# How to celebrate Simchat Tora in times of COVID19?

By rabbanit Coty Bitton

One of the most beautiful memories of my childhood in Melilla, Spain, is that of the weddings celebration. All weddings were held in our Synagogue, “Or Zarua”, the Synagogue of Don Yamín Benarroch. I clearly remember that after the Chuppah the couple would descended and the bride circled around the Teba (the place from where the Tora is read) and all the guests looked at her with admiration as she passed close to them, and everyone celebrated her new married life.

Simchat Torah was also celebrated in a similar way in Melilla. For each of the Hakafot a single member of the community held the Torah and circled the Teba, while the rest of the congregants singed songs in Hebrew and Ladino in honor of the Tora, from their seats, looking at the Tora with admiration and affection and kissing it from afar.

As you can see, our celebration of Simchat Torah, particularly the dancing, was a little different from the Hasidic dancing we have today. And although not everyone danced with the Torah the Simchat Torah of my childhood was very joyful.

This year we have many restrictions due to COVID. And these new guidelines seem to take some of the happiness out of this special day. In many Synagogues it has already been established that this year we will not be able to dance with the Torah. And only one person is allowed to hold the Tora while everyone remains in their seats …

But, wasn’t this how Simchat Torah was celebrated in Melilla?

I think it is imperative that we put our feelings in order and not allow our happiness to be diminished at all during this

Simchat Tora.

First of all, we have to be proud to have rabbinical and community leaders who prioritize what is most important! “Ushmartem Meod Lenafshotekhem”! Our Torah holds that the preservation of life is the highest value. And taking care of our health and safety is a beautiful way “to honor the Tora” and its commandments.

We also have to be very happy that this year we will have the opportunity to do a little more introspection, and understand that dancing with the Torah is not “the cause” of our happiness, but one of many ways to express our joy. The true “cause” of our joy is ASHER BACHAR BANU MIKOL HAAMIM VENTAN LANU ET TORATO that the Creator “chose us among all peoples and gave us His Torah ”. We are happy to belong to the nation of Israel. We are happy that HaShem has given us the Tora that guides our lives with the correct values.

At Simchat Tora we also celebrate the conclusion of the annual Tora reading cycle and the beginning of a new cycle. And even if we don’t dance with the Tora, we are happy to have the opportunity to start the new year by reading the same text but with a new look, and with our eyes full of curiosity. We are happy to live in times when we are free to study and observe the Tora. And that our children have access to Jewish schools and incredible teachers. Tora study is more accessible today than ever for all ages and levels. It is just “a click or a Zoom” away from us.

This year, in many Synagogues congregants will be invited to take a Chumash (a printed Tora book or Pentateuch), and hold it against your chest, while the Sefer Tora circles around us like the bride in a wedding ceremony. As we embrace our Tora book, we shuld resolve to be more ambitious in its study, and we should feel a desire to reach a deeper level of understanding and observance of Tora.

Even if we don’t dance to the Sefer Tora, let us express our gratitude to God and ask Him to inspire us to learn and share with our friends and family the beautiful life lessons that our Tora contains.

May we have the happiest Simchat Tora of our lives!

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