



שמיני עצרת ושמחת תורה - 2-3 October 2026 - Volume 5, Issue 49 - ט"ו תשרי תשפ"ז

Oneg Shabbas explores drinking in the weekly Torah portion, along with timely essays on drinking in Jewish life.

Celebrating Simḥas Torah

While all of our holidays have some element or aspect of drinking, perhaps none is greater than that of Simḥas Torah. The drinking on this holiday affects even the prayer services and what is typically done, owing to the amount of drinking taking place on this holiday.

For a little background, Simḥas Torah was created in the diaspora, specifically, on the second day of Shemini Atzeres. Not only is there no second day of Shemini Atzeres in Israel, but the communities in Israel many centuries ago used to read the Torah on a triennial reading cycle, whereas the Babylonian Jewish communities would read it on an annual basis (cf. the first chapter of Avraham Ya'ari's השתלשלות מנהגיו תולדות חג שמחת-תורה: השתלשלות מנהגיו (Jerusalem: Mosad HaRav Kook, 1964)). The Jewish communities in Babylonia carved out this second day of Shemini Atzeres to serve as the final day of the reading of the Torah and to reset their reading.

As the name implies, Simḥas Torah (Joy/Rejoicing of Torah), the festivities of the day are filled with celebrating the reading through of the Torah, whether through reading, dancing, or other activities. One of the earliest recorded mentions of the drinking parties that are to take place was written by Rabbi Ya'akov ben Asher (1270-1340), who recorded (טור או"ח תרטס):

And in Ashkenaz, they are accustomed that the one who completes [the Torah] and the one who begins [it again] make vows of freewill offerings, and they invite all their friends, and they make a drinking party and a celebration and a festival day for the conclusion of the Torah and for its beginning.

This day on the final day of the holiday season is a day for drinking-parties to take place, as part of celebrating both the concluding of the reading of the Torah, as well as its restarting. We read later of Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530-1572), who wrote (הגה לשו"ע או"ח תרס"ט):

The last day of Yom Tov is called	וקורין י"ט האחרון
"The Rejoicing of the Torah"	שמחת תורה לפי

{continued on page 3}

Mysticism, Decrees, and Intoxication

A late 18th century rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Mirkes, wrote the following (שלחן שלמה: אורח חיים תרס"ח:א) in 1771:

It is forbidden to establish a meal from Minhah onward, nor like those who sit down for a drinking session and become intoxicated from Minhah until they are unable to recite Kiddush at night.

אסור לקבוע סעודה מן
המנחה ולמעלה ולא
כאותן שקובעין לשתות
ומשתכרין מנחה עד
שאין יכולין לקדש בלילה

Here, he is pointing out that there are Jews who get into drinking sessions and end up drunk before they even make it to being able to say Kiddush HaYom for Simḥas Torah(!). Moreover, he further writes (שלחן שלמה: אורח) (חיים תרס"ט:ב):

As to what they do every festival after Minḥah on the first day: They drink and become very intoxicated. It is forbidden to establish a drinking session of mead or wine, as explained above. Moreover, they become intoxicated and are then unable to recite Kiddush.

מה שנוהגין בכל י"ט
אחר מנחה של יום
ראשון שותין ומשתכרין
מאד שאסור לקבוע
לשטות דבש או יין ע"ש
ללעיל ועוד דמשתכרין
ואין יכולין לעשות
הקידוש

This is especially so on Simḥat Torah, for then, after Minḥah, the notes containing what has been decreed for the entire year are handed over, and there is no possibility of reversing [the decree]. Therefore, one should take care during that time to study [Torah], if possible, or to pray, or to discuss matters pertaining to a mitzvah.

