

# Dancing on the Edge

By Batya Gold

**T**he room is packed to capacity. The noise is deafening. Working my way past the onlookers near the entrance, I manage to reach the outermost circle of dancing women. Someone notices me, takes my hand and happily welcomes me into the crowd. The singing is unbelievably joyous as I add my voice to the countless others. I look around. Like every year, I wonder if I stand out, with my complete head-covering, high neckline, below-the-elbow sleeves and stockings. On the other side of the shoulder-high *mechitzah*, I see the men's colorful "*kippot serugot*," their shoulders bearing little boys waving flags. I love watching them, and wish my own black-*yarmulkahed* husband and sons were among them. Yet while the men's energy is wonderful, the spirit among the women is still higher. For there are few places like this in Jerusalem where a woman can celebrate Simchas Torah.

Simchas Torah is the time when I, a *Chareidi* woman living in Jerusalem, leave my community to seek religious expression elsewhere. It reflects my struggle to find an outlet for a spiritual need unrecognized by the *Chareidi* world, while still maintaining my affiliation with that world.

My feelings about Simchas Torah have moved through different phases. Twenty years ago, coming to Judaism from a society which extolled androgyny, I was taken with the Torah's affirmation of women's right to be women and of a distinctly feminine spiritual path. On my first Simchas Torah, I repressed the resentment I felt at being unable to participate by reminding myself that I didn't have to do what men do to achieve equal closeness to Hashem. By the time I was married and the mother of two small children, I had succeeded in blocking out most negative feelings. Standing outside a window of the *beis midrash* with my youngest in my arms, watching my husband dance with our *bechor* on his shoulders, the fullness of wifedom and motherhood made it difficult to feel anything but joy.

But as the years passed and the level of my Torah study reached new depths, my feelings began to shift. I was still a spiritually-centered *Chareidi* woman. I wanted neither to be a man nor to be Modern Orthodox. And perhaps, as apologists claimed, I had no "need" to celebrate as men do in order to feel love for Hashem's Torah. But still...

how I longed to. It felt increasingly wrong that while I was actively learning Torah, I was expected to be a passive bystander to its celebration. And even were I not studying Torah, I was living it. My soul, which had received the Torah with the rest of *Klal Yisrael* at Sinai, was thirsting for a more direct experience.

I decided to go to a well-respected rabbi affiliated with a number of *Chareidi* institutions, who I sensed might be sympathetic. I asked my *sheilah*: May women celebrate as men do on Simchas Torah, and dance with a *sefer Torah*? His answer was negative.

I shared this disappointing, but somewhat expected, response with my friend Shoshanah — a brilliant woman who spends most of her waking hours learning Torah and whose desire to celebrate Simchas Torah was even more burning than mine. She felt that had I preceded my question with a clear explanation of my motivation, the answer might have been different. On behalf of both of us, she drafted a new *sheilah*.

"Dear Rabbi," it read, "Simchas Torah has always been a complicated day for me, and for most women I know. I have wandered from *shul* to *shul*, trying to find a way of celebrating that feels right.

"Women are supposed to feel vicarious participation by watching the men dance and sing. Yet as women enter into a more direct relationship with Torah study, indirect participation on Simchas Torah no longer works for many of them. Instead of reinforcing one's bond to Torah, it creates alienation. Instead of *simchah*, it creates pain.

"I love Torah and spend my days immersed in its study. I want to celebrate that on the day designated for celebration. For the past several years, I just sang and danced alone in my study, because it felt more real than anything else I could do.

"There is an Orthodox learning center in Jerusalem called Yakar where women also dance with the Torah on their side of the *mechitzah*. This is not politically motivated. The *kehillah* has a *rav* who studied the question and ruled that it was permissible. Many of the most serious and respected women teachers in Jerusalem attend. They are not making a feminist statement. They are just expressing their love of Torah. This, too, is my motivation. Batya Gold shares my feelings exactly.

"In light of the above, we would like to raise the question again of women dancing with a *sefer Torah*

in the hope that you might reconsider your answer. We thank you for your time, patience and sensitivity."

A few days later, the *rav* spoke to Shoshanah. He had read her letter. And he had changed his mind. At the same time, he uncharacteristically requested that we not tell anyone from whom we had received our *psak*. "I'm afraid it will be misinterpreted," he said sadly. "The practice of women dancing with a *sefer Torah* has come to be associated with those whose ideology is against normative Judaism. Still, your reasons are valid, and *emes* is *emes* [truth is truth]. You can go."

So the next year I found myself, accompanied by my two little daughters (and with my husband's support), in a neighborhood far from my own, celebrating Simchas Torah at Yakar.

For five years now, I've gone. And it's always special — particularly because of the interesting mix of women. The majority are young and single: American Modern Orthodox transplants, Israeli *dati leumi* girls on break from their national service, and in-process *baalos teshuvah* from anywhere and everywhere. But there are also older women, married and unmarried, mothers and children, and even grandmothers — as well as a number of prominent Jerusalem educators.

