

# שמחת תורה

## *Simchat Torah - Rejoicing over the Torah*

Simchat Torah means “rejoicing of the Torah” and describes the celebration of the conclusion and beginning again of the yearly cycle of Torah readings. Simchat Torah follows Shemini Atzeret, the eighth day connected with Sukkot. In the one year cycle (in which the Torah in its entirety is read in one year), the final portion of Devarim (Deuteronomy) is read, and the first verse of B’reshit (Genesis). This is to symbolize that the completion of the cycle signals the time to begin again, and thus the celebration indicates the joy that the Torah will be read and studied again. Simchat Torah reminds us that the Torah is our life, and that we never finish studying and learning from it, for each and everytime we read the Torah we glean new insights and understanding from its inspired words.



Simchat Torah is traditionally attached to the one year cycle. But evidence shows that this one year cycle was not the only reading schedule in the time of Yeshua and even earlier. A three year reading cycle (called the triennial cycle) was also in place, and was apparently the more common tradition, at least in Jerusalem and surrounding regions. Since the three year cycle would only conclude the reading of the Torah once every three years, if Simchat Torah were considered to be an early tradition, it would have been celebrated on a 3-year rotation rather than every year.

However, while there is no clear evidence to support a combination of the 1 and 3 year cycles, it is interesting to consider the possibility that together they represented the 7-year cycle culminating with the Sh’mitta year (sabbatical year). If the 3-year cycle was completed twice (taking up 6 years), the final year could have been completed with the 1-year cycle. If this were the case, Simchat Torah may have been used as a way to celebrate not only the conclusion of the Torah reading, but more especially the conclusion and beginning again of the 7-year cycle. This would seem to correspond to the text in Deuteronomy 31:

10 Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of every seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, 11 when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing.”

The traditional celebration of Simchat Torah involves meeting together in the synagogue, removing all of the Torah scrolls from the Ark, parading the Torah Scrolls through the synagogue and even outside, dancing around the Torah Scroll, and reading the final portion of Deverim (Deuteronomy) and the first verse of B’reshit (Genesis). Since Sukkot coincides with the end of the 1-year cycle, it also became a custom to circle the Sukkah (these circles are called *hakafot* in Hebrew) during the parading of the Torah. After the reading of the last of Deverim, the scroll is entirely unrolled so all can see it, and then re-rolled back to B’reshit to begin the readings over again.