

The Shtomp, Or The Case Against Religious Dancing

Simchat Torah, the festival of Rejoicing Over The Law, is upon us and once again I find myself completely out of sync with most of my coreligionists. It is not that I don't love Simchat Torah. Who wouldn't? It is the way we are expected to celebrate I have a problem with.

The Torah demands that we enjoy life in general and our festivals in particular. And enjoyment is understood on two levels. One is taking pleasure from and appreciating the material gifts we are fortunate to have, whether many or few. I do. I regard myself as a very blessed person. I thank God every day for my good fortune. And I find spiritual pleasure far less transient and ephemeral than ordinary physical delights. But nowhere can I find any support for defining pleasure as stomping around in a tight circle of sweaty males, having my feet stamped on, my shins kicked, my suit pulled out of shape, hot unsavory breath blown in my face, and my tallit and kipah sent flying to be trampled underfoot. But that is what happens at most synagogues on Simchat Torah. Why does it have to be that way?

We suffer from the tyranny of conventional expectations that have increased in their intrusiveness over the years. If this is how "everyone" does it, then put up and shut up and damn well enjoy it! You'll tell me I am too English, too uptight, a boring old man. I like a good dance, where steps are synchronized, where there is coordinated movement, a stirring tune, and space to move and enjoy the whirl and the sense of the carefree losing oneself in the rhythm and the physical exertion. It reminds me of the good old days of Israeli folk dancing, now sadly lost to post-Zionist pop culture.

But what happens on Simchat Torah? A mass of bodies forced reluctantly to participate in a boring convention, press in on each other in a restricted space and try to force jolliness by stomping around in a sad circle, constantly interrupted by others barging or being pulled reluctantly in, forced into the ever-tighter, claustrophobic knot of compressed bodies squeezed against bodies, and it is barely possible to move half a foot at a time. It's a religious shuffle, painfully weaving its way around the bimah, a "shtomp". What kind of pleasure is that?

Or a small circle of enthusiastic youngsters who do really know how to dance, whirl around in the middle kicking their legs with no regard to anyone else, whacking their oblivious way round and round like a mad whirligig until they have either prevented anyone else from dancing or have been swamped by so many others who cannot dance but want to force their way into the only exciting spot on the floor. Then the whirling circle inevitably becomes so congested that the good dancers give up and go off to find another space and the process starts over again. It's often the same at weddings, except there if you look across at the women, they are dancing in elegant, expert styles, and proper steps, with enough space to do it so well that I prefer watching them across the mechitzah (surreptitiously) to joining in the boring

crocodile of suited men squeezing up against each other looking like reluctant draftees doing their duty because that is what is expected.

To make matters worse, nowadays our celebrations are increasingly invaded by young neophytes and religious acolytes brandishing bottles of vodka as if alcohol is the only way to God. They have been conditioned to thinking that forcing drink down people's throats is a Divine command that earns them brownie points in the Next World, or at least cements their reputation as members of the faithful. I cannot think of anything more insulting to the Divine than the implication that only in drunken stupor can one get any closer to Heaven. I like a drink, though single malt is my preferred spirit. Even so, one or two is enough. It is not a bar. I hate being pressed to drink more, particularly under the pretense of a religious obligation, when neither my body nor my mind wants to. Anyway, I would rather have a good, dry red wine. I find vodka total unappealing, even when doused in orange or tomato juice. It is fine for drunken Russian peasants, city girls in bars, or Lubavitcher Chasidim. But if I politely refuse, I am made to feel that I cannot be genuinely Jewish and must be a monk in disguise.

Yes, I know the arguments about lowering one's inhibitions to get closer to God. But I can get a religious high without alcohol or being shoved around a dance floor pretending I'm having a good time. Is this really our religion? I agree the Western European Ashkenazi world needed shaking out of its inhibited formality, but I wonder if we have gone too far.

I love Chasidism, but not when gangs of black-suited youths imitate soccer hoodlums and run around like demented yobs, as if uncontrolled noise, hooliganism, and drunkenness are part of a religious calling. I suppose that if you have no other outlet, if sports are frowned upon in your circles, gyms are treif, and physical exercise is supposed to be suitable only for those who haven't the brains or the sitzfleisch to sit in front of Gemara all day, this is the only outlet for hormonally supercharged young men (apart from going on demonstrations and throwing stones). But really, what is the difference between this and pop concerts except for the presence of screaming, nubile, semi-naked girls?

Is this what the Torah wants? I can't believe it. But I'll do it. Because I have to set an example and because I don't want appear to be a killjoy (except here, where I can safely ventilate). But that's social pressure, not pleasure!

Chag Sameach and if where you are is better than where I am, you are very fortunate and I envy you.