

# Absence and Presence - An End and A Beginning

Parashat Bereshit

R. Yonatan Cohen

Simchat Torah always struck me as a day defined by opposites. We both complete reading the Torah and begin reading it anew. For a moment we fulfill a mitzvah, only to realize minutes later, that we are back at the very beginning once again.

More subtly, the seven *Hakafot*, circles of joyous dancing around the Torah, attempt in their own way to mask an unobserved Shiva, seven days of mourning, for Moses, the giver of Torah, whose passing from the world is described in the closing verses of the Torah. As we read about the seven days of creation, the seven days of unobserved Shiva are redefined. The immense absence of Moses gives space for the creation of a new world. As importantly, the absence of the giver of the Torah gives license to new and creative readings of the Law.

The world is renewed, and in turn the Torah is renewed. The Torah is renewed, and in turn the world is renewed as well.

The word Simcha (joy) is used euphemistically by the rabbis for “mourning.” As prime example, Maschet Smachot is the tractate that delves into the laws of mourning. Seen this way, Simchat Torah is both a joyous and mournful dance for the Torah. A dance of completion and renewal, death and birth, absence and presence.

Rav Soloveitchik beautifully captured another aspect of absence related to the day’s celebration. In “Hakafot — Moving In Circles” the Rav noted:

“We can appreciate encircling a *mizbe’ah* [altar] or a *Sefer Torah* [Torah scroll], thereby acknowledging their centrality and holiness in Jewish life. But what is the significance of the *Sifrei Torah* [Scrolls of Torah] encircling an empty center? The answer is that the center is not empty. God is symbolically there. When nobody is there, Someone is there. There is no place bereft of His Presence. The encircling *Sifrei Torah* pay homage to their Divine Author, acknowledging that the purpose of Torah is to direct us to God.”

Moses’ absence in Simchat Torah gives space to the presence of God – the giver of the Torah by the Author of the Torah. In many ways, this is similar to the Passover Seder Hagaddah where surprisingly Moses is only mentioned once. The absence of the leader of Israel is meant to focus our attention on the true Redeemer of Israel.

There is another insight from Rav Soloveitchik that resonates deeply with me:

“During *Hakafot*, all marchers are equidistant from the center, from God. One may be Rabbi Akiba, another the Gaon of Vilna, and the next humble “hewers of wood and drawers of water” – all have equal access to God. No doors of heaven will open before whoever devoutly knocks on its gates. “God is close to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth” (Ps. 145:18).”

We are back at the beginning. The world has not yet been created and the Torah has not yet been read. There is an accessible textual absence waiting to be filled by any reader and commentator. There is a Presence waiting to be reached by anyone who truly seeks.

The music stops even as a new tune is heard.

One dance ended, but it’s hard to tell, for the circle forces a new dance to begin.