

# Simchat Torah Doesn't Have to be a "Men's Holiday"

By Sarah Rudolph

(Kveller via JTA) - There seems to be a widespread misconception in the Orthodox world that the upcoming holiday of Simchat Torah is a "men's holiday."

I can understand the confusion, stemming from what we celebrate and how we celebrate it.

Simchat Torah has evolved as a celebration of the annual cycle of weekly Torah readings — readings that in Orthodox shuls occur purely on the men's side of the *mechitza*, or divider. And we celebrate it by taking all the Torah scrolls out of the ark — also on the men's side — and dancing seven circuits, or *hakafot*, with them. There is much joyful singing, generally in a masculine timbre, and the dancing men take turns holding the heavy scrolls.

With so much action naturally taking place on the other side, I can understand — sort of — why things tend to be much less lively on my side of the *mechitza*. Depending on the community, the women might dance, but it is rarely as exuberant, as populated or as sustained as the men's dancing. My childhood memories of the holiday involve a core group of women who enjoyed dancing and would try to get things going, while most of the women might join for a few minutes in between their primary activities of chatting, chasing sugared-up children (did I mention excessive candy often plays a role in the celebrations?) and watching the men.

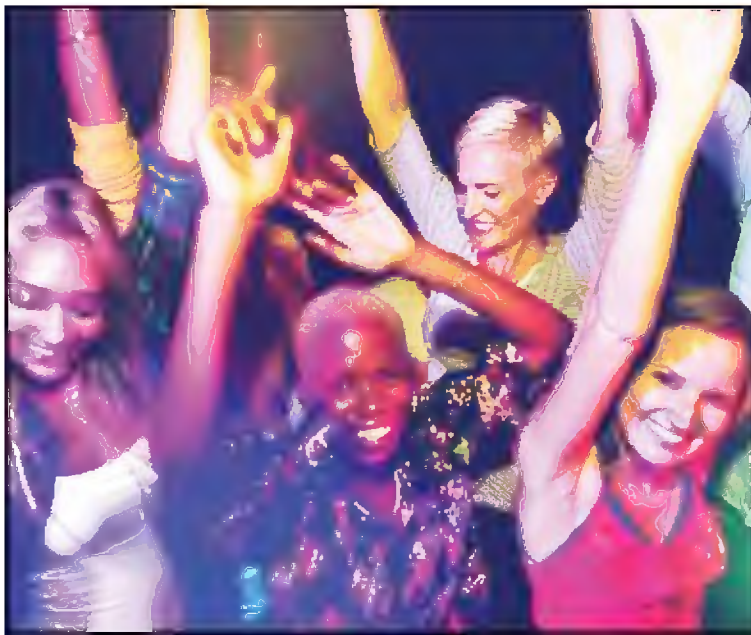


Photo courtesy of Kveller.com.

From what I have experienced and heard since, my shul was fairly typical, though in many places the women don't dance at all — or even show up.

My husband likes to tell of the girl he once dated who was surprised at the suggestion that she might go to shul on Simchat Torah.

"Why would I go?" she asked. "I have no one to watch."

For her, I think, it was accepted as a matter of course that dancing on Simchat Torah is what men do, and she wouldn't have ever imagined that she could — or should — have a part in it.

For others, the questions around women and Simchat Torah are more fraught — and many focus on the Torah scrolls themselves, arguing that if the women can't dance with a Torah, then they feel excluded, like their dancing is pointless. Indeed, in more recent years, as this sort of discomfort with gender disparities has increased, many rabbis have concluded that there is no real *halachic* problem with a woman carrying a Torah scroll, and in some shuls a scroll or two will be passed to the women's side for the dancing.

This is the part where I have a

harder time understanding.

So often I hear some version of either, "My rabbi lets the women have a Torah, so the women's dancing is nice," or "The women in my shul don't have a Torah, so it's lame; they just stand around talking and watching the men dance."

It is really easy to blame the men and the rabbis. It is really easy to say, "If only we were granted equal rights and could dance with a Torah scroll, we would dance and celebrate, too." It is really easy to say, "I'm not going to shul if the women are just going to sit around schmoozing and watching the men. It's a men's holiday; I don't feel a part of it."

It's really easy to say those things, but if I may be frank, I think it's all baloney. We have an equal right to Torah. I'm not talking about holding the scroll; that, to my mind, is secondary. The real point is that we have an equal right to rejoice in our sacred heritage. Nobody is making us chat; ultimately, no one is stopping us from dancing. If it's a men's holiday, that is because we let it be. We can unite and take back Simchat Torah. We can choose to dance.

And we don't need a scroll to do it.

What are we dancing for, after all?

On Simchat Torah, I dance for the concept of Torah, not the object. I dance for myself and my

love of Torah study. I dance for the joy of the completed cycle of reading, and I dance for the joy of beginning all over again. I dance because I will shortly have tears in my eyes, like I do every year, as I listen to the account of Moses' death in the last few verses of the Torah. I dance because I will shortly be awed, as I am every year, when we begin again and read, "And it was evening, and it was morning, one day." The very beginning of everything; something, where there had been nothing.

I, too, can make something from nothing, in my own little way. I can walk into a women's section full of schmoozing women and wild kids, grab some hands and create a circle of joy. I can rejoice in Torah, and nothing — no object or lack of it, no *mechitza*, no rows of chairs presenting a logistical challenge — will stop me.

I only hope, this year, the other women on my side get up and dance, too. ☆

(Sarah Rudolph lives in Cleveland with her family. She has been teaching Jewish text studies for over 10 years to students ranging from elementary school to retirement age.)

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