

Tishrei

Simchat Torah: The Torah as Something Precious

This lesson will focus on the importance of the Torah in people's lives, as viewed through the eyes of the Sages, and its relevance for students' lives. To do this, we will use the sources "The Torah Is Compared to Water" and "Torah Is Better Than Any Merchandise."

Goals

- > Learning about the holiday of Simchat Torah
- > Understanding the importance of Torah for an individual person through the use of texts and images
- > Experiencing the customs of the holiday through an interactive game

Sources


The *piyyut*: "Ashorer Shira [I Will Compose a Song]"


The midrash: "The Torah Is Compared to Water"

The story of the Sages: "Torah Is Better Than Any Merchandise"

Ages


Level 2 Grades 4–6


Level 1 Can be adapted for grades 1–3


Level 3 Can be adapted for grades 7 and up

Background for the Teacher

The Torah

The Torah is the main holy book of the Jewish religion. The term "Torah" refers to the first five books of the Bible – Genesis (Beresheet), Exodus (Shemot), Leviticus (Vayikra), Numbers (Bamidbar), and Deuteronomy (Devarim) – which precede the Prophets and the Writings in the Tanakh. But the word "Torah" is also used to refer to the entire Tanakh and as a general term for the whole body of Jewish writings based on the Tanakh and developed from it (Mishnah, Talmud, midrashim, and commentaries). In the Torah, we find central myths of the Jewish tradition, like the stories of the creation of the world and the giving of the Torah, stories about the forefathers and origins of the Jewish nation, values, commandments, theology, ethical perspectives and more. In Jewish tradition, the Torah is viewed as something divine and, according to the Sages, it was created before the world was created (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Nedarim 39b). In light of its holy status, each word that appears in the Torah is seen as important and open to interpretation.

Torah study is a central value of Judaism. The term “Torah study” refers to the study of works from the Jewish bookshelf, not only the five books of the Torah. The commandment to study Torah appears in the Torah in the book of Deuteronomy (6:7): “וְשִׁנַּנְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְדִבַּרְתָּ בָם” [Teach them repeatedly to your children and speak of them].” During the first centuries of the common era, study houses and schools were established and children were taught to read and write, so that they would be able to study Torah. During that same era, among other nations in the region, literacy was the province of the elite and very few people could read and write.

Simchat Torah

According to ancient tradition, each week, a different section of the Torah is read, referred to as the portion of the week. On Simchat Torah, we complete the annual Torah reading cycle and begin to read the Torah all over again. Completing the reading of the Torah is a milestone in the life of the community and expresses the bond between the community and the Torah. Therefore, this milestone is celebrated with singing and dancing. This dancing is referred to as *hakafot* (encirclements), because the dancers carry the Torah scrolls around the *bimah* of the synagogue.

The *hakafot* with the Torah scrolls are a very old custom. Originally, they were based on the recitation of prayers in the synagogue and honoring the Torah as part of the celebration of the holiday. Later, people began walking around the table on which the Torah was read while singing. Today, the *hakafot* involve dancing, which, in some communities, spills out of the synagogue and into the street, where neighbors and passers-by sometimes join in. During the dancing, songs are sung, *piyyutim* are recited, and people carry the Torah scrolls and dance with them. Usually, there are seven *hakafot* in the evening and seven more *hakafot* in the morning. At the end of the holiday, some communities in Israel add on extra *hakafot*, which are referred to as *hakafot shniyot* (second *hakafot*).

Just as Simchat Torah has changed over the centuries, today, communities around the world are developing new ways to celebrate the holiday. In recent years, women have begun to more actively participate in the communal celebration, just as their general participation in the synagogue has increased. In some communities, women dance with the Torah scrolls and, in others, they are full participants and even get called up to the Torah and read from it.

Torah Is Compared to Water

Water is an essential resource for life and it is available to anyone. Our Sages used water as a metaphor for Torah to emphasize its importance, as well as its availability for everyone. In the prophecies of Isaiah, we find the verse: “הוֹי כָּל צָמָא לְכוּ לַמַּיִם” [Oh, every thirsty one, go to the water]” (Isaiah 55:1).

The Sages interpreted this verse as referring to Torah, which can quench the thirst of a person who is spiritually thirsty. In the Talmud, it says: “There is no water but Torah” (Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Bava Kama 82a).

The midrash presented in this lesson presents a number of similarities between water and Torah: Water makes noise as it flows and Torah was given with noise at Mt. Sinai and is read out loud in the synagogue. Water is available for all (it is found all over the world) and so is Torah and water is the basis for life on Earth, just like — according to tradition — Torah. In addition, according to tradition, both Torah and water come down from heaven.

For the students, we present only part of the midrash. Among other things, this midrash teaches us about how the Sages thought about Torah study and about learning in general. To their way of thinking, studying, even a little bit at a time, leads to the accumulation of great wisdom. Humility is necessary for learning and for applying what you have learned. We can learn from everybody, even those who are younger or less knowledgeable than ourselves. When a person wants to learn, he or she should be ready to learn anything from anyone.

