Part A: Simchat Torah is ahead!

Back in Russia, a Jew was walking the streets on the eve of Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year, when he chanced upon a woman in great distress. Her husband had been thrown into debtor’s prison for falling behind in the rent he owed the landowner, and she needed help raising the large sum of money.

This Jew felt her pain and asked other fellow Jews to join him in contributing. He got a few kopeks here and there, but everyone was too busy with their preparations to worry about it. So this fellow looked around for places to get some money and soon found himself in a tavern. This was no place to be on the eve of the holiest day, but he thought not of himself but of the poor guy languishing in the debtor’s prison.

He went over to the first table and found a drunken lot engrossed in a game of cards. When he asked for a contribution, they laughed at him. Then one of the card-players made him an offer. If he could down a large mug of vodka in one gulp all the money on the table would be his.

While he was not a big drinker, he thought it would be worth a shot. He accepted the offer and downed the mug with some difficulty. True to their word, they handed him all the money on the table. Seeing how successful that was, he went over to the second table, and offered to down a second mug for the money there. They looked him over and thought that a second cup would be quite a challenge, so they took him up on it. Again he made it, and got the cash. He was now almost at the goal needed to free the poor man, so despite his sorry state, he stumbled over to the third table and repeated the offer. When he downed that third mug, he was already in a haze, but managed to make his way to debtor’s prison in time to free the man before Yom Kippur.

He then swaggered into the Synagogue and collapsed onto the back bench. The worshippers were horrified to see him in this undignified state on the holiest day of the year. He reeked of alcohol and was a total disgrace. As the opening service KOL NIDREI began, he lifted his head up to see the Torahs being brought out of the Ark and held at the Bima. In his drunken haze, he saw the stationary Torahs moving round and round, circling the Bima, as on Simchat Torah. Excitedly, he shouted out the opening celebratory verses of Simchat Torah!

The congregants were aghast! How dare this man disturb the solemnity of the moment, with this outrageous outburst!? They were about to throw this man out of the synagogue, when the Rabbi intervened. (This Rabbi was none other than Rabbi Schenor Zalman of Liadi, or others say Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev). The Rabbi said:

"This man has surpassed all of Yom Kippur, and has already reached the level of Simchat Torah!!"

This story tells an important calendar message. Too many Jews think that the spiritual zenith is Yom Kippur that is the highest and holiest peak. This story tells us that Yom-Kippur, with all its holiness and prayer, is another stop on the way to the dancing and joy of Simchat Torah!

Here’s something I really love about Sukkot. Most holidays start off with a bang but it’s hard to sustain that energy to the end. Take Passover for example. You start with the Seders, but the last days aren’t the same as the beginning. Chanukah is like that, too, even though we keep increasing in candles. On Sukkot, the holiday is beautiful all week, but it ends with the ultimate joy of Simchat Torah, it ends on the highest note possible.
With his selfless dedication to a fellow Jew, this man bypassed Yom-Kippur and reached the level of Simchat Torah. At Chabad we know Simchat Torah is ultimate!

Part B: Celebrating (Simchat-) Torah is the Birthright of Every Jew

I came across this question on back of the Artscroll Hakafot book:

"Why should Jews who don’t study Torah all year, dance with the Torah on Simchat Torah?"

They answer with a parable: Suppose your brother is marrying off a son or daughter, wouldn't you rejoice at the wedding? Same on Simchat Torah, even if you aren't a scholar or Rabbi yourself, you are celebrating the joy of your brother the scholar, and rejoicing with him.

Chassidic thought views Simchas Torah very differently. From a Chassidic perspective: It's not your brother’s celebration, it’s your own! Simchat Torah celebrates the connection every Jew has with Torah, regardless of knowledge or observance or level of involvement.

The Rebbe’s father-in-law explains that this is the very reason why we dance with closed Torahs. It’s not about text or wisdom or how well you can read Hebrew. We’re celebrating that that Torah is our heritage; it belongs to each and every one of us. This is why it’s traditional to dance in circles, for circles have no beginning or end, we all join hands to celebrate our common bond with the Torah.

