

Simchat Beit Hashoevah

Sukkot's Joyous Water-Drawing Ceremony

By Tzvi Freeman

One who never saw the Water-Drawing Celebration has never seen joy in his life. (Talmud)



The Biggest Party in Ancient Israel

From the time King Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem until the day it was destroyed by the Romans (with a brief interim for temporary exile to Babylonia), the can't-miss-it event-of-the-year for Jews was the Water-Drawing Celebration.

Envision streams of Jewish families—farmers, vintners, shepherds, merchants, craftspeople, and scholars—streaming in from every part of Israel, Syria, Babylonia, Egypt, and other nearby lands, converging upon Jerusalem and celebrating day and night, non-stop for eight days. The hot spot was, of course, the Temple Mount.

At the close of the first day of Sukkot, Temple workers furiously began inserting sturdy poles into their brackets in the walls of the Temple courtyard. Over the poles they lay wooden boards, creating cascades of bleachers so that women could stand on the higher bleachers, with the men below—the original synagogue mechitzah.

Torch-laden boys scrambled up ladders scaling candelabras 75, perhaps 150 feet tall to light the thick wicks of the candelabras' four enormous lanterns so that all of Jerusalem was filled with light like day. The kohanim began sounding their trumpets, the levi'im played their flutes, lyres, cymbals, and every sort of instrument in thunderous, heavenly music, while all the people joined in song.

The most wondrous spectacle of all was the sight of the distinguished elders, with their long white beards, singing at the top of their lungs, dancing wildly, performing acrobatic feats, and even juggling acts. The most illustrious sage, Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel, who presided over the supreme court of seventy elders, would juggle eight flaming torches—and never would one torch touch another.

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"If you never saw the celebration of the water-drawing," Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi would say, "you never saw a celebration in your life."

Drawing Water, Drawing Divine Inspiration

Until dawn. Then came the water pouring.

What's so exciting about pouring water? We can't fathom. This is one of those things you just had to be there to understand.

Fresh water was drawn from a wellspring called Mayan Hashiloach, just outside Jerusalem. As the flasks of water were ushered in through the Water Gate of the Temple, trumpets sounded and fanfare ensued.

“From this we understand that the divine spirit only rests upon a joyous heart.”

On a regular morning, the offering in the Temple was the meat of one sheep accompanied by a flour-and-oil mix, both thrown into the fire of the altar, along with one flask of wine poured by a kohen at the altar's corner. But on the days of Sukkot, there was another flask, filled with this water freshly drawn from the Mayan Shiloach, poured by the same kohen together with that flask of wine.

That's why the celebration was called Simchat Beit Hashoeva שמחת בית השואבה—literally, “The Celebration of the House of Drawing Water.” Even though the people didn't attend the actual water-drawing, and it didn't happen in the Temple, they drew something else there. Here's a passage from the Jerusalem Talmud:

Rabbi Yehoshua ben Levi said, “Do you know why it was called ‘The Celebration of the House of Drawing Water?’ Because from there they drew divine inspiration.”

Rabbi Jonah said, “The prophet Jonah ben Amitai was one of the holiday pilgrims to the Temple. He walked into the Simchat Beit Hashoeva and the divine spirit rested upon him.”

From this we understand that the divine spirit only rests upon a joyous heart. As the verse says, “As soon as the musician began to play music, the spirit of G-d rested upon the prophet.”

After the morning offerings, the communal prayers, the priestly blessings, the additional offerings, and more prayers and priestly blessings, the people parted to the study halls to review their Torah knowledge and hear the talks of great scholars, then to homes throughout Jerusalem to feast, sing and celebrate some more until returning to the Temple Mount for the afternoon offerings, followed by, once again, a night of music, spectacles, and celebration.

Every night for six nights—excluding the night of Shabbat—beginning as soon as the afternoon offering was complete, for around 15 ½ hours until the morning offerings. As Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya would say, “Our eyes never saw sleep.”

“But how is that possible?” the Talmud asks. “A person can't go without sleep for even three days!”

And the Talmud answers: They must have dozed off once in a while on each other's shoulders while standing.

Celebration Renewed