Activities

Opening Hook

Hand out pieces of paper to the students. Instruct the students to write or draw things that are especially important to their own lives or things that they think are generally important on those pieces of paper. You can give them some examples, like family, a favorite game, etc. Younger children can draw their answers.

Hang up the papers under the heading “Things That Are Important in Our Lives.” Discuss the students’ answers:

- > Are the things that they wrote or drew essential human needs?
- > Ask the students to explain why they think that the things that they wrote/drew are important. Let other students respectfully express their opinions about what was written/drawn.



In higher grades, you can present [Maslow's hierarchy of needs](#) and consider the students’ answers in relation to that hierarchy.



Main Activity

Part 1: Studying a *piyyut* for Simchat Torah

Study the piyyut “Ashorer Shirah” by Rabbi Rafael Baruch Toledano, which is customarily sung on Simchat Torah (Supplement 1). You can also listen to [Haim Louk's performance](#) of this piyyut.

Discuss the song. You can use the following questions to guide the discussion:

1. A tune was composed for these words. Listen to it. How does it make you feel?
2. The lines of the piyyut describe the good qualities of the Torah. How does the poet describe the Torah? According to this description, what does Torah mean to the poet?
3. The poet describes the Torah as “more precious than gold.” What do you think about that? Is the Torah that important to you? Explain.



In the lower grades, you can **play** the song [“Tov Li Torat Picha Me-Elfei Zahav Ve-Kesef”](#) whose words come from Psalm 119.

Project the [words](#) onto the board:

טוֹב לִי תוֹרַת פִּיךָ מֵאַלְפֵי זָהָב וְכֶסֶף


“For me, the teaching of Your mouth is better than thousands of pieces of gold and silver”

(Psalms 119:72; translation from the Koren Tanakh)

- > Ask the students how they understand this verse. Then, make up dance steps for the song and teach them to the class.

Part 2: Studying a Midrash About the Importance of the Torah

Explain that the Torah has been very important for many members of the Jewish people throughout history. This value is illustrated by the midrash “The Torah Is Compared to Water.” Have the students use the study sheet to guide them as they study the midrash together in pairs (*havruta*) and ask them to answer the questions (Supplement 2).

 Bring the class back together and make sure that the students understood the story. Discuss it together and ask the following questions:

1. Why do you think the Torah is compared to water?
2. How does water help us in our lives and how can Torah help us in our lives?
3. Water is important for everyone. How can Torah be as important to the Jewish people as water is for our bodies?
4. What in the Torah can inspire you or give you strength, like water refreshes and livens up someone who is thirsty?

Ask the students to each think of one thing that is important to them (you can refer to the opening activity) and to draw a picture comparing that thing to something else that shows how important their thing is to them. Explain that the Sages, who wanted to express how important Torah was to them, chose to compare it with water.

- > Ask the students why they think that the Sages chose to compare Torah to water.



You can study the story “Torah Is Better Than Any Merchandise” (Supplement 3). To start off, read the first section, which ends with the words “to laugh at him and make fun of him” without telling the students the name of the story. Ask the students to try to guess what merchandise the wise man had – merchandise that was better than that of all the other merchants, but which they didn’t see. Then, read the rest of the story and explain it.

Ask:

1. What merchandise did the wise man have?
2. How were his goods better than those of all the other merchants?
3. What other things in our lives are like Torah, in that they can’t be taken from us and don’t get lost like material things?

After reading the story, you can ask the students to draw the story and the “treasure” in it or you can ask them to act out the story.



Conclusion

Ask the students what we celebrate on Simchat Torah and explain the holiday. For an example of Simchat Torah celebrations, watch this [video](#) of Simchat Torah at a synagogue in the US or this [video](#) of Simchat Torah *hakafot* at a synagogue in Israel.

- > Ask the students to explain the reason for the joyous celebration of this holiday, based on what they’ve learned in this lesson.



Bonus Material

Ask the students to think of one thing in their own lives that is related to how Torah is important to them. For example, maybe they go to synagogue and listen to the Torah reading or study Torah in school. Or maybe Torah is important for them because it includes values or stories that speak to them or because it was important to their grandparents, etc. Then, have the students prepare a short video for social media or a picture to put under the heading "Torah Is Important." If the students make videos, you can edit them together to make one video for the class. Another option is to write slogans or design bumper stickers with the reasons why Torah is important to the students.



An Interactive Game for Simchat Torah

Uncover the Picture



Read the instructions and the attached questions. Then, click on the link for the game.

The game has two levels.



Level 1 Easy

In this game, a picture is hidden behind numbered squares. Divide the class into two teams, which will compete against each other to complete the picture. Taking turns, each team will pick a number of a hidden part of the picture. When you click on the number, the square will disappear to reveal part of the picture. The team needs to try to guess what is shown in the picture. Taking turns, the two teams will gradually reveal the picture.

If you want to make the game more challenging, you can ask questions about the material covered in the lesson, the Torah, or the holiday. For each correct answer, uncover another part of the picture.



