Simchat Torah

“In the synagogues around the world this is the moment to pull out the Torah rolls, and march with them, dance with them. The last part of Deuteronomy is read along with the first part of Genesis, so that the reading cycle of the Torah effectively never stops”

Dr. Debbie Weissman

Rejoicing with the Life Cycle

The Torah is divided in fifty four parashiot, which must be read throughout the year, and are finished on the specific date of the 22nd of Tishre in Israel and the 23rd of Tishre in the Diaspora: the holiday of Simchat Torah.

To demonstrate that the study and fulfillment of the Torah have no end, we finish reading the last parashah “Vezot haberachah” from the last book, the book of Deuteronomy, and immediately we pick up reading the first parashah of Genesis, making explicit the uninterrupted circle of life, in which generations come and go.

This holiday does not appear in the Torah, but even so, our Sages of blessed memory, fixed the norm that we must celebrate the end of our Torah reading cycle. This festivity is similar to the one when one finishes the study of a treatise of the Talmud, where one celebrates by holding a se’udah: a festive meal.

In the last parasha of the Torah it reads: “Moses commanded us a Torah, an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob.” (Deuteronomy 33.4) From this we learn one of the deepest meanings of Simchat Torah, which is related to the democratization of the study and the reception of Torah. As the verse teaches us, the Torah is the possession of all of the people Israel, without exception, differentiating us from other times and peoples in which only encumbered elites had access to knowledge while the rest of the population was mired in ignorance. Our Sages of blessed memory derive another teaching from this verse: the Torah must not be understood exclusively as ḥerem - an inheritance - which belies a merely passive attitude of receiving what is given to us, but rather they read this verse in an active light as ḥeres vehicle to be betrothed.

Thus, we should see ourselves as the eager groom which through the arduous games of seduction, must gain the favors of the bride: the Torah. Therefore we pass from a passive attitude to one in which we are the builders of a fruitful relationship with the Torah, based on love, respect, care, and dedication. Thus, the person called to the last parasha of the Torah is called Chatan (or Kallat) Torah - the groom (or bride) of the Torah - and the person called to the first aliyah of Genesis is called Chatan (or Kallat) Bereshit- the groom (or bride) of Genesis. It is customary to call up as Chatan Torah someone who is distinguished by their merits and trajectory. Likewise, the Chatan Bereshit must be a young person who shines by his or her commitment and potential.

A beautiful and picturesque tradition is to dance in the synagogue with the Torah and to make seven hakafot- processions- both in the prayer of ‘Arvit as well as in the prayer of Shacharit, parading with the scrolls, youngsters, old people and children, living and celebrating together the constant flow of life.

¡ Chag Sameach !

Rabbi Marcos Perelmutter
Comunidad Benei Tikva
Buenos Aires, Argentina
(translated by Rabbi Juan Mejía, Southwestern Coordinator for Bechol Lashon)