews throughout the world sang and danced and recited poems in honour of the Torah, exactly as if they were dancing in the courtyard of the Temple at the *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah*, or as if they were King David bringing the Ark to Jerusalem. They were determined to show God, and the world, that they could still be *ach same'ach*, as the Torah said about Succot: wholly, totally, given over to joy. It would be hard to find a parallel in the entire history of the human spirit of a people capable of such joy at a time when they were being massacred in the name of the God of love and compassion.

A people that can walk through the valley of the shadow of death and still rejoice is a people that cannot be defeated by any force or any fear.

Rambam writes (Laws of Shofar 8:15) that to experience joy in the fulfillment of a *mitzvah* out of the love of God is to touch the spiritual heights. Whoever stands on their dignity and regards such things as beneath them is, he says, a sinner and a fool, and whoever abandons their dignity for the sake of joy is thereby elevated "because there is no greatness or honor higher than celebrating before God."

Simchat Torah was born when Jews had lost everything else, but they never lost their capacity to rejoice. Nechemiah was right when he said to the people weeping as they listened to the Torah, realising how far they had drifted from it: "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Nechemiah 8:10). A people whose capacity for joy cannot be destroyed is itself indestructible.

**REFLECT:** How will you continue to find joy this Simchat Torah when the usual celebrations will likely be curtailed due to the pandemic?

*Simchat Torah was born when Jews had lost everything else, but they never lost their capacity to rejoice.*



Illustration courtesy of Chabad.org

## Deep Diving into the Tefillah of the Day: The Hakafot of Simchat Torah

Tefillah text and commentary taken from the Koren Sacks Succot Machzor

### סדר הקפות

אתה הראת לדעת, כי ה' הוא האלקים, אין עוד מלבדו:  
לעשה נפלאות גדולות לבדו, כי לעולם חסדו:  
אין כמותך באלקים, ה', ואין כמעשיך:  
יהי כבוד ה' לעולם, ישמח ה' במעשיו:  
יהי שם ה' מברך, מעתה ועד-עולם:  
יהי ה' אלקינו עמנו, כאשר היה עם-אבותינו  
אל-יעזבנו ואל-יטשנו:  
ואמרו, הושיענו אלקי ישענו, וקבצנו והצילנו מן-הגוים  
להדות לשם קדשך, להשתבח בתהלכתך:  
ה' מלך, ה' מלך, ה' ימלך לעולם ועד.  
ה' עז לעמו יתן, ה' יברך את-עמו בשלום:  
ויהיו נא אמרינו לרצון, לפני אדון כל.  
ויהי בנסע הארץ ויאמר משה  
קומה ה' ופצו איביך, וינסו משנאיך מפניך:  
קומה ה' למנוחתך, אתה ואדון עונך:  
בהניך ילבוש-צדק, וחסדיך ירננו:  
בעבור דוד עבדך, אל-תשב פני משחתך:  
ואמר ביום ההוא, הנה אלקינו זה קוינו לו, ויושיענו  
זה ה' קוינו לו, נגילה ונשמחה בישועתו:  
מלכותך מלכות כל-עלמים, וממשלתך בכל-דור ודור:  
כי מציון תצא תורה, ודבר-ה' מירושלם:  
אב רחמים, היטיבה ברצונך את-ציון, תבנה חומות ירושלם:  
כי בך לבד בטחנו, מלך קל רם ונשא, אדון עולמים.

### HAKAFOT

אתה הראת [these things] so that you  
may know that the LORD is God; besides Him there is no  
other.  
To the One who alone does great wonders, His loving-  
kindness is forever.  
There is none like You among the heavenly powers, my LORD,  
and there are no works like Yours.  
May the LORD's glory be forever; may the LORD rejoice in His  
works.  
May the LORD's name be blessed from now and forever.  
May the LORD our God be with us as He was with our  
ancestors;  
may He never leave us or forsake us.  
Say, "Save us, God our Saviour;  
gather and deliver us from the nations,  
that we may give thanks to Your holy name,  
that we may glory in Your praise."  
The LORD is King, the LORD was King,  
the LORD will be King for ever and all time.  
The LORD will give strength to His people;  
the LORD will bless His people with peace.  
May our words find favour before the LORD of all.  
Whenever the Ark set out, Moses would say,  
"Arise, LORD, and may Your enemies be scattered;  
may those who hate You flee before You."  
Advance, LORD, to Your resting place, You and Your mighty  
Ark.  
Your priests are clothed in righteousness,  
and Your devoted ones sing for joy.  
For the sake of Your servant David,  
do not reject Your anointed one.  
In that day they will say,  
"This is our God; we trusted in Him, and He saved us. This  
is the LORD, we trusted in Him; let us rejoice and be glad in  
His salvation."  
Your kingdom is an eternal kingdom,  
and Your dominion is for all generations.  
For the Torah shall come forth from Zion  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.  
Father of compassion, favour Zion with Your goodness;  
rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.  
For we trust in You alone, King, God, high and exalted, Master of  
worlds.