(This is why the Talmud says “all Jews can come together in one Sukkah. (Sukkah 27b)” Why a Sukkah? Why not in one synagogue? Because Sukkah (with its simplicity, transience, immaterial sense) helps us get out of the sophisticated and complex development of “self” and allows us to find that common denominator of Jewish identity we share with all Jews.)

The first verse we teach young children is "Torah Tzivah Lanu Morasha Kehilas Yaakov." The thrust of this verse is that the Torah is our Morasha, our heritage and inheritance. Before Birthright Israel, this was the original birthright, Torah is an inheritance, and it belongs to us simply because we were born Jewish.

There are a number of stories to illustrate this point that KEE KAROV ALEYCHA, LO RECHOKA HEE. TORAH MORASHA - Torah is the heritage of each and every Jew. Pick the one that you haven’t told recently, the one you enjoy telling the most, or the one that will best resonate with your crowd.

Story 1: Isaac's Treasure & Jewish Identity

Isaac was a poor fellow who struggled to make a living. He dreamt of a treasure buried under the Imperial Bridge in Prague. At first he dismissed it as a foolish dream, but after the dream kept repeating itself he set out for Prague. The journey was long and difficult, but at last he arrived at the bridge. He was eager to begin digging, but the constant presence of the Imperial Guards (i.e. Homeland Security) made it virtually impossible to do anything of the sort. He tried one side, and then the other, left for a while, returning at a different hour, first tried one day, then the next. But no luck. A guard noticed that Isaac was loitering around the bridge, and pulled him over for questioning. Isaac had little choice and bashfully told the truth about his dream. The guard erupted in laughter, "Foolish dreams! I dreamt that a Jew named Isaac from the town of X (and he named the precise village) has a treasure buried under his oven. Do I drop everything and hurry to Isaac's town? Of course not! So be off and have a good day!" Isaac needed no prodding. He hurried back home, dug beneath his oven and found his treasure.

This story has profound lessons about our Jewish identity. Often we think we need Rabbis and experts, experiences abroad, or other external factors, but then we discover that our Jewish identity is already within us, right here in our own hearts and in our own lives.
"PinteleYid" is a favorite emphasis of the Baal Shem Tov and it refers to the G-dly spark, the inner core and essence, the 5th and most powerful level of our Jewish soul. It is the heart of our identity, it is who we are, and beyond anything we do or don't do.

But if that's the case why did Isaac dream of Prague? Why didn't his dream direct him to the treasure underneath his own oven? It often takes a spiritual journey, with much effort and personal investment - to discover that which we already have within ourselves.

Story 2: The Anti-Religious Torah Enthusiast

A colleague of mine on Chabad on Campus (happens to be Mendel Rubin) was in Jerusalem officiating at wedding of alumni from his Chabad House. Being a Rabbi at a wedding is serious business, and can be intimidating even for seasoned veterans, especially when it takes place abroad. He was anxious to get to the hotel on time, and concerned that he had all the necessary documents and speeches etc.

He called a taxi, and was about to be seated inside, when a noisy commotion approached on the narrow Jerusalem street. The taxi driver ran out and pushed himself into the thick throng that was coming down the street. The Chabad on Campus Rabbi settled down in the taxi, about to get comfortable when the taxi driver returned and shouted, "Rabbi from America! You don't go and kiss Torahs? Here, come with me!" Without another word, the taxi driver dragged the Rabbi out of the taxi and pushed him through the throng of singing and chanting people to the Torah which was being carried through the streets. Evidently this was a new Torah being brought to a synagogue with an excited entourage.

At first the Rabbi was very impressed with the devoutness and piety of the taxi driver, and his passionate love of the Torah and tradition. But once inside the taxi, the driver went on a long tirade against religious Jews, the Rabbinate and on and on. That made the Chabad on Campus Rabbi even more impressed! The combination of the taxi driver's passionate Torah experience coupled with the anti-religious talk inside the taxi was a great lesson in what it means to be a "holy people".

This Israeli taxi driver got it right. Religious or not, learned or not, regardless of what he did or didn't observe - the Torah is his heritage, it is his celebration!