Level 2 Difficult

Divide the class into two teams, which will compete against each other to complete the picture. To uncover the picture, the students need to correctly answer questions about Simchat Torah. Taking turns, each team will choose a number of a square. When you click the number, a question will appear on the screen. If they answer the question correctly, click on the "like" icon and a piece of the picture will be revealed. If they answer the question incorrectly, click the "dislike" icon and nothing will be revealed. Then, it's the next team's turn. They can choose to answer the question that was answered incorrectly or to be asked a different question. The first team to complete the picture wins.

Questions and answers:

1. What do we celebrate on Simchat Torah? (Finishing the annual reading of the Torah)
2. When do we read from the Torah? (We read one *parsha* each Shabbat. We also read from the Torah during the week and on holidays, but the students don't need to mention that.)



3. In the synagogue, is Simchat Torah only a holiday for grown-ups? (No, it's for everyone and it's important that everyone be encouraged to participate.)
4. Name two characters from the Torah.
5. Name two main events in the Torah.
6. Name one of the five books of the Torah.
7. Name one of the mitzvot in the Torah.
8. Name one *parsha* in the Torah.
9. What do we call the dancing with the Torah in the synagogue on Simchat Torah? (*Hakafot*)
10. Why do we dance with the Torah scrolls on Simchat Torah? (To show how happy we are to have the Torah.)
11. Simchat Torah comes at the end of what holiday? (Sukkot)
12. Do we sit in the *sukkah* on Simchat Torah? (No)

Supplement 1

Piut "Ashorer Shira"

I Will Compose a Song

Rabbi Rafael Baruch Toledano

I will compose a song in honor of the Torah
Torah, which is more valuable than gold and pure

[...]

The whole Torah is full of pleasant things
It makes a simple man wise and allows the eye
to see

אַשׁוֹרֵר שִׁירָה

רבי רפאל ברוך טולדנו

אַשׁוֹרֵר שִׁירָה לְכָבוֹד הַתּוֹרָה
מִפֵּי יְקָרָה זָכָה וּבָרָה

[...]

רַבָּה נְעִימָה תּוֹרָה תְּמִימָה
פְּתִי מַחְכִּימָה עֵין מְאִירָה



Supplement 2

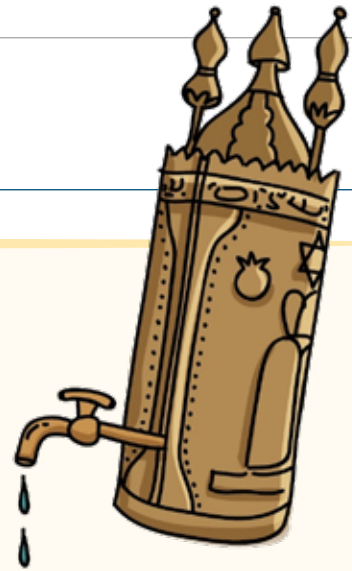
Study Sheet: **The Torah Is Compared to Water**

The words of the Torah are compared to water.
Just like water makes a noise as it flows,
The Torah was given with great noise.

Living waters for the world
are like living Torah for the world.

Drops of water come together to form streams and rivers
like Torah: A person learns two rules today and two rules tomorrow until he has
a gushing river of knowledge.

[Shir Ha-Shirim Rabba (midrash on the Song of Songs) 1:19]

**Questions:**

1. In the midrash, what comparisons are made between water and Torah?

2. Why do you think the Sages compared Torah to water?

3. How is water important for a person? How is water different from other things that a person needs?

4. What else can we compare Torah to? Suggest another metaphor for Torah.

Supplement C

Torah Is Better Than Any Merchandise

There was once a ship sailing the seas. On the ship, there were many merchants with all different kinds of merchandise that they planned to sell when they reached the land to which the ship was sailing. Among the passengers, there was also another man, who was a wise Torah scholar.

The merchants started chatting with this man and asked him, "What kind of merchandise are you carrying? What do you plan to sell when we reach land?"

The man answered, "You can't see my merchandise, because it is hidden."

The merchants' curiosity grew and they began to look all over the ship for that man's merchandise, but they could not find anything. They thought that the man had to be lying. They thought that he must be embarrassed about not having anything to sell and they began to laugh at him and make fun of him.

After some time, the ship reached its destination. At the dock, the merchants were met by customs officers working for the government, who took away all of the merchandise they had planned to sell. The merchants were left with nothing. They had nothing to sell, no money, no food, only the clothes they were wearing.

Meanwhile, the Torah scholar who had travelled with them went to the local synagogue, sat down by the bimah, opened a book, and began to teach Torah to people in the synagogue. The local people saw that this man had a great knowledge of Torah and began to honor him. They even offered him a job in their community.

Meanwhile, the merchants heard about what had happened to the man who had traveled with them. They got together and went to visit him to ask him for help. "Please," they begged. "Since you know us, tell the locals that we're good people, so that they'll take care of us."

Why was that man saved? Thanks to the fact that his merchandise — Torah — was in his head and could not be taken away from him.

*[Adapted from Midrash Tanchuma (Buber),
Parshat Terumah, Section 1]*

