**Simchat Torah: The Possibility of Joy and of Hope**

**By Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb**

10.02.2007

Simchat Torah marks the end, and the beginning, of the endless cycle of Torah reading in our communities. We read about the death of Moses in the last chapter in Deuteronomy, and go right back to the birth of the world in Genesis. We take our Torah scrolls from the ark and dance with them, passing them among ourselves and singing joyful songs, celebrating our Book, and declaring the Torah to be "our strength and our light." And thus, we cross the threshold of the final holy day of the New Year season, in dance and song, filled with joy.

It's easy to see such delight, such light-hearted pleasure, as a momentary respite from the serious work of tikkun olam, repairing the world, to which we are called. Yet Rebbe Nachman of Bratslav (founder of Hasidic dynasty) believed that joy plays an important role in this work, redeeming us from passivity and depression in the face of overwhelming obstacles. The spiritual power of joy allows us to imagine new directions, and fashion creative approaches around obstinate challenges, leading to a state of readiness to pursue tikkun within our own hearts and in all our relations.

But the accumulation of sorrows that every person suffers means that many people cannot find such inner joy. We become trapped in dark bitterness, and lose faith in our ability to affect change, to make the world a better place. When we dance with the Torah, though, we have the chance to place ourselves in sacred motion, to "pray with our feet," affirming our joy in Torah's message: The pursuit of justice and peace is the greatest expression of our love for the covenant of Torah, and the Jewish people.

The holiday of Simchat Torah was born ten centuries ago, and as we look over the past millennium, we can certainly see many opportunities when it would have been easier for our people to give in to despair than to find joy. And yet in every generation, often in times of heartbreak, the Jewish people has stopped to dance and celebrate, to find the joy necessary to continue with our work.

In our generation, our community faces its own challenge: the sorrow of the on-going conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, the sorrow of the occupation. It is easy, when rockets fall on southern Israel and the government in Jerusalem seems farther than ever from true peace, to give in to hopelessness, to wash our hands of the whole mess and return to our own little worlds.

But Brit Tzedek believes that the antidote to passivity and crushing despair lies, in fact, in action, in an active engagement in the pursuit of peace. In the cycle of Torah reading, we intuit that from death and loss comes birth and renewed possibility -- if we allow ourselves the possibility of joy, of hope, we are reinvigorated and are ourselves repaired. We can act to shape a peaceful future by imagining that future and acting on that imagining, in sincere partnership with all who wish to prevent future violence.

Rebbe Nachman also possessed strong feelings about the use of war as a purported instrument of peace. As a witness to the Napoleonic Wars, he believed that the use of weapons was a form of idolatry. "Many foolish beliefs that people once held, such as forms of idol worship that demanded child sacrifice, etc., have disappeared. But, as of yet, the foolish belief in the pursuit of war has not disappeared."

True joy for Rebbe Nachman was rooted in the discovery of the power of peacemaking. He believed in the sacred tools of our tradition: the mitzvot of reconciliation, compassion for its own sake, and storytelling were, to his mind, more powerful instruments of tikkun than any weapon invented by man.

Recently, Israel's cabinet declared the Hamas-led Gaza Strip a "hostile entity," in a continuation of a policy of collective punishment on the Palestinians of Gaza that has led to a breakdown of basic services, wide-spread hunger and crushing despair. Such actions are in profound conflict with the Jewish values we espouse during our fall holy days. How shall we find joy, atonement when we continue to use harmful force? How can we repair our own world by devastating that of another people?

Let us rather stand together in opposition to the use of violence in all its forms and instead pursue peace through acts of reconciliation, and restorative justice. In that way, we will find the true joy that is born from divine service.

May your heart be filled with joy as you take upon yourself the mitzvah of peace for the coming year, and may our eyes behold a negotiated settlement and an end to occupation, speedily and in our days.

**Suggestions for Simchat Torah:**

Organize or attend a Simchat Torah celebration; read the final verses of Deuteronomy and the first verses of Genesis in light of the ongoing struggle between Israel and the Palestinian people. How can we find rebirth, a new beginning, in the troubles of today? How can we assure that the conflict does not itself become an endless cycle?

Organize a Simchat Torah discussion at your synagogue or among friends and family about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and creative ways that it might be resolved. Discuss how despair can lead to a lack of imagination among all people -- Arabs and Palestinians as well as Jews and Israelis -- and consider ways that each of us can find the joy necessary to move forward to a peaceful future.

Read and discuss Rebbe Nachman’s “prayer for peace.” Two versions are appended below.

**May we see the day when war and bloodshed cease,**

**when a great peace will embrace the whole world.**

**Then nation will not threaten nation and we will never again know war.**

**For all who live on earth shall realize we have not come into being to hate or to destroy.**

**We have come into being to praise, to labor and to love.**

**Compassionate God, bless the leaders of all nations with the power of compassion.**

**Fulfill the promise conveyed in Scripture: “I will bring peace to the land, and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you.**

**I will rid the land of vicious beasts and it shall not be ravaged by war.**

**Let love and justice flow like a mighty stream.**

**Let peace fill the earth as the waters fill the sea.”**

**And let us say: Amen**

\*\*\*\*

**May it be Your will, Adonai our God and God of our ancestors, that You abolish all wars and bloodshed from this world and extend a great and wonderful peace in the world. Nations shall not lift up the sword against one another, neither shall they learn to make war any more. May all the inhabitants of this universe acknowledge the one great truth; that we have not come into this world for friction and dissension, nor enmity and jealousy and vexation and bloodshed. We have come into the world solely that we might know You, eternally blessed One.**

**And therefore have mercy upon us that through us the written word will become a reality. "And I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts and no sword shall cross your land." (Lev. 26:6) "But let justice well up like water, righteousness like an unfailing stream." (Amos.5:24) "For the land shall be filled with devotion to Adonai as water covers the sea." (Is. 11:9)**

\*Based on the prayer of Rabbi Nachman of Bratslav, from Siddur Ha'avodah She'ba'lev, Service of the Heart.

**Rabbi Lynn Gottlieb** is a member of Brit Tzedek’s Rabbinic Cabinet. Rabbi Gottlieb entered pulpit life at the age of 23 in 1973, as rabbi to Temple Beth Or of the Deaf in New York City. In 1981, she became the first woman ordained in the Jewish Renewal Movement. Rabbi Gottlieb's creativity, peace and justice activism, feminism, and focus on spiritual meaning helped shape the Jewish Renewal Movement. In 1974, she founded a Jewish feminist theatre troupe called Bat Kol, which brought feminist midrash, ceremony, and storytelling to hundreds of communities throughout the US, Europe, and Canada. In 1983, she moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico, where she lived for 22 years, co-founding [Congregation Nahalat Shalom](http://www.nahalatshalom.org/).

Rabbi Gottlieb presently directs southern California-based [Interfaith Inventions](http://interfaithinventions.org/) where she works with children and adults in peace camps, interfaith ceremonies and family programs that promote respect and understanding between people of diverse faiths. It is an extension of her work as co-founder of the Muslim-Jewish Peace Walk that created pilgrimages between synagogues and mosques and other supporting faith communities throughout the US and Canada. Rabbi Gottlieb also regularly leads interfaith Peace-Builder delegations to Israel and the occupied territories.