As usual, I gradually work my way into the inner circle of dancers. Seeing the eagerness on my face, someone signals that I be given a turn to hold the *sefer Torah*. My turn comes, and I take it carefully in my arms. I am always nervous at first — what if, God forbid, I drop it? But my fear subsides, and holding it close to me, I circle with it, almost shyly, in the midst of the singing and dancing women, feeling an indescribable happiness.

Perhaps even greater is the joy and awe I feel watching other women hold the *sefer Torah* — some of them, like myself five years ago, for the first time. A young woman receives it with a huge smile and dances with it joyfully and freely. She gives it to a woman in her 50s who, accepting it graciously, bears it with queenly dignity and pride. It next passes to Shoshanah, who hugs it tightly for several moments, eyes shut in deep concentration; then she suddenly raises it above the heads of the crowd, up and down, in all directions, with an intense exuberance. But the woman who always brings tears to my eyes is Dina. A deeply spiritual mother of six and a teacher, her face constantly radiates the joy of living, learning and breathing Torah. She takes the *sefer Torah* in her arms and cradles it with the tenderness of a mother toward her newborn. Her cheek pressed softly against its velvet cover, she

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rocks gently to and fro, eyes closed, oblivious to the commotion around her, a look of pure bliss on her face.

One year, after the Yom Tov day meal, Dina and I meet to take our children out to a park. Dina is intrigued by the contradiction between my presence at Yakar and my membership in the *Chareidi* community. I

admit that celebrating Simchas Torah at Yakar answers to a spiritual need that would otherwise be left unfulfilled.

Sensing my openness, Dina decides to be direct. She does not attack, just honestly questions. "Why do you identify with the *Chareidim*?" she wants to know. "Spiritually, they have no positive outlook on change, no creativity, no ability to meet challenges other than by just pulling in. What do you see in that world?"

Rather than debate the accuracy of her statement, I go to the heart of the issue for me. "There's a kind of purity there that's hard to find," I answer. "A different quality of *tznius*, of *mesiras nefesh* [dedication]. A more intense *yiras Shamayim* [awe of God]."

I sense that Dina understands, but she isn't ready to concede. "There are different kinds of *yirat Shamayim*," she points out. "Maybe you know how to recognize only one."

Maybe, I think to myself. But that kind stirs something so deep in me...

Later, I ask Shoshanah, who herself tends toward the religious left wing, whether she feels as negatively as Dina about the *Chareidi* world. "No," she answers soberly, "I don't." Shaking her head slowly, she says quietly, "There's definitely something there."

Yes. There's definitely something there. And how I wish I could celebrate Simchas Torah as I do at Yakar with the women of my own neighborhood. Several respected women have privately confessed that they would love to. It would solve the problem for a well-known *rebbetzin* who has refrained from going to Yakar only due to her concern that people will draw the wrong conclusions about her *hashkafah*. But that which seems so normal and legitimate to some of us is still feared as dangerously radical by many others. And I am the only one with strong enough feelings to actually step out. Clearly, I am a misfit. And while I believe that, someday, things will change, it's so hard to wait.

I voice my frustration to the *rav* and ask what can be done to make the change happen more quickly. "A bold change isn't *tzanua*," he says. "Change in the Jewish world has to happen slowly, organically."

I repeat this statement to Shoshanah. "No

change initially happens ‘organically,’” she says. “It happens because some group of people takes the ‘bold’ step of breaking with established practice. From that point, others start following them, and gradually more and more do, until the change becomes ‘organically’ accepted. But there’s always an initial break.” Shoshanah sighs. “I’m not brave enough to be in that group of leaders, but I thank God for them.”

With two of my daughters now in the *Chareidi* school system, I wonder how long I’ll be brave enough to be even a follower. I live in one world yet have a foot in another. I want the traditional *tznius*, the *taharah*, the *temimus* [dignity, purity and simplicity] that are such rare and precious commodities and so hard to find outside the Jerusalem *Chareidi* community (and, increasingly, even within it) — yet I also want to actively celebrate my connection to and love of Torah. And while I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to bring my daughters to Yakar — or go myself — I want this for them too. It may be an impossible dream, but I pray that one day they will be able to have it all, while living in one world, without the conflict I find so painful.

Once, just once, did I experience the absence

of that conflict. It lasted only briefly, but it was a precious, glorious moment I’ll never forget.

It was on my first Simchas Torah at Yakar. Shoshanah was holding my three-year-old daughter Tehillah and another woman had taken one-year-old Esther so I could hold the *sefer Torah* in the midst of the joyfully celebrating crowd of women. Although thrilled, I felt somewhat unnatural in this new role. Suddenly I saw that Esther was crying for me. Quickly and automatically, I shifted the full weight of the *sefer Torah* onto my right arm, reached out for her and took her with my left. She immediately stopped crying and snuggled close against me.

There I stood, with a *sefer Torah* on one arm and my precious baby daughter on the other. All feeling of conflict evaporated as both sides of me felt simultaneously confirmed. Torah study and celebration alongside motherhood. Change alongside tradition. A warm feeling of peace washed over me, the deepest peace I had experienced for a long time. I can only pray it will someday settle over my whole life. **JA**

*All names of individuals, including the author, have been changed at her request.*