## Background to the Tefillah

**SIMCHAT TORAH** as the name of the ninth day of Succot, roughly dates back to Babylon in the eighth century. It began as the convergence of two distinct customs. The first was the Torah reading of the day, namely the passage at the end of the Torah in which Moshe blesses the tribes (“This is the blessing”, Devarim 33:1). The other was the long-established custom of making a festivity at the conclusion of the study of a text – an order of the Mishnah, for example, or the conclusion of a Talmudic tractate (Shabbat 118b).



The day on which the Torah readings were completed was already known as Simchat Torah by around the eighth century, and other customs rapidly followed. One was the practice of beginning the Torah anew immediately after the completion, so that the charge could never be levelled against the Jewish people that having reached the end of the Torah, they stopped, or even paused. Hence the reading of the beginning of Bereishit immediately after the conclusion of Devarim. The two honours of being

called to read out the ending and the beginning were greatly prized, and soon became known by the name of *Chatan*, Bridegroom – *Chatan Torah* for the former, *Chatan Bereishit* for the latter. By the eleventh century the custom had already been established in many communities to call up every adult male to the Torah on the day. Shortly thereafter, we developed the custom of collectively calling up *kol hane'arim*, “all the children.” The practice of *Hakafot*, walking around the *bimah* seven times in procession holding the Torah scrolls, as was done with the Four Species on Hoshana Raba, came later, originating in the mystical circle around Rabbi Yitzchak Luria in Tzfat in the late sixteenth century, at roughly the same time and in the same place that the service known as Kabbalat Shabbat was born.

### Analysis

Simchat Torah is one of the profoundest expressions of the Jewish spirit. The other festivals were either ordained by the Torah or, in the case of Purim and Chanukah, formally instituted to recall an event where the Jewish people were saved. Simchat Torah, by contrast, emerged through a series of customs that rapidly spread throughout the Jewish world. It is what the mystics called *itaruta deletata*, an “awakening from below” – an initiative that emerged from the Jewish people itself. Through it, we recapture some of the joy and exuberance that marked the *Simchat Beit HaSho'evah* celebrations in Jerusalem in Temple times. More than that: we turn the day into a wedding, in which the Jewish people is the groom, and the Torah the bride. As the rabbis said, re-interpreting the verse, “Moshe commanded us the Torah as the heritage of the congregation of Ya'akov” – Read not “heritage” [*morashah*] but “betrothed” [*me'orata*] (Devarim 33:4, Brachot 57a). Never has a book been loved more.

The custom of reciting a long sequence of verses prior to taking out the Torah scrolls (beginning with *Atah Hareita* / *You have been shown*) from the ark is first mentioned in the *Machzor Vitry*, a work emanating from the school of Rashi in eleventh century France. This *tefillah* includes not only the verses usually said on Shabbat or festivals on taking out the scrolls, but also others added in honour of the occasion.



### Points to Ponder

1 Why is it important to celebrate the completion of a unit of study?

2 Why is it important to immediately begin the Torah cycle again?

3 Why do you think Simchat Torah became so important for the people after the destruction of the Temple, during their exile from the land of Israel?

## Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah for the Young (and Young at Heart!)



