

## **SH'MINI ATZERET AND SIMCHAT TORAH**

### **ABOUT THE HOLIDAYS**

*Sh'mini Atzeret*, the Eighth Day of Assembly, is celebrated on the eighth day of Sukkot and is mentioned in the Torah, (Leviticus 33:36 and Numbers 29:35-38) as a specific and separate festival day. As on any festival, we usher in Sh'mini Atzeret with candles and kiddush, and treat it as a day of rest on the same level as Shabbat. This holiday officially ends our celebration of Sukkot, and it is no longer a mitzvah to eat in a sukkah – although, if the weather is wonderful, some families continue to enjoy an outdoor meal. The observance of Sh'mini Atzeret involves two major customs; one is the recitation of the *yizkor*, memorial prayers. The other is the inclusion in the daily *Amidah* of the prayer for rain in which we acknowledge that it is G-d who makes the wind blow and the rain fall. Although it may be difficult for us, here in Oregon, to truly feel desire for rainfall, our prayers are actually directed toward Israel, where the precipitation of autumn and winter are crucial to the entire year. Jews have been following the practice of praying for rain at this season from the time of the Second Temple, and Rabbi Irving Greenberg has called Sh'mini Atzeret the “Zionist holiday,” because this prayer has kept alive the connection between world Jewry and the Land of Israel throughout our 2,000 years of dispersion.

*Simchat Torah*, our holiday of Rejoicing in the Torah, is celebrated the day following Sh'mini Atzeret, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of Tishrei. In Israel, and in Reform congregations, Sh'mini Atzeret and Simchat Torah have been combined into one festival. Simchat Torah, the last holiday of the fall season, marks the annual completion of the Torah reading cycle with the last verses of Deuteronomy, upon which the entire congregation stands and together chants, “*Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazeyk!* Be strong, be strong, and let us strengthen each other!” Immediately the chanting of the first verses of the book of Genesis... “*B'reishit*, In the beginning...” is read from a second Torah which has been made ready for this moment. Simchat Torah is one of our most joyful holidays, a time when we express our true delight and gratitude as the “People of the Book.”

### **HOW WE CELEBRATE**

The celebration of Simchat Torah begins after the evening prayers. Congregants remove from the Ark all of the Torahs belonging to the synagogue. All of the people dance around the perimeter of the sanctuary, and even into the streets in many cities around the world, in seven *hakafot*, circuits, carrying the Torahs, singing songs of joy and praise, and asking for God to answer our prayers and to save us. The carrying of the Torah scrolls is shared among all who are present and children join in waving flags, singing, dancing, and delight in the candy inevitably tossed their way. Another high point for children – and all who love them – is the practice of *Kol HaNe'arim*, in which the children are called up the Torah and together recite the Torah blessings while standing under an outstretched *tallit*, prayer shawl, held by members of the congregation. Upon conclusion of the Torah blessings, the children are collectively blessed by the congregation with Jacob's blessing over Menashe and Ephraim (Genesis 48:16-20): “May the angel who has redeemed me from all evil bless these children...”

### **SUGGESTIONS FOR FAMILY CELEBRATION**

Most congregations provide children with flags on Simchat Torah. It is always most fun, however, to bring those that have been made at home. The safest flag begins with a large square of paper. Cut a strip about three inches wide up one side, stopping the cut about 2/3 to the top of the paper. Roll the strip to form the flag “stick” and tape it

together so it doesn't unroll. Decorate the "flag" area with Jewish and Torah symbols, or make a personalized flag representing your family. Other flagpole materials are wooden dowels and paper towel rolls. The flag may be attached with glue, tape, staples, or hot glue, depending on the material of the flag – construction paper, fabric or felt.

You may want to help younger children create a model Torah from empty paper towel rolls with a long roll of paper attached to each. Illustrate with Torah scenes and quotations. Visit a synagogue to learn about the many Torah "dressings." Create a cover for your model Torah as well as the other decorations you noticed. Dramatize some of your favorite Torah stories... the creation of the World; Adam and Eve and the snake and the apple; Noah's ark; Joseph's coat of many colors; the crossing of the Red Sea; Moses climbing Mt. Sinai; etc.

### **A FINAL WORD**

We, as a people, have always considered Simchat Torah to be one of Judaism's most joyous days. In modern times we have witnessed the holiday take on additional significance. During the 1960's, Jews in the Soviet Union adopted this holiday as their own, taking the Torahs into the streets, publicly dancing Hakafot to affirm and celebrate their commitment to the treasure of their heritage. Simchat Torah was more widely celebrated there than Yom Kippur or Passover, and crowds of thousands of Jews could be found near the Moscow and Leningrad synagogues. These celebrations became a symbol of the insistence of the Soviet Jews' right to live as Jews, and their refusal to abandon their birthright. Many of us, as Americans, find ourselves similarly longing to reconnect to our traditions. Simchat Torah, with joyfully open doors everywhere, is a good time to begin, and to continue, that connection.

Chag Sameach!

### **ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

For adults: Philip Goodman, *The Sukkot and Simchat Torah Anthology*; Aryeh Kaplan, *The Living Torah*; Barry Holtz, *Back to the Sources*; Dalia Hardof Renberg, *The Complete Family Guide to Jewish Holidays*.

For children: Elsa Okon Rael, *When Zayde Danced on Eldridge Street*.