

Holding onto Joy: Celebrating Simchat Torah

by Sara Debbie Gutfreund

Five ways that the Torah brings us joy.

Jon Krakauer describes reaching the top of Mount Everest in his book, *Into Thin Air*:

“Straddling the top of the world, one foot in China and the other in Nepal, I cleared the ice from my oxygen mask, hunched a shoulder against the wind and stared absently down at the vastness of Tibet. I understood on some dim, detached level that the sweep of earth beneath my feet was a spectacular sight. I’d been fantasizing about this moment, and the release of emotion that would accompany it, for many months. But now that I was finally here, actually standing on the summit of Mount Everest, I just couldn’t summon the energy to care.” (Jon Krakauer, *Into Thin Air*, p.5)

I was so startled by his description I had to read the paragraph a few times. It shook me up that a person could work for years training for a climb like this, dreaming about standing on the top of that mountain, looking out at the thousands and thousands of feet that he had found a way to rise above and be too tired to care.

But this happens often in life. We imagine that once we reach our destination, we will be ecstatic. We fantasize about that moment of happiness, but it is elusive, falling so easily out of our grasps, disappointing us just at the moment when we are straddling the top of the world.

How can we find and hold onto joy in this world without it slipping out of our hands? The holiday of Simchat Torah provides an answer. As we dance with the Torah, we bask in the unique, eternal happiness that only Torah can bring into our lives. “It is a tree of life for those who grasp it” (Proverbs 3:18).

Here are five ways that Torah brings us this lasting joy and life.

1. It gives us higher goals. The highest predictor of a person’s lasting happiness is a goal that transcends himself. All of our personal goals, however important they may be, are part of a greater mission that all Jews share – to bring light to the world, to honor God’s Name, to pass on our sacred traditions. The Torah gives us higher goals to strive for.

2. It shows us how to be grateful. Most people understand why gratitude increases our happiness levels, but we don’t necessarily know how to feel grateful on a daily basis. The Torah shows us how to be grateful several times each day. With prayer three times a day, with blessings over food and mitzvot. It imbues within us a constant awareness that we are receiving

goodness and kindness from the Source of all life from the moment we open our eyes in the morning.

3. It teaches us hope. Life is hard and often unpredictable. Many of us have different challenges that make it difficult to see a way forward. But the Torah teaches us that nothing is impossible. That God never gives us circumstances that we can't handle. That tomorrow will be brighter. That redemption is in our future. That we are not struggling in vain.

4. It connects us. In a world where so many are lonely and dependent upon virtual company, the Torah pulls us each out of our isolation. It shows us how to set up communities and bring people together. It teaches us that we need each other. It helps us give even when we're not sure how. It connects grandparents to their grandchildren. It bridges the cultural gaps that so often divide us. It gives us a common language and a shared truth. It connects us to each other.

5. It gives us flow. Our happiest moments occur when we are in the "flow," completely engaged and absorbed by an activity we are doing. We transcend our physical and emotional limitations by immersing ourselves in the energy of the moment. Torah gives us this sense of flow when we are doing a mitzvah that is challenging for us but within our grasps. We visit the sick even when hospitals make us nervous. We invite the widow from across the street to Shabbos dinner even though we aren't in the mood for guests. We give tzedakah even though we are anxious about our finances. We choose to overcome a limitation inside of us and move forward even when we have to push ourselves to do so.

But the Torah also gives us this sense of flow through song and dance. This is the flow of Simchat Torah, celebrating the Torah that teaches us how to transcend our limits, how to be happy, how to be connected. How to sing songs that weave circles into circles that climb beyond the dancers themselves. The words that we sing bring us back to the core of who we are. The higher goals, the gratitude, the hope, the sheer joy of connecting to our Creator. For this moment He created us. For this joy, He created the world. It is a happiness that won't slip away whether we are straddling the top of the world or just beginning our climb. It is in fact right there in our arms – the gift of the Torah that He gives to us. A happiness, a joy, that dances beyond itself.