ובפרט בשמחת תורה כי
ואז אחר המנחה מוסרין
הפתקין מה שנחתם על
כל השנה ואין להשיב
לכן יזהר ללמוד באותו
הזמן א"א או להתפלל או
לדבר צרכי מצוה

It seems that, building off of what he wrote above, one should not be getting involved with these late afternoon drinking sessions towards the end of the first day of any holiday, since he has witnessed many Jews becoming so drunk that they are unable to even perform *Kiddush HaYom* for the second night(!). I am pretty surprised that, where/when he lived, it was so widespread a practice for Jews to be getting drunk then, but it is also understandable to get involved in drinking sessions then, since there is still plenty of holiday left and it is an enjoyable way to use one's holiday time and experience. However, the surprising part for me was the aspect of getting so drunk as to be unable to perform *Kiddush HaYom*.

All of that was for holidays, in general, then he goes on to talk specifically about this time for these final hours of Shemini Atzeres that unfold into

{continued on page 3}

Oneg Shabbas is composed by, edited by, and published by Rabbi Drew Kaplan.

If you have any comments, compliments, or suggestions, feel free to reach out at Drew@JewishDrinking.com



Today we will be dancing with our precious, holy and HEAVY Torah Scrolls. It is vitally important nobody drop one!



Dukhening on Simḥas Torah

What happens when two cherished Jewish practices come into tension? On Simḥas Torah, the custom of drinking in celebration of completing the Torah encounters a longstanding halakhic discussion over whether, and under which circumstances, a kohen who has consumed wine may perform Birkas Kohanim - the priestly blessing; also known as *dukhening*. This question has helped shape when, and even whether, kohanim bless the congregation on Simḥas Torah in different communities.

Indeed, this question provides one of the most well-known challenges of the day when it comes to prayer services. While this activity takes place on a daily basis in Israel, Ashkenazi communities customarily have it only taking place at Mussaf on holidays (Sefardic communities have a different practice). Since *kiddusha rabbah* is typically conducted by those who have been called up to the Torah following *Shaharit* and drinking ensues, which generates a quandary, regarding kohanim (priests) and their consumption. While readers may want to check out the 161st episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show* regarding a variety of rabbinic opinions on how much alcohol kohanim are permitted to drink prior to providing the priestly blessing, there are some opinions that kohanim should not be under the influence while providing it. Thus, what should be done with this blessing?

Three Different Approaches

Apparently, three different approaches were taken to respond to providing the priestly blessing on Simḥat Torah, since drinking takes place prior to Mussaf. Rabbi Mordekhai ben Avraham Yaffe (1530-1612) advocated doing away with this blessing altogether in the diaspora (בוש או"ח תרס"ט):

We are not accustomed to [have the kohanim] ascend [on Simḥat Torah] to provide the priestly blessing, since the nation is so busy with their rejoicing that drunkenness is common.

ואין נוהגין לעלות לדוכן מפני שמחת העם שטרדין בשמחתן ושכחיו שכרות



Of course, this is a reasonable suggestion, since this avoids the problem of drunken priestly blessing, but it also makes it so that it is not even an option to be provided.

Instead of doing entirely away with this blessing, commenting on this text, Rabbi Eliyahu Spira (1660-1712) strove for two alternative options, seeking to still allow for the priestly blessing to be provided (אליה רבה או"ח) (תרס"ט):

Here in Prague, we are accustomed to have the kohanim ascend to provide the priestly blessing at Mussaf. It's only in Pinḥas' shul that they ascend in the morning service, as written in the books of customs.

פה פראג נוהגים לעלות במוסף רק בבית רב פנחס נהגים הכנסת פנחס נהגים בשחרית כמו שכתבו המנהגים



Similar to Rabbi Yaffe, Rabbi Yehiel Mikhel ha-Levi Epstein (1829-1908) wrote (ערוך השולחן, אורח חיים תרס"ט):

Kohanim do not ascend to provide the priestly blessing, since they normally will be drinking wine or whiskey after reading the Torah.

ואין עולין לדוכן, מפני... שרגילין לשתות יין ויין שרוף אחר קריאת ספר תורה.....



However, not being satisfied with simply dismissing this opportunity, a kohen, Rabbi Yisrael Meir ha-Kohen Kagan (1838-1933) mentions all three of these practices, quoting both Rabbi Spira and Rabbi Yaffe, and then concludes (משנה ברורה תרס"ט:י"ז):

And every place should practice according to their custom, as long as they are careful to have the kohanim not drink [when they perform the blessing].

