

Simchat Torah: Throw a party for Torah

Just a few months before he was killed in the 1996 bus bombing, my JTS classmate Matt Eisenfeld, ז"ל, held a party in his Jerusalem apartment. It was a Saturday night, but it was hardly a typical Saturday night event. It was a *siyyum*, a conclusion of study, celebrating his completion of *Masechet Kiddushin*, a long and difficult tractate of Talmud.

I'll never forget the sense of joy at that party, as Matt taught us a passage from the tractate, and we ate and drank in his honor. It felt like a party with purpose, a party that honored his personal commitment to study, and it inspired me to begin to learn Talmud on my own. Since then, I have completed a few tractates of Talmud, and I've always thought of Matt at the concluding ritual.

The traditional *siyyum* ceremony is a powerful one. It begins with the words "Hadran Alach," May we return to you... we say in Aramaic. But the idea of *Hadran Alach* has a double meaning... it also comes from the root *hadar*, as in *hiddur mitzvah*. May the beauty of this text be upon us, may we know the beauty of this text. We are grateful that this is our portion in life. There are so many ways to spend a life, and studying Torah is a good one.

Without the traditional *siyyum*, there are other ways we can celebrate studying text. Several years ago, I finished the goal of *leyning* the entire Torah, reading every *aliyah* in traditional trope. The tradition doesn't have any ritualized *siyyum* for reading the whole Torah, but when my cousin told me he had hosted a Kiddush when he finished reading the whole Torah, I knew my next move. Having a goal helped me to get me to *shul* regularly, and it helped me get to know the people in the new communities I was joining. When I read the final *aliyah* that I had left, I hosted my own Kiddush, which I like to refer to as my Torah party.

With *Simchat Torah* around the corner, I've been thinking a lot about this Torah party. The thing is, it's not really a thing in the Jewish community. YET. But I think it should be. Rituals are a powerful way to honor the things that we feel are most important. And while there was no new ritual created for the event, there was great food, Torah candies, and even a Torah cake! Instead of singing "*mazel tov*," we sang "*v'ha'eir eineinu*," praying with our voices that God would open

each of our eyes to Torah, and “*v’lo nevosh l’olam va’ed*,” that we need never be ashamed of our connection to Judaism—or our desire to celebrate that connection with song and dance.

For me, learning Torah is something to celebrate, but not everybody has to learn a tractate of Talmud or read the whole Torah to have a party. Celebrating our learning doesn’t require that we have impossible standards. In fact, I believe that anything worth doing is worth doing—*badly*! This attitude takes the pressure off of trying to do everything perfectly, which, for me, would undoubtedly look a lot like not doing ANYTHING. I was pretty proud when I finished the first NYC triathlon, back in 2001, even though (or maybe especially because) I placed third to last in that year’s small crowd. Or when I reached my life dream of arriving at the peak of Kilimanjaro, I didn’t care that I had leaned on porters and my guide to get to the top. The guides and porters on Kilimanjaro had a phrase that they repeated many times an hour. *Pole, pole*: slowly, slowly. It turns out that slowly is the only way to get things done anyway, one step at a time. That’s pretty much the attitude I’ve had since I started reading Torah. I gave myself credit for *aliyot* even when they didn’t go perfectly. Now, when I read those aliyot again, I’ll have an opportunity to improve my reading, but planning that Torah party was the thing that got me started.

The best part about the party was hearing other people tell me what they were planning to do, how they were going to start reading Torah or put their efforts towards another goal. Now, I’m eager to attend other parties, along the same theme: Torah parties, Mishnah parties, or “I read Hebrew for the first time” parties. It’s time we start celebrating our own goals and giving meaning to our spiritual lives. My friend Matt taught me that back in 1995, and it is a message I am, years later, fully embracing. Each of us can learn something new this year (maybe through this very podcast) and maybe each of us can host a Kiddush-- or a brunch, or a champagne toast—to inspire others. *Simchat Torah*- real *Simcha*, real Torah, and the joy of living a life infused with Torah-- is available to each of us, any day of the year.