

True Simchas HaTorah

October 25, 2016



Something that always irked me but I never really spoke about was the current state of Simchas Torah in our community. To me, Simchas Torah was represented by the usual assortment of rowdy individuals, many of whom picked up a Gemara* maybe 12 times this year, dancing in a raucous crowd of giddy, inebriated, and puerile adults. The usual occurrences were all there. Just to name a few for those who are unfamiliar: The tying together of talleisim, the “picking up (and moving) the Baal Tefillah while he was reciting chazaras hashatz”, the grabbing of all the “good” candies from the childrens’ pekelach... All these acts and the many more that are commonplace at many shuls throughout our community is all fun and games. But in my eyes (at least), do not embody the true spirit of Simchas Torah.

Although I’ve observed these behaviors for years, this year was the first time that I have actively discussed it with others. Voicing my opinion to whomever would lend an ear, I described my “perfect” Simchas Torah as such: A setting akin to the one I imagined it would be like on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. I can only imagine what the Hakafof at the minyan of Reb Dovid Feinstein looked like. Reb Dovid, accompanied by the Kollel yungeleit and Baal Habatim who learned each and every day, all dancing in unison with massive smiles on their faces, possessing the true embodiment of Simchas Torah. I chose them for once single reason. That “crowd” is not the same as the multitudes in Lakewood, where many learn in a rote state, just another number in a sea of white. They weren’t comprised of members such as the classic Baal Habayis either, groaning as he shleps into his car on the way to his Daf Yomi shiur. I am not saying these people do not learn. They most certainly do. But to they have true Simchas HaTorah?

One place where I have observed such Simchas HaTorah was in Yerushalayim. Those who have yet to observe this spiritual wonder should make it a goal to do so. I am referring to the Hakfot Shniyot that takes place Motzei Yom Tov on Rechov Kook at Harav Kook’s old residence. Anyone who has ever been there will recount the unbelievable and uplifting spirit that permeates the very air during the 6 hour-long hakafof. Men dance in a room packed so tightly that many times there are those whose feet do not touch the ground, but their bodies are moved by those around them. The people attending are not wearing black hats and white shirts, they don’t have giant velvet yarmulkas with large rims. However, what they do possess is their tears of happiness and enormous smiles etched onto their faces as they dance soaked in their sweat of elation, clutching to their beloved Sifrei Torah, singing beautiful melodies to Hashem. The Simchas HaTorah in the room is palpable.

These were the two situations I described as my ideal Simchas Torah experience.

I discussed the situations with a Baal Habas who lives in my neighborhood, telling him that I wished I was in one of those locations instead of my current one. That if I was, I would experience a “real” Simchas Torah. His reply shocked me.

“You are dead wrong.” He said.

My wise neighbor proceeded to expound upon a concept that he had learned years earlier, telling me that just like him, I will never forget it.

He explained that I was looking at Simchas Torah all wrong. Saying as follows:

Look at me, can I say that I have true, 100%, Simchas HaTorah all the time? No. I know that I don't, sometimes the yoke of Torah feels like a true burden and it can be tough to learn. But even if I come to shul and know that I may not possess 100% Simchas HaTorah, or that those attending davening alongside me do not possess it either, that is not a reason for one to say it isn't a "real" Simchas Torah.

The concepts can be explained in simple terms. *Simchas Torah is like a wedding*. Many groan when they recall a wedding, usually the 3rd one that week, that they must shlep hours away to attend (not including time it takes to look for parking). But when it boils down to it, why do they really go to the wedding? Who is the Simcha for? Who is experiencing true, 100% "Simcha" at the event? The Chosson and Kallah. It is their simcha.

All we are doing when we attend is contributing to **THEIR** simcha. That is what why we show up. And that is an important duty in itself. This same concept is true of Simchas Torah. Although many of us may not feel that we possess true Simchas HaTorah, we still show up. We still sing and dance. We do this for *two* reasons. We do this for our own Simchas HaTorah, to whatever degree that may be. And secondly, we do it for the real "Baal Simcha(s)" the ones who live their lives each and every day experiencing true Simchas HaTorah! Each shul and each kehila has members who are experiencing true Simchas HaTorah, our job is to contribute and help them celebrate in their simcha. Even if we aren't experiencing it fully ourselves.

I can say this with utmost certainty. My neighbor was right. I will never forget this concept.

It is astounding how a two minute conversation changed my outlook on one of the holiest days of the year, forever.

May Hashem help us all attain true and complete Simchas HaTorah in our lives.

*Not the only form of learning, just an example.