

Rejoicing in Torah

Can Christian awareness of the Jewish festival *Simchat Torah* ('Rejoicing in the Torah') enliven their own Christian Bible reading?

What is Simchat Torah?

Simchat Torah ('Rejoicing in the Torah') is a one-day Jewish festival at the end of the seven-day festival of Sukkot. In Israel the day coincides with another holiday called *Shemini Atzeret* ('the Eighth Day of the Assembly'). Outside Israel the two holidays are treated as separate days.

The focus of *Simchat Torah* is the centrality of Torah. For Jewish communities it marks the very last day of the annual Torah reading cycle. The next day, the cycle of Torah readings begins all over again with Genesis 1:1. In synagogues, *Simchat Torah* is celebrated with joyful [dancing with the Torah](#). The conclusion of the Book of Deuteronomy is read in the synagogue followed by the opening words of the Book of Genesis. Thus there is an unbroken continuation of the annual cycle of Torah readings.

Christian awareness

Can awareness of *Simchat Torah* help our Christian Bible reading? Certainly, it can serve as a reminder of the centrality of Scripture in our own Christian lives and, in particular, the importance of the Hebrew Scriptures (our 'Old Testament' or 'First Testament'). Further, it deepens our appreciation of the unbreakable link between God, Torah and the Jewish people, and of the fact that Jesus himself was formed by the Torah traditions of Israel.

"By taking part in the synagogue celebrations where the Old Testament texts were read and commented upon, Jesus also came humanly to know these texts; he nourished his mind and heart with them, using them in prayer and as an inspiration for his actions. Thus he became an authentic son of Israel, deeply rooted in his own people's long history. (John Paul II, 11 April 1997)

Further, for those partaking in the annual [Light of Torah journey](#) and making their way through the 'five books of Moses,' the festival of *Simchat Torah* is a good time to take stock and review your Torah learning. This review is ideally done with your *havrutah* partner and others who have shared in your Torah learning. Gather over a meal, or a celebratory drink, and, together, *remember* your journey from Genesis to Deuteronomy, its ups and downs, progress and setbacks... how you set out, what you knew then, what you know now... how your attitudes (to Scripture, Tradition, life, faith, Judaism, Christianity) have been shaped in the company of the sacred text, Israel's sages, and your Torah companions.

For example, you may like to consider your:

1. Deepest insight

Name a treasured insight which the Torah revealed to you during this past year. *How* was it revealed; i.e., through what story, verse, commentator, method?

2. Favourite character

Which biblical character especially came 'alive' for you? What about their personality and story captured your heart, thoughts, imagination?

3. Burning question

The questions arising from our reading draw us into God's Word. What is one question that continues to intrigue you?

4. Greatest difficulty

Torah study is challenging for many reasons. What was one difficulty or obstacle you encountered?

5. Happiest moment

Jewish tradition speaks of 'rejoicing in the Torah' (*Simchat Torah*). Share one of the joys of your Torah journey. •

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LIGHT OF TORAH