8

SIMCHAT TORAH

The Mosh Pit

10.20.14

I AM DETERMINED TO meet Simchat Torah head-on: dancing wildly with the scrolled law, holding it like a dance partner. But I'm nervous about boogieing alone. So I ask my family as the holiday hour approaches: "Anyone want to come dance with the Torah with me?"

Blank stares.

Daughter: "I have *so* much homework, Mom."

Husband: "You're seriously going to dance with strangers?"

Son: "I love you, but you're on your own."

Me: "Fine. Abandon me."

Simchat Torah (rejoicing of the Torah) marks the day we complete the Torah and start it all over again. The last verses of the last book (Deuteronomy) are read, followed by the first verses of the first book (Genesis). It's a clear snapshot of how we hold both the ending and the beginning in the same moment, not to mention that the ending never ends. After this celebration, the cycle restarts on the next Sabbath and then continues every Sabbath going forward, with sections read or chanted chronologically, weekly, in synagogues everywhere.

The *eve* of Simchat Torah is always the big kickoff. There are high spirits and literal spirits: people get amply inebriated ahead of time.

My kids would call it "pre-gaming." The rabbis tell me that single malt is the drink of choice on this holiday. So I stand in my living room and pour myself a shot of Macallan. The first sip doesn't go so well; I brave a second and stop there. Okay, call me a Simchat Torah lightweight. But I won't wimp out on the dancing.

The question is where. When I ask my rabbi "consultants" to point me to The Place To Be on this holiday, the near-unanimous response is B'nai Jeshurun—BJ—my parents' synagogue on West 88th Street.

The line extending down the block is my first confirmation: this is a happening. I'd been told it was popular, but the numbers astonish me. Jews, Jews, and more Jews—notably a critical mass in their twenties and thirties, a group considered to be the demographic sweet spot by Jewish professionals who fret about Jewish continuity.

These youngsters are queuing as they would outside a hot nightclub, waiting to get into the bash we can hear from the street. When I finally get inside BJ, a worn-but-beautiful building, it's like entering a raucous wedding reception, midstream. The sanctuary, cleared of chairs or pews, throbs with music, singing, and dancing.

By dancing, I mean stomping and clapping; bouncing and hopping; do-si-doing and tango-ing; human chains connected by hands on shoulders weaving in and out of other human chains, dodging smaller circles of carousers encircling someone bobbing with a Torah.

Torahs are passed around liberally, handed off with a tallis so that whoever dances with the scroll can be draped properly in a prayer shawl.

In the bedlam, I find two friends from my synagogue: Associate Rabbi Maurice (Mo) Salth and Interim Rabbi Andrew Straus, both of whom clearly got the same memo that BJ is the Studio 54 of Simchat Torah. I also spot rabbis from other shuls: Irwin Kula, who cofounded CLAL, a center for learning; and Elliot Cosgrove, who heads Park Avenue Synagogue where I spent Selichot; plus Amichai Lau-Lavie, spiritual leader of the experimental Lab/Shul who led my Tashlich tour of Hell's Kitchen. Knesset member Ruth Calderon is also in the house. This scene offers something I haven't yet experi-

enced in my holiday escapades: a service that brings together leaders from disparate institutions, all dressed in weekend clothes, schmoozing and cavorting. It makes me feel happy, and also hip. I'm in the hub of the holiday.

Rabbi Mo has been to this hoedown before, so he explains the lay of the land: BJ's two senior rabbis, Rolando Matalon and Marcelo Bronstein, are taking turns at the microphone, leading rousing niggunim with the help of their beloved senior cantor, Ari Priven. Each niggun represents one of seven hakafot—the circuits taken with the Torah when it's removed from the ark, which calls to mind the seven circles under the wedding huppah. The Torah is the ketubah; we're wedded to The Book. I recall that I missed the seven circuits taken on Hoshana Rabbah and how wise Judaism is to think constantly in symbols and numbers. People remember numbers the way children remember rhymes. They stick in your head: forty days of introspection, Ten Days of Awe, forty years in the desert. Seven days of creation and Sukkot, eight days of Hanukkah and Passover. Memory itself is recurrence, going back over things. The repetition is starting to feel resonant to me. It creates a rhythm. Each repeated ritual is an affirmation that we're Jewish and therefore we do these specific things on these specific days. We believe there's meaning to be found every single time, and that the echo of our ancestors, heard in these rites, informs the moment we do them today.

