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9-29-2021
SIMCHAT TORAH
JEWISH CELEBRATION OF GOD'S WORD

Sundown yesterday concluded the High Holy Days of Rosh Ha Shanah, Day of Atonement, and Sukkot. With that conclusion, today becomes the most jubilant celebration of all called Simchat Torah.

The Torah are the first five books of the written word of God; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Christians call it the "Pentateuch."

Simchat Torah is a great celebration featuring and honoring these five books. The Torah is also what the Jews call "the Law" and is called so in the New Testament. Synagogue worship involves reading through the Torah in full every year. It is divided into segments. A segment is read aloud every week. Members of the congregation are chosen each week to do the reading.

This day, Simchat Torah, is the "turn around point" in the year of the readings. They read the last segment of Deuteronomy, then the first segment of Genesis. The seamless transition from the end and back to "in the beginning" make for a continuous unbroken flow of the word of God.

As a celebration of the word, all the scrolls are taken out and the people carry them seven times around the sanctuary while dancing (Hava La Gila) and singing. The children usually lead the procession waving flags or banners inscribed with verses of the Torah or carrying miniature Torah scrolls. As the Torah scrolls pass by, everyone leans in to kiss the scrolls. This ceremony is called "hakafot" which means "march around" (in Hebrew) just as Israel had done at Jericho.

The study of the Torah is a never-ending process. The Hebrew term for a great Torah Scholar is "talmid chakham" meaning "wise student."

Some congregations also incorporate candles or large torches as part of their celebration. This is likely an extended variation of Simchat Bet Hash'ayva, the celebration of lights, which acknowledges Messiah as the light of the world.

The Simchat Torah is not in the scriptures. It developed in the Middle Ages among the diaspora as a means of binding the scattered Jewish populations together with customs in common and emphasizing high value upon God's written Word.

What a difference it would make for us if all Christian churches and people placed such high value upon reading and studying the Holy Bible. I do not know of any church or denomination where they read aloud through the whole Bible. Most "professing" Christians have never even read it through one time in their lifetime, much less once a year.

The Word of God is more powerful than any weapon man can devise. Why are we not so devoted to reading it? It is never to late to start. Today, Simchat Torah, is the perfect time to start.