

SPACE TORAH

SIMCHAT TORAH - REJOICING WITH/OFF THE TORAH REJOICING OF THE TORAH IN SPACE WITH NASA ASTRONAUT Dr. JEFF HOFFMAN

Simchat Torah is a Jewish holiday that begins on the 23rd of Hebrew month of *Tishrei* (on the 22nd, in Israel), the day after the last day of the *Sukkot* festival. The holiday celebrates the end of the annual Torah reading cycle (which consists of 54 portions), and the beginning of a new cycle, starting with the first reading, Genesis (*Bereshit*). On this day, it is customary to dance and sing with the Torah scrolls in the synagogue. ([National Library of Israel](#))

This year in your community, hold an “out of this world” *Simchat Torah*! Celebrate the first Torah in space and its significance.

In 1996, on his fifth and last mission, NASA astronaut Dr. Jeff Hoffman took a Torah scroll on space shuttle Columbia. On Shabbat, while orbiting earth, he read from the Book of Genesis (*Bereshit*).



“In the beginning G-d created Heaven and Earth”.

This was the first time a Torah scroll was taken to space. The second time was in 2003 by Israeli astronaut Ilan Ramon, also on space Shuttle Columbia.

In a video recording from that space flight, Jeff Hoffman reflected on this act and special moment and said:

**Having brought the Torah here, for me,
makes space something special; it brings
the holiness of human life into space.**

Dr. Jeff Hoffman, NASA Astronaut, 1996

As we celebrate *Simchat Torah* and the joy of the Torah, the Space Torah reminds us that even when we as humanity are engaged in most advanced technologies, the ancient Torah is still relevant and important.

Do you know of any other groups in the world (besides the Jewish people) who dance and rejoice with their holy book/text? Why do you think this tradition was developed over the years?

What values does the Torah teach us that you find meaningful?

On that flight, astronaut Jeff Hoffman also said:

"We astronauts are human beings and when we travel, like all explorers we bring with us part of our culture, our history, our traditions."

What Jewish object would you take with you to space? Why?

More about *Simchat Torah*: The holiday is mentioned in the Torah as *Shemini Atzeret*, though the biblical text does not note any commandments. The holiday's new vibe as well as its name, *Simchat Torah* ("Rejoicing with/of the Torah"), were adopted after the Sages of Babylon instituted the annual Torah reading cycle. Over the generations, the annual reading cycle was adopted in the Land of Israel and in the Diaspora, and the name *Simchat Torah* took root alongside *Shemini Atzeret*.

***Simchat Torah* Commandments and Customs:** The holiday's main custom is the *Hakafot*, in which worshippers circle the Synagogue with the Torah scrolls on the eve and morning of the holiday, a custom that probably began in the 16th century and has since spread to most Jewish communities. It is customary to remove the Torah scrolls from the ark and carry them in a joyous procession around the *bimah* (the synagogue's main platform from where the Torah is read) to the accompaniment of singing and dancing. Many communities customarily complete seven circles.

On *Simchat Torah*, it is customary to honor worshipers with an *aliyah* to the Torah (a congregant is called to the *bimah* to recite one of the blessings for the reading of the Torah). Children's participation is specially emphasized. To endear the Torah to them, children often receive small Torah scrolls, special flags, snacks and surprises on the holiday. Another custom, *Aliyat Kol HaNe'arim*, invites all the congregation's boys up to the *bimah*, where they gather under a *tallit* and recite the blessing of *HaMalakh HaGo'el* ("The Redeeming Angel").

In Jewish tradition, the Torah is likened to a bride and the people of Israel to a groom, and therefore it is customary to call the reader who completes the annual reading the *Hatan Torah*, (lit. "Bridegroom of the Torah") and the reader of the first Torah portion of the new cycle the *Hatan Bereshit* (lit. "Bridegroom of Genesis"). The roles are usually given to persons the community wishes to honor, and the grooms often host a *kiddush* (a light meal) for the entire community afterward.

([From the National Library of Israel](#))



Book a screening of the award-winning **Space Torah** short film (25 min) in your community.

Reach out to spacetorah@gmail.com. Screening fee is \$25 for Moishe House communities and can be used as part of the *Chag*/Holiday Grant expenses.

Hold a weekly Torah study group in your community to explore the weekly Torah portion (*parashah* in Hebrew פרשה)

Participate in a *Simchat Torah* celebration in your community.

Resource created by Rachel Raz, Moishe House Jewish Life Specialist and Founder of the Space Torah Project