

Radical innovation and the future of Jews

By RACHEL SABATH BEIT-HALACHMI

Rethinking Judaism: Reading, interpreting, arguing about and celebrating Torah may be our time's saving innovation.



If we learn anything from Simhat Torah it should be that the future of the Jewish people depends on our capacity for radical innovation. There are signs that Jewish leaders of our time have some of the creativity and foresight of the ancient sages, who understood the necessity of inventing the holiday of Simhat Torah, but it's too soon to say whether their innovations will ultimately be as successful in uniting the Jewish people.

Scholars today may dispute which sages originated the yearly celebration of Simhat Torah (was it the sages of the Land of Israel or the sages of Babylonia, and was it in the Amoraic or Geonic period?), but the sources indicate that a radical innovation took place. They added to the end of Succot a full holiday celebrating the completion of the reading of the Torah regardless of whether a community read Torah on a triennial or an annual cycle, and regardless of whether in the Diaspora or in the Land of Israel. Torah-reading, these sages found, was far more unifying than any of the myriad of rituals of Succot.

It seems that Succot as a holiday of Jewish peoplehood failed to unify despite its pure origins. Ultimately the pilgrimage aspect was limited to a small percentage of the Jewish population, the harvest celebration was limited to those in the Land of Israel, and the rituals of dwelling in booths for seven or eight days and waving of the lulav were probably observed by only a small minority, especially as Jewish existence became more varied both in terms of practice and geography.

The sages who established Simhat Torah knew three things that we should be keenly aware of today: (1) a new era of Jewish life had emerged; (2) the most compelling ideas of the past must be our guiding principles for the future; and (3) creating new collective rituals allows for the affirmation of diverse realities and ensures the flourishing of the Jewish people wherever we dwell and regardless of how we practice other rituals.

For one day every year, despite our differences of ideology and practice, we celebrate the most unifying and important idea of our culture – that we are the People of the Book who never stop reading and interpreting it. No other single aspect of Judaism mattered then and matters today as much as being a culture of Torah readers.

This kind of cultural wisdom and communal initiative had already proven itself effective because it's precisely what enabled the ancient Israelites to move from a focus on the sacrificial cult of the Temple to the cult of the *beit midrash*, and it's what enabled us to move from a focus on the Land of Israel to an affirmation of the potential of the Diaspora. These are precisely the kinds of innovations that have preserved the possibility of a Jewish future.

BUT LET'S not miss another shared characteristic of the innovations that saved us. In each case the innovation confirmed that, as a people, we were never so stubbornly committed to a single ritual, place or practice, or even definition of who is a Jew, that we couldn't survive without it. (But we did – and still do – need a set of ideas or values with which we can collectively rejoice.) The innovation of Simhat Torah should remind us that it is far less important whether or not we agree on the legal definitions of a succa, or whether or not most Jews know what the Arba Minim (four species: lulav, arava, hadas, etrog) are, much less how to shake them, or whether or not one lives in the Land of Israel or in Los Angeles. Our collective Jewish future depends far more on whether or not one reads and discusses Jewish texts and ideas; it matters far more whether or not one joins with others to read and think about Judaism and the future of the Jewish people.

So what then is the redemptive innovation of our time? Certainly the establishment and building of the State of Israel has served in many ways as a similar force for uniting the Jewish people regardless of observance, identity, politics or geography. But if we are honest with ourselves we must also hear the argument that perhaps the State of Israel no longer plays that role for a variety of reasons.

The only other innovative “ritual” of our time, which hardly seems radical but nonetheless transcends space and religious identity in the same way, is the ever-growing practice of adult Jewish learning. More and more adults are attending Limmud and other similar events all over the globe; more and more are attending synagogue study groups; more and more “unaffiliated” Jews are finding their way to text-study experiences whether in yoga classes, coffee houses, or a myriad of institutions in Israel and all over the world.

If we were radical innovators like the sages who created Simhat Torah we would make ongoing adult text study affordable and accessible for all. We would make it as attractive and exciting as a Birthright experience for every person who wants it, in a myriad of forms, regardless of affiliation, denomination, gender, sexual orientation, race, finances or geography. Reading, interpreting, arguing about and celebrating Torah’s many faces may be, like Simhat Torah in its time, the saving innovation of our time. Once again we might find that the future of Jewish peoplehood will be secured because of our shared love of the great ideas found in the greatest book. If so, we can have great hope, and great cause for celebration.

Blessings to you and yours for a joyous Sukkot,
Rabbi Sabath