Each hakafah lasts at least fifteen or twenty minutes and begins by inviting one age cohort to walk under a human-made bridge formed by the rest of us. I've arrived just after the 40 to 49's have ducked their way through. It reminds me of my childhood "London Bridge" or "Red Rover, Red Rover." Since the next hakafah group is just over my bracket—"everyone 40–49"—I leave Mo and Andy, find a spot on the bridge-line, and tent my arms across from a stranger. As the fifties group snakes its way through our gauntlet, it's impossible to miss how giddy people look—a marked difference from the solemn faces of Yom Kippur. We hold the bridge till everyone has walked under it, many holding Torahs, while the rabbis lead us in a recurring call-and-response prayer: "*Aneinu B'yom Korienu.*"

I find Mo in the crowd again and ask him to translate that refrain. *"Answer us, on the day that we call."* I like that language. It's another example of how Judaism beseeches, cries out—in this case, for another beginning, another Genesis, a connection to Torah. "Answer us" cements the idea I keep hearing during these holidays: God answers us. Or might. It's reassuring and rousing, both.

A line-dance has started to conga through the sanctuary while many of us still stand clapping on the perimeter. I'm tempted to join, but too bashful to leap. Since Mo is holding his four-year-old son, he has no free hands to latch on, but Rabbi Andy and I exchange a glance that signals "Should we brave it?" and we break one of the chains to join it, jogging to keep up with the frenzied pace. The exhilaration is instantaneous. I ignore how clumsy I look, how badly I sing, how sweaty are someone's hands on my shoulders behind me. I just find myself laughing.

"If you jump in, you get caught up in it. It really opens you up," says Rabbi Asher Lopatin, whom I interviewed with the phone to my ear, laptop on my lap, before the holiday began. He says he always looks forward to the unfettered whirl. "You don't have to know any fancy dance steps. There are no complicated lyrics; just 'lai lai lai,' or 'dai dai dai.' The tunes go over and over again." He likens it to King David dancing before the ark in the Book of Samuel. "On Simchat Torah, we don't worry about the usual decorum in the synagogue—*Kavod hatzibur* [public dignity]," Lopatin says. "We get rid of those inhibitions and connect with the Torah and with each other."

His words prove true. I toss my inhibitions and "connect." It actually hits me that this is what I was missing: primal Judaism. Gut spirituality. A night like this, where it doesn't matter what age, aptitude, or denomination you are. Simchat Torah is a level playing field, no experience required.

David Kalb told me—also before the holiday began—that this night eliminates factions. "Sometimes I'll just stop in the midst of the dancing and say, 'This is the way things should be,'" he says. "When you dance with people in a circle, you don't worry about their politics or whether you agree with them. You put everything aside. The fact

that we're ending this holiday with that experience kind of says to me, 'Why can't we be like this all the time?'"

I'm asking myself the same question as I careen around the sanctuary: "Why can't all Jews be like this?" I have that sudden, hopeful thought that if we all gathered to dance unrestrained once a year, we would not only have fewer internecine frictions, we'd be putting a firmer stake in the ground for Judaism overall. Men are dancing with women here. Reform Jews with Conservative Jews, Reconstructionist with Renewal, labeled Jews with unlabeled Jews.

"How powerful is it," Kalb says, "that the Torah is something so sacred—we're so careful with it all year round—but at the end of the day, we're dancing with it. Passing it. It's out there. It really makes a statement: the Torah should be out there in the world. It shouldn't be sequestered."

Communing with Torah. It's my second time in twelve days that I've been close to it: first the private moment on Yom Kippur afternoon at Central, now this revelry. "Where in the world is there a people that loves a book so much that they dance around with it?" Kalb asked me. "It's a celebration of the biggest book club in the world."

I remember how moved I was when my children had the heavy scroll unfurled in front of them when they became bar and bat mitzvah. Ben and Molly looked so small as they stood behind the large podium on a step stool, in order to be able to view the calligraphy on parchment. They touched the fringe of their tallis to the starting place in the Torah and then kissed the threads. I thought, as I watched them chant assuredly: "Our tradition essentially says 'Take hold of this luminous thing; it belongs to you, too.'"