וכל מקום לפי מנהגו ויזהרו שלא ישתו



Related Episode

A related episode of *The Jewish Drinking Show* is the 161st episode on the topic of Dukhening Under the Influence.



In addition to being on YouTube and podcast players, you can also find it at JewishDrinking.com/161DUI



Description of Different Approaches

In an insightful article on this topic, Rabbi Akiva Males provided further insights into these possibilities ("Friends Don't Let Friends Drink and Dukhen: Birkat Kohanim and Simḥat Torah in the Diaspora", *Tradition* 49.2 (Summer 2016), 60-62):

Custom 1: As we have seen, R. Moses Isserles staunchly defended the longstanding Ashkenazic custom of restricting *Birkat Kohanim* throughout the year to Musaf on the holidays alone. His explanation of this custom was based on the integral role that a true state of happiness plays in *Birkat Kohanim*. The need for happiness is so great that *Birkat Kohanim* simply cannot take place when that state cannot be fully felt. According to R. Isserles, such a state can only be achieved at the Musaf service during the holidays. Accordingly, the same limitations which apply to *Birkat Kohanim* during any other holiday apply on *Simḥat Torah* as well. Therefore, *Birkat Kohanim* can only take place during Musaf and at no other point – on *Simḥat Torah*. Engaging in *Birkat Kohanim* at that time, however, needs to be carefully supervised to ensure that no Kohanim who have imbibed intoxicating beverages bless the congregation.

Custom 2: While fully agreeing with the need to limit *Birkat Kohanim* to the narrow window of Musaf during the holidays, some communities realized this would cause serious challenges on *Simḥat Torah*. Having completed a full year's worth of weekly Torah readings, people would feel a strong urge to celebrate the occasion by toasting one another. In the midst of such a celebratory atmosphere, it would be too difficult to control which Kohanim remained eligible to bless the congregation and which ones needed to refrain from doing so based on how many toasts they had enjoyed.

Such locales were left with just two options: A) completely omitting *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simḥat Torah*, and B) moving *Birkat Kohanim* from Musaf to *Shaharit* on that day.

Many of those communities did not consider cancelling *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simḥat Torah* to be an option. After all, with so few opportunities for Kohanim to bless the congregations of Ashkenazic lands, *Simḥat Torah* was a precious opportunity to receive those blessings. As such, many congregations hoped to find a way to make that happen. Not willing to lose out on *Birkat Kohanim*, they took the bold step of moving *Birkat Kohanim* to

{continued on page 4}

Jewish Drinking, Inc. is a 501(c)3 initiative to educate about drinking in Jewish wisdom, tradition, history, practice, and more in order to enrich people's lives.

Tax-deductible donations made be contributed at JewishDrinking.com/Donate



{*Shemini Atzeres*, continued from page 1}

Simḥas Torah, where he speaks of some sort of a mystical chronology where the final hours before the heavenly documents are handed over is taking place. It seems as if he sees it not as if the final decrees of Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur has taken place, but that they are taking place at that time in the annual judgment process; thus, he thinks one should be using this time for better performance of studying Torah, praying, or some other holy activity, rather than merely enjoying the holiday.

Davening Under the Influence and Halakhic Boundaries

Another rabbi who wrote against this practice was Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen Kagan (1838-1933), who did so on account of different reasons, as he wrote in 1907 (משנה ברורה תרס"ז:טז):

Regarding the practice of those in certain places, that, after *minḥah* on the first day of Shemini Atzeret, they set themselves to drink until *ma'ariv*. And sometimes, they continue this activity until an hour or so into the night, not in accordance with the proper practice, on account of many reasons:

The first of which is, as we have read in §99, that if one drank a quarter-*log* of wine, one should not pray, even if one is still able to speak in front of The King. And this is also the case if one drank other intoxicating beverages; see there in §99:1. And even if one drank non-intoxicating beverages, once it reaches the time of possible darkness, then one needs to make Kiddush, and it is forbidden to taste anything until they make Kiddush.

And even after Kiddush, behold, it holds them back from eating on account of Shema-reading of the evening. And the only tasting that is permitted is simply a taste, such as types of fruits or an egg's-worth of bread, but no further. Indeed, one should seek out a merit on their behalf, to remind them so they should not forget the evening prayer.

However, one can seek a merit for them, in that a group reminds one another and they will not come to forget the Evening Prayer. Nevertheless, in any event, one must be careful not to drink intoxicating beverages then. All of this is explained above in §99:1-2.

Rabbi Kagan has several issues with those who begin their drinking celebrations in this in-between period of Shemini Atzeret and Simḥas Torah, the first of which is praying under the influence, referencing Rabbi Yosef Karo's *Shulḥan Arukh*. While Rabbi Karo (1488-1575) did, indeed, record in his work to not pray if one had consumed a few ounces of wine, he then cites the Talmudic standard of still being able to pray as long as one is able to speak before The King (*Eruvin* 64a). While Rabbi Kagan is not okay with even praying while having had a few drinks, he does not like even that leniency.

Fortunately, he then moves on to another issue: that of *Kiddush HaYom*. Indeed, one needs to make *Kiddush HaYom* when it gets dark, so while there is not much to work in their favor, he kindly advised readers to seek out merit on the behalf of those who continue to drink during this time without having made *Kiddush HaYom*.

מה שנוהגין באיזה מקומות שאחר מנחה של יו"ט ראשון קובעין עצמן לשתות עד מערב ולפעמים נמשך ד"ז עד שעה ויותר בלילה שלא כדון הוא מפני כמה טעמים א) דק"ל בסימן צ"ט דאם שתה יין כדי רביעית אל יתפלל אף שיכול לדבר עדיין בפני המלך וה"ה אם שתה שאר משקין המשכרין ע"ש

בס"ק א' ואפילו אם שותה שאר משקין שאין משכרין כיון שהגיע ספק חשיכה חל עליו חובת קידוש ואסור לטעום עד שיקדש ואפילו לאחר קידוש הלא מעובר לאכול מחמת ק"ש של ערביה ואינו מותר רק טעימה בעלמא דהוא מיני פירות או פת כביצה ולא יותר אכן יש לחפש עליהם זכות דברים מדכרי אהדי ולא יבואו לשכוח תפלת ערביה אבל עכ"פ יש ליהור שלא לשתות אז משקה המשכר ומבואר הכל לעיל בס"ט ס"ק א' וב'



While he concludes with dissuading anyone from drinking intoxicating beverages at this time, one also senses that he is suggesting that as a best practice, even if it will not be followed.

Comparative Analysis: Mystical Vigilance vs. Technical Halakhah

Both Rabbi Mirkes and Rabbi Kagan were responding to the same entrenched social reality in late 18th and early 20th century Ashkenaz: a Jewish populace eager to extend holiday celebrations into the transitional hours between Shemini Atzeres and Simḥas Torah through drinking. While both rabbis had issues with Jews drinking and then getting drunk during this liminal period, Rabbi Mirkes emphasized the spiritual urgency of the moment, while Rabbi Kagan focused on preserving the formal integrity of the liturgical aspects, especially for *Kiddush HaYom*, but also for mental clarity for prayer.

Conclusion: The Persistence of Holiday Revelry

For both Rabbi Mirkes and Rabbi Kagan to report the widespread drinking (and drunkenness) that took place in Ashkenazi places in the late 18th and on through the early 20th century during this twilight period of Shemini Atzeres as it went into Simḥas Torah is pretty fascinating, as it became so noticeable of a widespread practice as to earn the ire of these rabbis. Clearly, this practice represented a long-standing tension between popular celebration of this holiday time versus formal halakhic discipline amongst the rabbis. However we decide to celebrate and enjoy this fascinating time bridging this liminal period, if drinking is involved, please enjoy responsibly.

L'chaim 

{Simḥas Torah continued from page 1}

because we rejoice on it, making a festive meal of drinking in honor of the finishing of the Torah. It is customary for the person who finishes the Torah and the one who starts Genesis to make a donation and invite everybody to a drinking party.

Clearly, this is a very joyous day, as well as one filled with drinking.

Quarelling

While a day filled with drinking and joyfulness sounds enjoyable, this could also lead to some brawling, as a late 18th century rabbi, Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Mirkes, described in 1771 (אורח חיים תרס"ג:ח):

They have the custom to take out every Torah scroll and circle the bimah, and, from this, arise several disputes, quarrels, and physical fights, especially since, at that time, they are intoxicated.

While Rabbi Mirkes does not describe how they sought to de-escalate these men from their being quarrelsome owing in part to their being drunk, it is still a fascinating description of what he saw in synagogues in the late 18th century.

Descriptions of Ashkenazi Experiences

Through memoirs, we are able to be provided with descriptions of how the holiday was celebrated. For instance, Pauline Wengeroff (1833-1916), the only nineteenth-century Russian Jewish woman to publish a memoir, described the celebration growing up in the following way:

On this day, you saw drunken Jews in the streets, something we otherwise only very rarely had occasion to experience. In our house, too, there was plenty of excitement. All kinds of drinks

{continued on page 4}

{Simchas Torah, continued from page 3}

were prepared; the Jewish kitchen had to offer the best foods. Many guests were invited to lunch; the children and servants, too, were given full freedom, and strict discipline was abolished. My father, like all the guests, considered it a mitsve (a religious deed) to get tipsy at the table. My parents did not stop the young men when they danced and sang playfully, indeed wildly; Father even sang gaily along with them. Only the notes of the fiddle were missing, since the Jew was never allowed to touch a musical instrument on the festivals. There were also many religious table songs that made allusion to this joyful day and were sung in chorus. For my father, simchas torah day had particular significance. As I have already said, my father's main occupation was Talmud study, which he was even more eager to pursue whenever his business suffered losses. He would turn his back to the world, escape into his study room, and live only al hatauro ve'al ho'avau, as the Jew put it succinctly, that is, only in learning the laws and in prayer, which was the chief purpose of his life. Thus, from time to time, he would make a siyyum; such an event was celebrated very joyously and brought respect and honor, especially when it was a siyyum over the whole shas, that is, completing study of the entire Talmud, whose extent and unfathomable depth our sages compared to the ocean! My father used to keep his siyyum for a simchas torah.

Pauline Wengeroff, *Memoirs of a Grandmother: Scenes from the Cultural History of the Jews of Russia in the Nineteenth Century*, Volume One, trans. Shulamit S. Magnus (Stanford University Press, 2010), 167-168 (as quoted in Eliezer Brodt, "Simchas Torah and its customs, Including an Appendix From R' Chaim Zev Malinowitz Zt"l: Celebrating Simchas Torah All Year Round", *The Seforim Blog* (28 September 2023)).

One of the intriguing aspects of this description of her father's behaviors on this holiday is that he was Rabbi Yehudah Yudel Halevi Epstein (1806-1879), a student of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin (1749-1821), who founded the Volozhin Yeshiva.

A description of the celebrations on this day in early 20th century Russia was composed by Menachem Mendel Frieden (1878-1963), who wrote:

After the processions, members of the congregation are honored by being called up for the reading of the Torah, ... and then people disperse to their homes to eat and to rejoice in the spirit of the holiday. Again, the reins are loosened. People go from house to house and drink no end of liquor. Even those who have taken a vow of abstinence don't abide by it strictly on this day; they get drunk and engage in all sorts of childish behavior, all in the name of rejoicing over the Torah.

Menachem Mendel Frieden, *A Jewish Life on Three Continents: The Memoir of Menachem Mendel Frieden*, trans. Lee Shai Weissbach (Stanford University Press, 2013), 160-161 (as quoted in Eliezer Brodt, "Simchas Torah and its customs, Including an Appendix From R' Chaim Zev Malinowitz Zt"l: Celebrating Simchas Torah All Year Round", *The Seforim Blog* (28 September 2023)).

Conclusion

Taken together, these sources show that drinking on Simchas Torah was not merely incidental to the day's festivities; it has become woven into a wider culture of communal meals, open homes, singing, dancing, hospitality, and the celebration of Torah study and its completion. At the same time, Rabbi Mirkes' account of quarrels and the memoirists' frank descriptions of intoxication remind us that such joy could sometimes exceed its intended bounds. The enduring Simchas Torah challenge, then, has been to celebrate with genuine abandon while remembering what the celebration is for: not simply the drinking itself, but the privilege of living with the Torah, completing it together, and immediately beginning it anew. Of course, it seems as no mere accident that - for numerous centuries - drinking has become a significant aspect of this celebrating. As such, I'm wishing you a hearty l'chaim for this year's Simchas Torah!

L'chaim 

{Birkas Kohanim, continued from page 2}

Shaharit on *Simhat Torah*. By moving those blessings to a point in the service which preceded the Torah reading - and celebratory toasts - they ensured that all of their Kohanim were in fact eligible to participate in *Birkat Kohanim*.

How did those communities justify this break from the classic Ashkenazic custom which limited *Birkat Kohanim* to the Musaf service of the holidays alone? It is possible to say that their thought process was similar to the above-cited observation of the *Arukh ha-Shulhan* (O.H. 128:64):

Behold, there is certainly no proper explanation of our custom to neglect the Biblical precepts of *Birkat Kohanim* all year long... However, what can we do? It is as if a heavenly voice called out and will not allow us to engage in *Birkat Kohanim* throughout the year...

In the view of those communities, the ultimate reason behind this Ashkenazic custom to limit *Birkat Kohanim* to Musaf during the holidays alone was never fully clear. As such, some communities recognized they could not engage in *Birkat Kohanim* during Musaf on *Simhat Torah* since there would be no way to properly monitor which Kohanim should bless the congregation. At the same time, they were not prepared to omit *Birkat Kohanim* altogether on that day. As such, those communities felt justified in taking the bold step of moving *Birkat Kohanim* from Musaf to *Shaharit* on *Simhat Torah*.

Custom 3: Now it is easy to understand how a third custom - that of omitting *Birkat Kohanim* altogether on *Simhat Torah* - developed. This custom adheres most closely to the ancient Ashkenazic custom which R. Isserles detested. As R. Isserles explained, *Birkat Kohanim* can only be recited when the Kohanim are in an absolute state of happiness. In the Diaspora, such a level of joy can only be achieved during Musaf on the holidays. As such, there were simply no other times of the year when Ashkenazim living outside the land of Israel could honestly experience such happiness.

Since allowing *Birkat Kohanim* during *Musaf* on *Simhat Torah* was highly problematic, and moving those blessings to *Shaharit* was simply not an option for some communities, there remained no way for Kohanim to recite the priestly blessings in those locales. As such, for those who felt compelled to take R. Isserles' explanation of a perplexing but longstanding Ashkenazic custom seriously, no option for performing *Birkat Kohanim* on *Simhat Torah* in the Diaspora remained. Hence, odd as it sounds, in some Ashkenazic communities - outside the Land of Israel - the custom developed to completely omit the priestly blessings on *Simhat Torah*.

Conclusion

The differing customs surrounding *Birkas Kohanim* on Simchas Torah reveal more than a technical disagreement about timing. They show communities trying to honor two deeply valued dimensions of the day: the exuberant celebration of completing the Torah and the solemn privilege of receiving the kohanim's blessing. Some communities preserved the blessing by moving it earlier, before the Torah reading and the day's celebratory drinking; others retained it at Musaf, but required care that kohanim remain eligible to participate; still others omitted it rather than risk its being recited improperly. Far from diminishing Simchas Torah, these varied practices reflect the seriousness with which Jewish communities have sought to make room for both joy and religious responsibility. Whether you are in a synagogue that has dukhening take place or not, or whether it has been moved or not, it is a fascinating liturgical change, owing to drinking.

L'chaim 