### Top Ten Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah Facts

1. Shemini Atzeret means “The Assembly of the Eighth Day”.
2. There is a difference of opinion in the Talmud whether Shemini Atzeret is the eighth day of Succot, or an independent festival of its own.
3. Some Jews in the Diaspora eat in the succah on Shemini Atzeret, but do not make the “*ley-shev ba’succah*” brachah.
4. In Israel, Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah are celebrated on the same day.
5. We begin praying for rain on Shemini Atzeret with the special *Tefillat Geshem* (Prayer for Rain) said during Musaf. This is reflected in the addition of the line *mashiv haruach u’morid hagashem* (He makes the wind blow and the rain fall) in our private Amidah on weekdays, from Shemini Atzeret until Pesach.
6. The *chazzan* who leads the *Geshem* prayer wears a white *kittel* just like on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, because we pray for a favourable judgement for the world’s rain in the coming year.
7. Some communities have the custom to read from the Torah on Simchat Torah night. This is the only time in the year when the Torah is read publicly at night.
8. On Simchat Torah we dance around the shul *bimah* seven times, carrying the Torah scrolls as we go. These circuits are called *Hakafot*.
9. Many communities give every person an *aliyah leTorah* (calling them to the reading of the Torah) which means the last part of the Torah is read many times over.
10. It is a special honour to be chosen to be the *Chatan Torah* who completes the year’s cycle, and to be chosen as the *Chatan Bereishit*, the first person called for the new cycle.

### It Once Happened...

**TWO BROTHERS** who were both famous Chassidic Rebbes, Reb Elimelech of Lizhensk and Reb Zusha of Anipoli, were once arrested on false charges.

As the guard threw them into the cramped cell, already full of criminals and thugs, he pointed to a bucket in the corner and laughed as he told them this was their toilet.

Reb Zusha broke down and flung himself at the door of the cell weeping.

Reb Elimelech was taken aback. This was not like Zusha, who had pure faith that everything God did was for the good.

“Zusha, pull yourself together!” Elimelech cried at his brother.



“This is a *Chillul Hashem* (a desecration of God’s name); everyone thinks you have lost faith and hope!” Reb Zusha turned to his brother and asked him tearfully, “How can you not cry? We are stuck here in this cell with this bucket, and because of it, the *halachah* is that we cannot study Torah or *daven*, or even think about Torah. What are we going to do? How can we live without any Torah, *mitzvot*, or prayers?”

Reb Elimelech thought deeply about the situation and then he jumped up in joy. He explained excitedly to his brother that by not learning or davening, they were actually keeping the *halachah* to the letter of the law!

So in fact all of their non-learning and non-davening was serving God in the most challenging way for them. “It’s incredible”, he said. “Every second that we are here, we do a *mitzvah* by not studying Torah. When else will we ever have such a holy opportunity to serve God by not serving Him?”

Reb Zusha’s face lit up, and he began to smile, and then laugh, and then dance. He picked up

the bucket and began to dance with it, elevating it above his head as if it were a Sefer Torah on Simchat Torah! “How fortunate are we that we get a *mitzvah* with this! How incredible is God that He gave us such a commandment!”

When their cellmates saw this bizarre behaviour, they thought the brothers had lost their minds. But one of them suggested that the rabbis were praying to their God for a miracle to set them free, and before long they had all joined in, making circuits around the cell dancing with the bucket.

When the guard heard all the commotion and saw what was going on, he soon put an end to it by confiscating the bucket. “From now on, anyone who needs to will use the facilities outside the cell!” he barked at them.

The cellmates collapsed in disappointment, but the brothers continued to dance, this time reciting at the top of their voices words from their holy Torah with pure joy: “*Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokeinu, Hashem Echad*” for now they were permitted to learn the sweet words of their beloved holy Torah once again!

## Points to Ponder

**1** Why was the absence of learning Torah and praying something to celebrate?

**2** Can this be compared to our experience this year where we are limited in how we might celebrate the *chaggim*?

**3** The brothers connected in love to the Torah despite extreme restrictions. How can we connect this year, and make our *chag* meaningful, since we cannot celebrate Simchat Torah in the usual way?

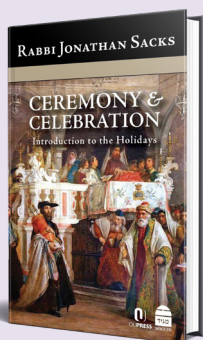
## Chidon on the Chag (A Quick Quiz)

1. What is the date of Shemini Atzeret?
2. What do the words “Shemini Atzeret” mean?
3. Is Shemini Atzeret part of the festival of Succot or a separate festival of its own?
4. Do we shake the Arba Minim on Shemini Atzeret?
5. How many *hakafot* are there on Simchat Torah?
6. Who traditionally is asked to take the Sifrei Torah out of the ark for the first *hakafah*?
7. Who gets called to the Torah for the *Kol Hane’arim aliyah*?
8. After everyone has been called to the Torah on Simchat Torah, how many Sifrei Torah are removed again and read from (and what is read from each of them)?
9. What is the title given to the last person called to the Torah before we complete the cycle of its reading and the title of the first person called to the Torah for the new cycle?
10. What is the connection between sweets and Simchat Torah?

