

# A Simḥat Torah Practice and the Ephraimite Tradition

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I dedicate this to Truman G. Madsen, “Head of the Academy,” in friendship. In the Jewish calendar, Simḥat Torah, the “Rejoicing of the Torah,” is the date on which the annual cycle of reading ends with Deuteronomy and is immediately renewed with reading from the first chapter of Genesis. This day is the final day of the fall holy days. In Israel, the ending and beginning of the reading cycle is celebrated on Shemini ‘Atzeret, the “Eighth Day of Assembly,” meaning the eighth day following the seven days of Sukkot, the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>1</sup>

Torah scrolls read in the synagogue contain the five books of Moses written in Hebrew on parchment leaves sewn into a scroll and mounted on two wooden rollers. In the practice of most Jews whose recent ancestors came from central and eastern Europe, after each reading of the Torah a congregant is given the honor of grasping the handles of the rollers, lifting up the Torah scroll, and displaying it to the congregation. In many Jewish congregations, on Simat Torah the raising of the Torah is completed in a unique manner. Rather than raising the scroll in the usual way, the congregant chosen for this honor grasps the left roller with his right hand and vice versa, flipping the Torah around as it is raised so that the text of the scroll faces the congregation rather than the person lifting it.

It is unlikely that the practice itself is ancient or expresses a profound theological lesson, and it is not my purpose to explain the principles and beliefs that in fact gave rise to it. Indeed, to quote Arnold Eisen, “Practice certainly should not be seen as the mere enactment or expression of belief. Very often it is the other way around. ... Part of the attraction of a particular practice lies precisely in the fact that one can find it meaningful for a *variety* of reasons or in the absence of any reason whatsoever.”<sup>2</sup> Thus what is important is often not exactly how the practice arose—often this is unrecoverable—but the reasons offered by the faithful to render it meaningful. For the believer, the words of written revelation and oral tradition are thus translated into practices that tend to fill every available moment of life with references to Torah, a process I have called “inpraxation.”<sup>3</sup> We will look at one set of reasons for reversing the handles of the Torah Scroll on Simat Torah, associating this practice with the biblical figure of Ephraim, son of Joseph, or with his descendants, the tribe of Ephraim.

Rabbi Abraham David Wahrman (d. 1840), sometimes known as the “Holy Excellence (*ha-gaon ha-kadosh*) of Buczacz,” suggests two reasons in his book *Eshel Avraham (The Grove of Abraham)*.<sup>4</sup> First, Wahrman connects it with the well-known talmudic saying, “Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it” (*Avot* 5:22).<sup>5</sup> This is, of course, a play on words. In context, “turn it” is a figure of speech that does not mean to turn the scroll around but to turn the pages over in contemplation; an idiomatic translation would be “Study the Torah again and again.”<sup>6</sup>

The other reason he gives is that “the prince of Ephraim offered his sacrifice on the eighth day.”<sup>7</sup> This can only be a reference to the offerings of the tribal leaders at the dedication of the desert sanctuary (*Numbers* 7:12–83). Today, according to the sage of Buczacz, the celebrations on the Eighth Day of Assembly affirm that the “words of the Scribes are dear to us, both those that are new and those that are old.” No doubt this is a reference to the fact that the practices of Simḥat Torah are not based on biblical commandments and are not found in the writings of the earliest rabbis. Moreover, the customs of this day (including calling each congregant to the Torah) “add extra blessings,” presumably both in the technical sense of adding more repetitions of the blessing formula, “Blessed art thou, O Lord,” and of increasing the blessings to be invoked upon the congregation.<sup>8</sup> The connection with Ephraim

himself is recalled—and the practice of reversing the hands when raising the Torah scroll is finally explained—by referring to Genesis 48:14. Joseph had presented his sons to his father for a blessing. Joseph placed Ephraim on his own right, to the left of his father, who nevertheless “put his right hand on Ephraim, even though he was the younger ... he crossed his arms [*sikēl et yādāv*]” (Genesis 48:14).

The words of the blessing pronounced by Father Jacob on this occasion also figure in another Simat Torah ritual, attested since the sixteenth century, although no explicit mention of Ephraim is made in this connection.<sup>9</sup> All children under the age of thirteen are called to the Torah, where they are offered Jacob’s blessing to Ephraim and Manasseh: “May the Angel who redeems me from all evil ...” (Genesis 48:16).

