

Ask the Rabbi

By Rabbi Yerachmiel D. Fried

Dear Rabbi Fried,

I've often been bothered by something I have noticed on Simchat Torah in synagogue, that people who are not dancing are sitting. I know that when a Torah scroll is removed from the ark, say at a regular Shabbos service, everyone stands in honor of the Torah. It was once explained to me that whenever the Torah is moving from place to place, we stand in honor of the Torah. Why is it that on Simchat Torah, when the Torah is being moved from place to place as part of the celebration, people are sitting in its presence?

Marvin J.

Dear Marvin,

Many years ago I posed this exact question to my mentor, the late Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Aurbach of Jerusalem, the leading halachic decisor of the past generation in Israel. He smiled, indicating he, too, was bothered by this question in his youth. He said that he had observed rabbis far greater than anyone in our generation who also sat during the seven hakafot, when the Torah is being taken around the circle of dancing and celebration on Simchat Torah.

Rav Aurbach then said, cryptically, that in his opinion the answer is the following: The need to stand for the honor of the Torah scroll is only when the Torah is taken from its stationary place and moved from place to place. On Simchat Torah, the entire synagogue is its place!

To me, this was a very profound analysis of what Simchat Torah is all about, as well as an important message for our lives as Jews. We often look at the Torah as something foreign to the world we live in, and in many ways it is foreign to our society. We try to add in a little bit of Torah and Judaism, here and there, deep down knowing it's not the central theme of our lives. In a sense, we are taking the Torah out of the ark, out of its place, and moving it into our lives a bit until we return it back to its place.

On Simchat Torah, the real celebration is that everywhere is the Torah's place. Torah, for those who choose to make it so, is central to our lives and permeates every area of our existence. "...because they [the words of Torah] are our lives and the length of our days..." (Siddur/Prayerbook).

When the Tablets were given to us at Mt. Sinai, the Torah says that they could be read from either side (Shemot/Exodus 32:15). This was a great miracle, because letters cut all the way through stone should be readable only from the front; in the

back they would be backwards. What was the point of this miracle, what lesson was G-d teaching by doing so? R' Samson R. Hirsch explains a penetrating message. Often Jews feel that Judaism is something "to do" in synagogue or on holidays, rendering it a religion. But Judaism is not only a religion; it is a way of life. There are mitzvot which apply to every area of business, domestic, family and community life. Whichever way you turn, there are mitzvot which show us how to live our lives Jewishly and infuse them with holiness. That is the message of the Tablets: Whichever way you turn them, they can still be read.

This is the joy and celebration of Simchat Torah.

I have often quoted one of America's outreach leaders who tells audiences, if you're going to take the family to synagogue twice a year, instead of it being Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, make it Simchat Torah and Purim! Show the family the joy of being Jewish!

Wishing you and all the readers a joyous, meaningful Simchat Torah.

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