

Simchat Torah: All Who Are Thirsty, Go to the Water

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin



Dear Friends,

Tonight we leave our Succah and return to our house in the deep, metaphoric sense of the word. Just as we entered the Succah joyously, so, too, we leave it with joy and with dancing.

Tonight the sun will set on the holiday we call "The Season of Our Joy", and seven days of happiness will end. Sunset will herald in the eighth day – Sh'mini Atzeret – and with it an entirely new holiday (in Israel, not in the diaspora): Simchat Torah (the joy of the Torah).

What is so joyous about the Torah that merits its own holiday?

There are many reasons – some of them religious and belief-based (the belief that God bestowed upon us glimpses of His infinite wisdom, i.e., the Torah); some are anthropological-sociological (the Torah is perceived to be the story of our People, regardless of religious affiliation, economic status, gender, or ethnic background). Every person has his or her own relationship with the Torah and a reason to find joy in it. I, too, have a personal reason for joy, and this is what I would like to share with you this year.

I love language. I love the idea that a person creates his world and gives it meaning by such a simple thing as words. Take the combination of movements of the mouth, tongue, and teeth, add a breath of air and a sound, and there you have it – a word! And with it, an entire world has been created, a whole new reality!

It is said of the Torah "*Delve and delve into it, for everything is in it;*" (Avot 5:22)

As someone who came to the Torah from "the outside", I was captivated by its magic when I realized that every verse and every word in it contains an infinite number of interpretations and possibilities, that indeed, if you delve and delve into it, you discover that everything is in it. For thousands of years the Torah has been studied, interpreted and discussed, and there are always new layers to uncover, layers that were concealed within it. Magically, every generation finds the layer in which its consciousness is reflected, as every generation interprets it in the most authentic, deep and relevant way. Since the time of our Sages, who began to interpret it 2,400 years ago - and distilled from it a glorious life of the spirit, of morality and actions - to our present day, the eve of Simchat Torah, 2017, wisdom pours forth from the Torah

It is because of the infinite number of possible interpretations that the Torah is compared to a spring whose water never ceases to flow. It is a generous spring, ready and willing to satisfy the thirst of anyone willing to plunge into its depths and find meaning in it. It does not distinguish between religious, traditional, and secular, or between man and woman, Jew and non-Jew.

However, this spring is less generous with those who read it superficially and expect to be moved or elated. A simplistic reading will produce some chapters which are more interesting and many others which are quite boring; chapters which are pleasant to the modern ear and others which will cause us to squirm; paragraphs that are exciting and others that cause us to cringe; verses that are as beautifully composed as a radical High Court decision, and others that seem like they belong to a primitive nomadic people.

Just as the spring is to be found deep in the earth, hidden from immediate view, so too is the life-giving water of the Torah. It makes itself apparent only to those who are willing to delve into it over and over. Those who do, will discover that their initial understanding is turned over and over again, and that under the simple (p'shat) reading lie many contradictory, opposing, and exciting possibilities.

In order for the Torah to be a Torah of Life and not just an ethical or legal code, one needs to know how to draw water out of the Rock. Striking the Rock is a little like peeling off old layers of skin. The goal, however, is not to discover what is underneath, but rather the act itself of peeling! Peeling IS the process of interpretation, and the process of interpretation allows for ongoing, never-ending renewal and rejuvenation. If we do not continue peeling, the skin grows old, dries up, and shrivels. We then lose the light that once shone through. Learning that does not seek to uncover the next layer, and then the next, and the next, that remains in the realm of what is already known, is boring and dull! There is no life in such learning.

We all know what it feels like when suddenly, from within the text, a new insight emerges; a new connection that is fresh, inspiring, and challenging, as though it has been pronounced by a heavenly voice. It's called in Hebrew a Hiddush. At such moments I am in a awe! Amazed that I have not had that particular insight before. While the text itself never changes, we do. We, the readers, are not the same people that we were yesterday, and a good text will always mirror who we are at the present time. Even if a heavenly voice yells tomorrow's insight into our ear today, we cannot hear it. A person can only hear that which is currently present in his heart, here and now.

Studying Torah – striking the rock, peeling off old layers - is an art. There are all kinds of artists, and each will draw forth their own unique water from the rock. A person may be born with one talent or another, but he is not born an artist. Artistry requires practice not talent, as does the art of Torah study. In Hebrew the words for "artist" and for "practice" have the same root. It requires a determined, preferably gentle, engagement between a person's heart and the heart of the Torah. Then, when our heart of stone softens, and turns to flesh, from the words etched on the stone tablets of the Torah, sweetness, freshness, and liveliness pours forth.

The prophet Isaiah said: *"Everyone that is thirsty come for water..."* (55:1) Our Sages tried to understand what he was trying to say. Obviously, anyone who is thirsty should go and drink. This discussion gave birth to the following midrash:

Rabbi Hanina Bar Iddi said: Why are the words of the Torah compared to water? To tell us that just as water begins at a high point and flows to a low one, so the words of the Torah are a

comfort for those whose thoughts are elevated and flow towards those whose thoughts are low... Just as the water gives life to the world, so the Torah gives life to the world, as it says: "They are life to those who find them..." Just as water revives a person's soul, so, too, do the words of Torah, as it says: The Torah of God is whole and rejuvenates." Just as water flowing from a spring does so at freely, so the words of Torah "are there for anyone who is thirsty." (Yalkut Shimoni 89).

You are all welcome to gather with us in celebrating the Torah. Come join the dance of our spring of water - the hakafot of Simchat Torah - which will take place this evening and tomorrow morning. (Details in the email.)

If we know how to be joyous on Simchat Torah, we may be worthy of the opening blessing of the book of Psalms: "And he will be like a tree planted on the waterside who gives its fruit in its time and its leaves do not wither, and all he does succeeds." (Psalms 1:3)

All who are thirsty go to the water!

Chag Sameach,
Elisha