The holiday of Simchat Torah is not found in the Bible; it's an invention of the ancient rabbis, who made a *separate* holiday out of the *second* day of Shemini Atzeret—which, just to confuse me, is the eighth day of Sukkot. So essentially Sukkot runs for eight days and then the following day is Simchat Torah.

"Scholars think this holiday emerged in the tenth or eleventh century," says Rabbi Michael Strassfeld, a learned presence whose fascination with the holidays' origins is contagious. (His book *The Jewish Holidays* has been one of my staples.) I interview him at his Reconstructionist synagogue, Society for the Advancement of Judaism (SAJ), New York's Reconstructionist SAJ, on West 86th Street. He says, "The creation of Simchat Torah probably has to do with the two Torah-reading cycles," referring to the two ways our tradition reads through the entire Torah: over the course of three years, or one. Once the method changed to the one-year cycle in the Middle Ages, the moment of concluding the Torah and restarting it again was considered cause for a party. And the crazy dancing came from the Hasidim, who tend to celebrate in that style of ecstatic rocking out (see the *Fiddler* wedding scene). "When the *annual* Torah cycle started to dominate," Strassfeld says, "then Simchat Torah emerged. Because there was this sense of 'Oooh, look, here's a great thing. We're finishing Deuteronomy and starting Genesis again. We're showing the cycle is an unending cycle.'"

That "unending cycle" can look redundant or rich, depending on your slant. An observant Jew has no choice in the matter; he or she is obligated to repeat, whether they find resonance or not. And I understand why the redundancy on its face can lose people—especially those who would rather read a new book than reread an ancient tome every single year. When I ask Strassfeld how he breathes life into the repetition, he harkens back to the metaphor offered by his pal Rabbi Burt Visotzky in my chapter on Rosh Hashanah preparation: "The repetition of the Torah and the holidays," says Strassfeld, "*is* like therapy in the sense that you come back to the same truth again and again, but you come back to it in a somewhat different way each year. You understand it more deeply, or you come back to it thinking more deeply about it. . . .

"So, yes, it's autumn again," he continues. "But I'm actually a year older and this thing happened in my life between last fall and this fall. I'm not the same person, even though I'm coming back to the same

place. Both things are true: I'm the same, but I'm different. The Torah is the same, but it's different."

That could be our slogan, since we seem to need one these days: "Try Judaism: The Same Is Always New."

"How was it?" my husband asks when I limp in the door.

"Actually, pretty wonderful," I answer. "But I need a shower."

The next morning, I take an Advil for my disco-hangover and rush to get to a service for Simchat Torah itself. After the holiday's rockin' eve, the daytime observance is entirely teetotaling. I head to a venerable institution, Park East Synagogue, the 126-year-old Orthodox shul led by Rabbi Arthur Schneier. Women sit in the balcony, and I take my place among a smattering of hatted ladies in the upper pews while admiring the stately sanctuary, with its two circular stained-glass windows at the front and back. Schneier, a Holocaust survivor born in Vienna, stands mostly toward the rear of the bimah, draped in a tallis that shimmers with mirrored squares, calling up male congregants for the honor of an aliyah, the summons to read Torah.

As they come forward, he turns to publicly praise them for their devotion to Torah, and then they go to stand under the huppah to chant, bent over the open scroll, aided by the hazzan (cantor) who stands beside them.

I'm less attentive to the text because I'm glued to the ballet on the bimah, watching the seasoned senior rabbi hanging back, clearly intentionally not making himself the center of attention, the cantor and the more junior rabbi greeting readers—sometimes their sons—as they approach the scroll. No women are called up. There's a brio to it all.

Repetition is inclusion on Simchat Torah because every person who wants an aliyah gets one today, which means the aliyot go on as

long as necessary until each person has had a turn. "It's not like needing tickets on the High Holy days," Rabbi Asher Lopatin says. "Everyone is welcome. The rabbis say that the Torah belongs to every single Jew. You're not coming as an outsider but as an insider: it's your Torah. Come as an owner."

I don't feel yet like an owner. Definitely a renter. But I'm feeling more and more at home.

As I leave the shul in the sunlight on the Upper East Side, it dawns on me: Simchat Torah is about access. It's a holiday that announces, *This Torah is yours. To dance with. To talk to. To encircle. To lift up. To chant. To hold.* That's what will stay with me: the Torah was brought close.