Story 3: The Kohen Joke (old joke, sad that to more & more of today's crowd, it may need explaining)

A wealthy congregant came to his Rabbi and said, “Please Rabbi, I want to be become a Kohen. Can you arrange it?” The Rabbi brushed him off by saying “it doesn’t work like that, it’s not so simple...” Everyone knows that being a Kohen is hereditary; if your father wasn't a Kohen there's nothing you can do to become a Kohen. The Rabbi didn't want to hurt this wealthy congregant’s feeling, so he said none of that. But the congregant was persistent and let the Rabbi know that he was willing to make a huge contribution, dedicating a much needed new wing of the synagogue.

The Rabbi hemmed and hawed and then thought of an idea. He approached the Gabbai, who calls people to the Torah, and instructed him to call this wannabe Kohen to the first Aliyah (reserved for Kohens) but with the murmuring preface that “since there are no other Kohen we call this Israelite instead.” emphasize the title Kohen and rush through the “instead.” This man will think he became a Kohen, and we’ll all come out ahead.

The Gabbai agreed and the ceremony was scheduled for the next Monday when Torah would be read. Monday arrives; the thrilled congregant is called up. He presents the big check to the Rabbi. The Rabbi couldn’t resist one nagging question. He pulled the man aside and asked, “Of all the things in the world, why are you so interested in becoming a Kohen?” The guy looks at the Rabbi and exclaims, “Why, my grandfather was a Kohen, my father was a Kohen, and I better be one too!”

Being a Kohen is hereditary, so there was absolutely no need for him to perform any ceremony at all. The same way that being Jewish is passed down from your mother, so too with a Kohen. If your father is a Kohen, then you are a Kohen, no ceremony needed.
It is the same with the Torah & Simchas Torah. You don’t need to know the words or tunes. We all belong in the circle, we all belong dancing. If you are Jewish: Torah is your heritage, inheritance, your birthright!

**Story 4: The First Class Ticket**

There is a story they tell of a simple but well-to-do peasant, living far in the deep reaches of Russia. One day he heard of a new invention; a horseless carriage. He didn’t believe that such a thing could exist, so he took a bundle of cash and headed off for the distant big city which had the closest train station.

When he arrived, he was shown to the ticket booth. The clerk showed several choices of ticket preferences, our peasant friend chose First Class. After all he did not travel every day! The clerk explained that First Class was the best way to appreciate the train travel experience. But trains did not travel every hour, and the next train to depart from this station was at 7am the next morning.

This man had simple tastes, and no need for a fancy hotel bed, so he just curled himself up on a bench in the station, determined not to oversleep and miss this incredible experience.

At about 5am, he awoke to the great sound of the train rolling into the station. It was overwhelming, dramatic and sensational. Dawn was just breaking and he noticed some movement at the far-end of the platform. He knew little of the train protocol, so he walked over to find out.

It was some vagabonds and crooks who had come early to sneak onto the train and avoid paying for a ticket. Not knowing the standard procedures, he followed their lead, crept under a bench and made himself comfortable.

Sometime later the train began to roll. The peasant enjoyed the hissing and clanking sounds, the rhythmic and soothing ride soon lulled him to sleep. His heavy boot protruded from under the seat and he was rudely awakened by an angry conductor. The official was livid that he had cheated the system, ruining it for others, by traveling without a ticket.

"But I have a ticket," persisted the peasant, and he proceeded to unroll a pile of newspapers from within his fur coat. From within all that (for he wished to hide it as he was told it was important) he produced a bright red-colored first class ticket! The conductor was confused. “So why did you hide under the seat? You could have been sitting up front in luxury!”

The peasant replied, "I followed what everyone else was doing."

We may not realize its worth, but each of us has a first-class ticket. There is no reason to climb under the bench, go to the back of the bus, or stand at the edges of the Simchat Torah circle. Each and every Jew is 100% entitled to the full Simchat Torah experience, whether you know the song or not, whether you have a good voice or not and regardless of how you dance. Make the most of your first-class ticket!

**Story 5: And of course there’s the famous George Rohr Story:**

Mr. George Rohr, a businessman and philanthropist who is the major benefactor of Chabad on Campus, once told the Rebbe about a High Holidays beginners Minyan he had arranged at his synagogue for Jews with no background. "No Jewish background?" asked the Rebbe. The Rebbe told him, "Tell them that they have a background! Their background is that they are children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob!"