

The Final Days of the Holidays - Symbolic Moments
Rabbi Eliot Malomet October 3, 2026 22 Tishrei 5787 Shmini Atzeret

These last days of the holidays are filled with profound symbolic moments that shape our religious consciousness. Let's examine a few of them.

Hoshana Rabbah. Following the musaf service, two Torahs are removed from the Ark and held at the Bimah. This connects us back to the eve of Yom Kippur when two Torahs were held near the cantor prior to Kol Nidre to suggest a simultaneous call-to-order of the heavenly **Court-on-High** and the earthly **Court-on-Low**. The threefold repetition of the Kol Nidre has a quasi-legal significance of nullifying vows, suggesting that we not be held accountable for all of our failures. We reckon that if God takes note of this, perhaps God will annul or suspend all decrees against us. **On Hoshanah Rabba we are simultaneously re-invoking and inverting that moment.**

KOL NIDRE	HOSHANA RABBAH
Evening.	Morning.
Hazzan is frozen in place.	Hazzan leads processions.
Formulaic legal petition.	Poetic litanies.
Solemn music.	Emotional chanting.
Virtuosic cantorial solos and recitatives.	Un-virtuosic congregational call-and-responses.
Synagogue is a formal venue of a court proceeding.	Synagogue is a venue of vocal demonstration, protest and petition.

The Decommissioning of the Lulav. Once the seven processions are completed, a series of longer, more elaborate Hoshanot hymns are recited. Customs vary, but there is ample room for improvisational call-and-response and, for lack of a better term, histrionics, all intended to submit our last-minute petitions to God and plead for God's sustenance in the form of rainfall (and blessings of sustenance) for the coming year. It is at that point that the lulav and etrog, which have served us as multi-vocal instruments of supplication for water and gratitude for God's blessings, are set aside and de-sacralized, as it were. Five willow branches are taken in their stead. A series of climactic poems are recited, culminating in a 21-verse call-and-response: קול מבשר מבשר ואומר - **the voice of the herald proclaims and says**, an invocation of the messianic redemption, the era of peace and fulfillment for which we fervently pray. The Hazzan leads the congregation in a loud voice in a three-time repetition of קול מבשר מבשר ואומר, following which each worshipper takes the bunch of willows and smacks them against the floor. As the leaves fly off the branches, there is a brief moment of chaos and confusion. Mystics claim that the meaning of this ritual is



a deep secret. But we can come close to understanding it, if we reflect on another "violent" moment in Jewish ritual life: when the groom smashes a glass at a wedding. Commonly



interpreted as a means of remembering the destruction of the Temple, it ought to be understood anthropologically as a means of literally shattering the moment of holiness to move from the zone of piety, fervor, ecstasy, and yearning, back to the mundane "normal" world of holiday and celebration, in this case, represented by Shmini Atzeret.

Geshem-Rain. Having engaged in expressive emotional outpouring the day before, the focus of the musaf service on Shmini Atzeret is prayer for rain. Donning the kittel reminiscent of the High Holidays, the Hazzan chants the beginning of the musaf in solemn modes and presents the petition for rain in a more stately and formal manner. The piyyut for rain consists of six stanzas imploring God to remember Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron, and the Twelve Tribes and the instances in which water was central to their lives.¹ All of this leads to the climactic seventh stanza of the piyyut which is the formal declaration that God is the one **who causes the wind to blow and the rain to fall** - מְשִׁיב הָרוּחַ וּמוֹרִיד הַגֶּשֶׁם. From this point until Passover, we will include that line in the amidah. This marks a key transition in the religious consciousness. Water is essential for life. Unlike Egypt, which is sustained by the seasonal flooding of a grand river, the Nile, the Land of Israel is sustained by rainfall from heaven, God. During summer, all vegetation is sustained by dew, the moisture supplied by the earth. At this moment we become deeply aware of the moisture supplied by heaven, rain. As we transition to winter, we are conscious of the no longer relying on the water that collects on the earth and the fields, but the water that falls from heaven that will sustain life and enable agriculture for the coming year.

Simchat Torah: An Inversion of Hoshana Rabbah.

HOSHANA RABBAH	SIMCHAT TORAH
Processions with Torahs on the Bimah.	Procession with Torahs in the congregation.
A court with protests, demonstrations, and litanies.	The court is adjourned. Instead of litanies there is song and dance.
Awe and fear.	Joy and play.
A set order of hymns, prayers and litanies.	A spontaneous outpouring of songs.
God is the sovereign Judge in Heaven and the last hours of the Court is in session.	God's presence is with the people rejoicing in their community, continuity and co-eternity with God.