Together with Elaine, I wish you and your families a wonderful Shemini Atzeret and Simchat Torah. Chag sameach!

Jonathan Sacks

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## Educational Companion to the Questions

### SHEMINI ATZERET & SIMCHAT TORAH IN A NUTSHELL

1. Succot has become known as the universal festival because the cumulative number of sacrifices brought on the seven days of Succot was seventy young bulls, and these could be said to represent the seventy nations of the world. Moreover, there are additional themes found in Succot that are universal and connected to all of humanity. These include the fragility of human life and our need for God's protection, the importance of water in our lives, and our general connection to nature. See *Ceremony & Celebration: Family Edition* for Succot for more on this.
2. God's intimate relationship with the Jewish people (as embodied in the festival of Shemini Atzeret) does not mean He does not have intimate relationships with other nations. This is not a necessary interpretation of the term "Chosen People" (which can just as easily be interpreted as a calling to a national mission or understanding of our relationship with God). Judaism's approach to the particular relationship between God and the Jewish people is a model for all other national relationships with God (in a universal context).
3. It could be argued that as Simchat Torah is not a biblical festival (such as Succot) and is not a rabbinically-instituted festival commemorating a historical event (such as Chanukah or Purim), it therefore has less significance and meaning. However, it developed over time as an expression of the people's love of Torah and of the *mitzvah* of learning Torah, and this gives the festival deep significance and importance.

### DEEP DIVING INTO THE TEFILLAH OF THE DAY

1. Completing a unit of study gives us a sense of accomplishment and encourages us to continue on to future achievements. Celebrating this completion expresses the value we find in what we have learned, and the hope that we will return to it again in the future.
2. It is important to avoid 'resting on our laurels' and taking a break from the important acts of study and spiritual growth. So we begin the new cycle immediately, continuing our journey of intellectual and spiritual development. This is also an important statement that we do not believe we have learnt everything there is to learn, and instead we are eager to revisit the Torah with a new perspective, in the hope of finding new insights.
3. After the destruction of the Temple and the exile and dispersion from the land of Israel, Judaism, which was previously a centralised Temple-focused system of worship, had to make a paradigm shift in order to survive and thrive in exile. Learning Torah itself, which could be taken with us wherever we found ourselves, and which united the dispersed and fractured Jewish people, became critical to Jewish survival and for the survival

of Judaism. For this reason, Simchat Torah, as a celebration of the Torah and the *mitzvah* of learning Torah, became hugely important to the Jewish people.

### IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. For these two Chassidic masters, the chance to serve God in any possible way was their first priority. In this case, they could serve God by refraining from learning Torah and praying, because the *halachah* forbids this in the presence of a toilet. They were happy that by abstaining from doing these *mitzvot* they were, in fact, following a *halachah* and therefore serving God.
2. This year many people will not be able to celebrate the *chaggim* in their synagogues as they normally would. Even if the local laws allow communal worship, this will be under severe restrictions to ensure everyone remains safe. As painful and tragic as this is, to refrain in this situation is actually serving God and keeping the Torah, which demands that we put life and health above everything else. By staying home, we are serving God just as the Chassidic masters were serving God by refraining from learning Torah and praying in their cell.
3. It is our challenge this year to find other ways to connect to God, to the festivals, and to the prayers that we cannot recite together with the community in the shul. We must try to find ways to connect to the *tefillot* at home, to observe the *mitzvot* of the festivals at home, including finding joy on Succot and Shemini Atzeret, and celebrating our love for the Torah on Simchat Torah.

### CHIDON ON THE CHAG (A QUICK QUIZ)

1. 22nd of Tishrei.
2. "Assembly of the Eighth Day".
3. Both. Both opinions are found in the Talmud.
4. No.
5. Seven.
6. The Kohanim.
7. All the children of the community (and one adult as an honour).
8. Three. One to complete the Book of Devarim. One to start the Book of Bereishit. And one to read the *maftir* reading.
9. *Chatan Torah* and *Chatan Bereishit*.
10. There is no link! But because the day is one of fun and celebration we make it as appealing to children as possible. Many communities therefore give out sweets to the children.