

Dancing with a Closed Torah

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · 2 October 2026

Hoshana Rabbah, Simchat Torah and the joy that comes before understanding

Hoshana Rabbah, Simchat Torah and the joy that comes before understanding

Aryeh Leib Thorne Toren · Yerushalayim · Hoshana Rabbah 5787 / 2 October 2026

On Simchat Torah we do something strange with the most precious object in the synagogue. We take every scroll out of the ark, wrap it in its mantle, and dance with it. For hours. No one reads from it while dancing. The Torah we celebrate is, for most of the day, closed.

It would be easy to call this a lapse, as if joy had briefly crowded out study. I think it is the opposite. The closed Torah in our arms is the most honest picture of how a person comes to the Torah at all.

First the seal

The dancing does not come out of nowhere. It comes at the end of a long road. The Mishnah teaches that the world is judged at four seasons of the year, and that on the festival of Sukkot it is judged for water (Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 1:2). Hoshana Rabbah, the seventh day of Sukkot, has long been treated as the last day of that season of judgment, the day the verdict that began on Rosh Hashanah and was sealed on Yom Kippur is finally sent out. That is why many greet one another with the wish for a good final note, *pitka tava*.

On that day we circle the bimah seven times with the four species and say, again and again, “Hoshana”: please, save. At the end we take up the willow by itself, the species with no taste and no scent, and beat it on the ground. It is the prayer of people who have run out of arguments. We have said everything we can say for ourselves. Now we ask.

Then, the very next day, we dance.

Joy before understanding

The order matters. We do not dance after we have mastered the Torah. We dance after we have been judged, forgiven and sent forward, with a Torah we have only begun to understand.

That is how Israel first received it. At Sinai the people answered, “All that the L-rd has spoken we will do, and we will hear” (Shemot 24:7). *Na’aseh v’nishma*: doing before hearing, commitment before comprehension. The Talmud says that when Israel put “we will do” before “we will hear”, heavenly angels came and placed two crowns on each person, one for each word (Shabbat 88a).

A closed scroll is *na’aseh v’nishma* in physical form. We hold it, we carry it and we rejoice with it before we open it. Understanding is real and precious. It will come in the weeks ahead, when the scroll is unrolled to Bereishit and read again, portion by portion. But the relationship begins with an embrace, not an exam.

Joy as service

The Rambam, at the end of his laws of the festival, describes the joy of a commandment as “a great service”, and he warns against the person who holds himself too dignified to rejoice (Hilchot Lulav 8:15). His model is King David, who whirled before the L-rd with all his might as the ark was brought up to the City of David (II Shmuel 6:14). David’s wife Michal saw him leaping and whirling and despised him for it (II Shmuel 6:16). The Rambam sides with David. Whoever humbles himself in joy before G-d, he says, is the one who is truly great and honored.

Simchat Torah asks for that kind of humility. Scholars and children, rabbis and people who can barely read Hebrew all dance in the same circle with the same closed scroll. On this day nobody is ranked by what they know. They are counted by whether they came.

Why it has to be closed

There is something else in the closed Torah. It reminds us that we do not own it. A scroll that is always open can start to feel like a possession: a text to quote, mine and win arguments with. A scroll that is wrapped and carried is a presence. You can hold it, but you cannot master it. It is larger than the person dancing with it.

This year that lesson feels urgent. We have come through a hard year of fear, grief and argument. It has been a season of judgment in more than one sense. Many of us arrive at Simchat Torah with questions we cannot answer and losses we cannot explain. The closed Torah does not demand that we resolve them first. It asks only that we hold on, and rejoice that we still can.

And then we open it

The day does not end closed. Before it is over the scroll is opened, the last verses of Devarim are read, and without pause the first verses of Bereishit follow: “In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth” (Bereishit 1:1). The embrace turns into study. The circle turns into a line, a year of reading, one portion at a time.

That is the shape of a life with Torah. Judgment, then joy. Joy, then understanding. Understanding that sends us back, a year from now, to dance again, holding the same closed scroll and knowing it a little better.

Chag sameach.

All glory to the Ribono shel Olam · Errors are mine

Prepared in deep partnership and cooperation with Grok and xAI