

WHY DO WE SAY L'CHAIM ON SIMCHAS TORAH?

Category: Holidays, Simchas Torah

There is a unique element to the celebration of Simchas Torah; unlike other major Jewish holidays, it's a completely man-made celebration. What does that tell us?

What Are We Celebrating?

L'chaim! Doesn't it seem like Jews are always ready to say L'chaim!?

There are two Jewish holidays on which we say "L'chaim!" repeatedly, again and again and again. They are Purim and Simchas Torah. What is the common denominator of these two holidays, and why specifically on them do we drink "L'chaim!"

In general, Simchas Torah is not a very well-known holiday at all. This week, I did a little survey and asked 20 people when they first heard of this holiday. Over half answered that they first heard of it when they started coming to Chabad. But really, when did this holiday start?

No holiday called "Simchas Torah" is found in the Torah. In the times of Moses, as well as in the times of Samuel the Prophet and King Solomon, there was a holiday called Shmini Atzeres which is recorded in the Torah. Shmini Atzeres, which means "an occasion on the eighth day," is indeed on the eighth day from the beginning of Sukkos—but no one back then was exactly dancing with Torah scrolls.

So what exactly are we celebrating on Simchas Torah? The Torah itself? We got that on the holiday of Shavuot, as everyone knows. So Simchas Torah actually honors the fact that we have completed the cycle of the yearlong reading of the entire Torah scroll.

In general, the Jewish tradition is that when one finishes studying a tractate of Talmud or a section of the Torah, he hosts a completion party called a siyum;

similar to a graduation party. How much more so should we celebrate when the entire

Jewish nation completes the Torah—certainly that’s a day fit for a special festival.

Babylon Vs. Israel

However, when we look at it historically, the custom of completing the yearlong Torah reading on Simchas Torah is relatively new.

Regarding the weekly Torah reading in synagogues each Shabbos, there were two ancient customs: the Land of Israel’s custom and the Babylonian custom. The Israeli custom was to read one third of each Torah portion each week. For example, at Week One, the first third of the portion of Bereishis would be read. At Week Two, the second third of Bereishis would be read and at Week Three, the last third of the portion of Bereishis would be read. Finally, on Week Four, the second portion of the Torah (Noach) would be started.

(This is not like the custom observed today in various shuls in which they read one third of the Torah portion each week, skipping each week to the next week’s Torah portion and thus reading the first third of each portion throughout the year. This is something essentially baseless—jumping from theme to theme and losing the flow of the Torah’s narrative by cutting it up into pieces).

That’s why, in Eretz Yisroel, the Holy Land of Israel, they would complete the entire Torah once every three-and-a-half years, and they apparently would mark this completion with a celebration, but one which had no connection with Shmini Atzeres.

This was not the case with the Babylonian custom, which was to begin reading the Torah on the first Shabbos after Shmini Atzeres, reading a complete portion every Shabbos with the clear goal of completing the entire Torah on the second day of Shmini Atzeres. In honor of this completion, Simchas Torah was established, and that’s how Shmini Atzeres and Simchas Torah became associated.

Thus, the entire custom of observing Simchas Torah is relatively new, having begun during the Babylonian Exile while the Jews of ancient Israel carried on with their sacred custom.

About 800 years ago, the legendary wanderer Rabbi Binyamin of Tudela spent 13 years touring the Jewish communities of the world. He described his travels using a travel diary he kept for himself, naming it “Binyamin’s Travels” and depicting what his eyes saw in every Jewish community. He writes of his visit to Egypt “where there are two synagogues—one for the Israeli community and one for the Babylonian community. They have different customs for the portions and orders of the Torah reading, because the Babylonians are accustomed to reading one portion each week as is done throughout Spain, thus completing the Torah each year, while the Israelis don’t follow this custom. Rather, they divide the Parsha into three sections and complete the Torah after three years.”

Thus, we have two clearly different customs regarding reading the Torah.

Babylon’s Upper Hand

The interesting thing is that as the years went on, the Babylonian Jewish custom became accepted throughout the Jewish Diaspora and even in Israel itself. And this custom is not the only one that follows the Babylonian tradition—there are many customs and traditions that originated in Babylon which have been accepted by the Jewish nation as a whole.

Furthermore, we all know that there are two Talmuds. The Talmud that the sages of Israel compiled is known as the Jerusalem Talmud, while the Talmud created by the wise men of Babylon is called the Babylonian Talmud. The Talmud accepted and studied for the most part by everyone is the Babylonian Talmud, which every child begins to study in “cheder,” and in yeshivah. Literally only a few unique individuals are versed in the Jerusalem Talmud as well; halachah originates from the Babylonian Talmud.

In the beginning, it wasn’t so simple. A dispute was propagated between the sages of Babylon and Israel over the control of halachah and who would perpetuate the traditions of the Sanhedrin. The Babylonian sages argued that since the Jewish nation had been exiled from its land, “the Divine Presence had risen from Jerusalem and rested in Babylon.” Indeed, the Babylonian sages won in most of these disputes, and all of Jewry, in its farthest-flung communities, accepted the rulings and customs of Babylon.

A Innovation of Exile

Thus, we have it that Simchas Torah is a holiday forged in exile, in Babylon. It is not in the Torah and we don't even find its name or mention in the Prophets. The innovation here is that this holiday was created specifically in exile—which is precisely why we are so happy on it. Not only didn't we lose our holidays in exile but just the opposite: new holidays were added, like Purim and Simchas Torah.

This is the bottom-line common denominator between Purim and Simchas Torah: they were both born in days of exile and darkness. That's why it is specifically on these holidays that we really cut loose and drink "l'chaim," because it is these holidays that celebrate the victory of the Jewish nation over exile: the victory of not only not losing any holiday to the ravages of exile but just the opposite—the Jewish nation going strong, and getting ever stronger.

So this Simchas Torah, as we dance with the Torah scrolls and say "l'chaim" to one another, let us not just dance to celebrate the Torah—let us celebrate our eternity, let us celebrate our history, and let us celebrate the hope in the greatest day to come in all of Jewish history: the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen!