

# Journeying through the Torah: Program for Simchat Torah

Nicole Wilson-Spiro

Goals: To allow students to physically experience the unique nature of the ongoing cycle of Torah. To acquaint students with some of the highlights of the Torah story, as well as with some of the customs of Simchat Torah.

This program works well as a family education program or for children grades K-5. The main portion of the program is set up through three stations – *B’raishit* (the beginning of the Torah), *Lev HaTorah* (the middle of the Torah), and *Callat/Hatan Torah* (the end of the Torah).

At *B’raishit* place a sign with an arrow reading “this way to *Lev HaTorah*”; at *Lev HaTorah* place a sign with an arrow reading “this way to *Callat/Hatan Torah*”; at *Callat/Hatan Torah* place a sign with an arrow reading “this way to *B’raishit*.” You can as much fun as you would like with the journeying metaphor. For example, children might have to climb through tunnels or hop on colored mats to move from one station to the next. To reinforce the cyclical nature of our Torah readings, you may want to have everyone move four times – for example, from station one, to station two, to station three, and then back to station one. The students will not actually repeat the activity at their first station, but they will see that they are back where they started.

## Introduction:

Begin by explaining that the Torah is a very special book. Most books we read the beginning, the middle and then the end. But as soon as we get to the end of the Torah, we read the beginning again the very same day – Simchat Torah. We are never done reading the Torah. Today we are going to take a journey all the way through the Torah - and wind up back where we started!

## Station 1 - B’raishit (lit. “first” or “in the beginning” or even “when”)

Materials: watercolor paints and absorbent paper (watercolor paper works very well and allows the colors to spread beautifully)

Read the following excerpt from Genesis 1:1-2 twice and instruct students to listen very carefully.

“When God began to create heaven and earth, the earth was messy and empty. With darkness over the deep oceans. And a God wind blowing over the water.”

You might want to help the students to think about they heard by asking the following questions:

According to our text, what did the world look like before creation?

What existed? Wind, oceans, darkness

What didn’t exist? Moon, sun, stars, planets etc

What would a “God wind” look like in this environment?

Pass out watercolor paints and instruct the students to paint what the world looked like before creation. Remind them that nobody really knows, so they can't be wrong.

### Station 2 – Lev HaTorah (lit. “the heart of the Torah”)

Materials:

Foam paper or other study paper, string to hang the posters, markers, copies of the study materials

At the very center of the Torah are the famous words, “*V’ahavta L’raicha Camocha.*” They are called the heart of the Torah. When the famous rabbi Hillel was asked to summarize the whole Torah (standing on one foot), he said almost the same words, “What is hateful to you, don’t do to your neighbor. The rest is commentary – go and learn it” (BT Shabbat 31a).

Have students break into *hevrutah* (study buddies) and study the text and answer the following questions.

“You should not hate your brother or sister in your heart... You should not take revenge or bear a grudge against other Jews. Love your fellow human being like yourself. I am God – listen to my laws” Leviticus 19:17-19.

1. The Torah tells us to do or not do four things here. What are they?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

2. Besides the fact that these words are found in the middle of the Torah, why are they called “Lev HaTorah, the Heart of the Torah”?

3. It would have made sense to say only, “You should not hate your brother or sister.” Why does the text add, “in your heart”? Why is it dangerous to hate people in your heart?

As a group brainstorm concrete ways we can follow “*V’ahavta L’raicha Camocha*” in our community.

Although we know in our hearts how to treat people kindly, sometimes we forget and need a reminder. Each person makes a sign that can be hung as a reminder around the synagogue.

### Station Three – Callat/Hatan Torah (“the bride/groom of the Torah”)

Materials: Torah scroll, butcher paper, pre-made crown, breastplate, pointer and belt (see below).

Usually two people are honored with a special *aliyah* on *Simchat Torah*: the *Hatan Torah* (“Groom of the Torah”) who does the *aliyah* for the last verses of Deuteronomy and the *Callat B’raishit* (“Bride of *B’raishit*”) who does the *aliyah* for the first verses of Genesis.

These people aren’t literally married to the Torah, but what does it mean to say that we are all symbolically married to the Torah? Do you feel married to the Torah?

This station is a good time to allow the children to interact with a Torah scroll. If you have a large group, you can unroll the whole scroll and point out various highlights, including the Song at the Sea, which is written to look like the sea splitting, and also “*V’ahavta L’raicha Camocha*” from station two. You also might want to have someone chant the last few verses from the Torah while the children gather round and watch up close. Also, with older children, you can pass the Torah from person to person and allow them to kiss and hold the Torah.

As a fun ending, two children can become the Torah: Take a long piece of butcher paper and have them start at either end and roll towards each other. Then place on each of their heads a *keter* (a crown), a *choshen* (a breastplate), and tie around them a *chagorah* (belt). One child can hold a *yad* (pointer). I make the crown and breastplate out of cardboard covered in tin foil. Make sure to have your camera ready! If you have time, you can ask the children dressed as the Torah to speak as the Torah and explain what it is like to be the Torah – I have received some very interesting answers!

#### Snack

Fruit by the foot, rolled around thin pretzels makes a yummy Torah treat.