¹ Example: **Remember Moses, whose basket rocked in reeds and water.**

Aliyot on Simchat Torah. The heart of Simchat Torah is the completion of last year's Torah reading cycle and the immediate inauguration of the new year's Torah reading cycle. As our most cherished literary companion, the Torah accompanies us throughout our lives. *We mark the weeks of our seasons based on the parasha that we are reading. We mark the seasons of our years by which book we are in, and in some way, we mark the years of our lives by the number of times we have read the book to its completion and restarted it.* The completion and immediate restarting of the Torah is one of the great moments in Jewish life. It occurs after every single adult in the community has had an aliyah. This enables each member of the community to demonstrate his or her claim to the Torah, and the Torah's reciprocal claim on them. *The ritual of the entire community receiving individual aliyot to the Torah democratizes the Torah.* Aliyot to the Torah are commonplace, but we should break an aliyah down into its constituent elements. An aliyah consists of seven² acts:

1. **The Summons and Ascent.** The individual is called up by their traditional Hebrew name and ascends to the Bimah.
2. **The Indexing of the Text.** The Torah reader points to the text that will be read. The individual acknowledges that text by placing the tzitzit³ on the first word of the reading.
3. **The Opening Blessing.** By reciting - בָּרְכוּ אֶת ה' הַמְּבָרֵךְ - (Everyone together!) Bless God who is blessed! each individual momentarily given the privilege of acting as a communal leader, democratizing the experience even more. The rest of the blessing acknowledges God for having chosen us and given us the gift of the Torah.
4. **The Reading.** Originally, each person called up to the Torah was entrusted with the reading. The Torah reader discharges that duty now on behalf of that person. Reading is sequential through the portion.
5. **The Closing Blessing.** While the opening blessing specifies the Torah as a gift to us arising out of God's choice of us as his people, this blessing acknowledges the content of the Torah: its content is truth, and through it, we have the potential of eternal life.
6. **To Honor and Be Honored.** In this stage, the individual steps to the side as the next person is called to the Torah and remains as an extra attendant. Traditionally, this is when they are acknowledged with a formal blessing.
7. **Descent to the Congregation.** As the next individual is called, the first person descends from the bimah.

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1. **The Summons.** The prosecutor or defense summons a witness to the stand and the bailiff or clerk calls out the witness's name.
2. **The Ascent.** The witness walks up to the front of the courtroom and stands near the witness box.
3. **The Oath.** The bailiff or clerk administers a formulaic oath in which the witness solemnly swears that the testimony they are about to give "shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth". The witness responds, "I do."
4. **The Identification.** The witness states their name, provides proper spelling for the record.
5. **The Examination.** Attorneys for the prosecution and defense examine the witness and, if necessary, challenge their testimony.
6. **Tendering the Witness.** The formal declaration that examination is concluded. "No further questions, Your Honor." The judge verifies that testimony has concluded.
7. **Excusing the Witness.** The judge turns to the witness and formally releases them from the stand: "You may step down."



Note the striking similarity. We might conclude that a Torah reading is a formal court procedure in which an individual (like a witness) is called by name, where a b'racha (like an oath) is chanted, a portion is read (like a testimony), and then the individual takes their seat in the congregation with blessings and honor. All of this takes place in a public setting of the synagogue (like the court) before the Divine Magistrate (like the judge). *A Torah reading therefore, is an act of testimony to God's gift of the Torah to the Jewish people and its place in our lives.*

Communities and Their Customs. All Jewish communities have their idiosyncrasies. We also have a few at Simchat Torah. For years we have dedicated the sixth hakafah to the victims of the Holocaust, to survivors and their families. The profound significance of this is to demonstrate that their souls are bound to us in the bonds of life. Simchat Torah reflects the eternity of the Jewish people, and they will always be with us. *During the last three years we have included the victims of October 7, 2023-Simchat Torah 5783, in this moment of remembrance. We will never forget the horror of that day and how it has changed our world and our self-understanding. May their memories be a blessing, their lives an inspiration.* Shabbat Shalom! Hag Sameah!

² It is always fun to point out 7's, whether they are deliberate or coincidental. It would be hard to claim that it is deliberate here. Nevertheless, the 7 acts or stages of an aliyah gives it the feeling of a complete ritual experience and gives it deep resonance with the master-framing structure of the Torah: the number 7.

³ There are layers of meaning in this act. Tzitzit function is an identifying symbol. The pattern of the knots and windings attest to the person's membership in the House of Israel and their

adherence to the mitzvot. By placing the tzitzit onto the Torah it is a symbolic act of affirmation, as if one was "signing-on" to the Torah. The (non-mandatory) custom of kissing the tzitzit is a further act of reverence. We do not discourage people from placing their tzitzit (or some other item) on the parchment, but repeated touching will cause the letters to fade over time and render the scroll unfit for use. So exercise caution when doing this.