According to the Midrash, Jacob gave an extra blessing to Ephraim at this time: “Ephraim, you are the Head of the Academy and Leader of the tribes, and in days to come my most excellent and celebrated descendants will be called by your name.”<sup>10</sup> The Midrash then identifies two non-Ephraimites linked to the tribe because they were called *efrati*, a Hebrew term that may be translated “Ephrathite” or “Ephraimite,” thus referring either to Ephrath, another name for Bethlehem, or to a person from the tribe or geographical region of Ephraim. These are David the son of Jesse (of Judah) and Elkanah the father of Samuel, who was, according to Chronicles, a Levite.<sup>11</sup>

Apparently the offering of the prince of Ephraim provides the rabbi of Buczacz with the connection between the crossing of Jacob’s hands and the reversing of the Torah scroll on Simat Torah. But this is problematic: The leader of Ephraim in fact made his offerings on the seventh day of the dedication ceremonies, not the eighth (Numbers 7:48). According to rabbinic tradition, this was indeed the Sabbath day, as the individual offerings of the tribes began on the first of Nisan, which was a Sunday, and Ephraim’s sacrifice was thus on the Sabbath.<sup>12</sup> According to the Midrash, the honor of presenting a gift on the Sabbath fell to Ephraim as a reward for Joseph’s fidelity to the Sabbath.<sup>13</sup>

Perhaps Ephraim’s offering had—at least for Rabbi Wahrman—relevance to the independent nature of the Shemini ‘Atzeret festival. In temple practice, as understood by the rabbis, the statutory public sacrifices were considered to supersede the Sabbath, but Sabbath observance precluded personal offerings. Moreover, if Ephraim’s sacrifice was merely one-twelfth of a group offering by the twelve tribes, it would not have been considered an independent sacrifice and also would have been precluded by the Sabbath. Thus the fact that the prince of Ephraim could bring his sacrifice on the Sabbath indicates that this was both a community sacrifice and an independent offering.<sup>14</sup> This corresponds to a point made by Wahrman, who concludes his comments on Ephraim’s sacrifice and blessing by declaring that Shemini ‘Atzeret, the Eighth Day of Assembly, has “its own sacrifice and its own blessing”; the independence of this holiday is a problem raised in rabbinic literature.<sup>15</sup> Could it be that the argument that arose from the offering of Ephraim on the Sabbath led to this conclusion about Shemini ‘Atzeret and that this association in turn was the reason the rabbi of Buczacz thought that Ephraim’s offering was made on the eighth day?

Having worked together with Truman Madsen and members of the Latter-day Saint community on *Covenant and Chosenness in Mormonism and Judaism*,<sup>16</sup> it comes naturally to me to recall their identification with the sons of Joseph, in particular with the tribe of Ephraim. Although celebrated in different ways and, of course, with different scriptural canons, the celebration of reading and studying scripture in a never-ending cycle is shared by Latter-day Saints and Jews. So, too, is the careful attention to the proper bounds of observing the Sabbath. Perhaps most telling is the midrashic blessing of Ephraim. It connects Ephraim with David, son of Jesse the Ephrati, who unified the tribes, founded Jerusalem on Mount Zion, and was the sweet singer of the Psalms. Moreover, it associates

Ephraim's reputation with the intellectual vigor of the "Head of the Academy." How well this resonates with a community which declares that "the glory of God is intelligence,"<sup>17</sup> and how well this resonates with the exemplary career and character of this volume's honoree.

## Notes

1. See **Leviticus 23:26, 39; Numbers 29:35**. Outside of Israel, the "Eighth Day of Assembly" is traditionally observed for two days, the second of which is celebrated as Simat Torah.
2. Arnold Eisen, *Rethinking American Judaism* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Frankel Center for Jewish Studies, 1999), 3, emphasis in original.
3. See, for example, my introduction to *'Avoda and 'Ibada: Liturgy and Ritual in Islamic and Judaic Societies* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 5/1:1–6; and Seth Ward, "Religious Ethics in the University Setting: The University of Denver Student Symposium on Jewish Ethics," *Panorama: International Journal of Comparative Religious Education and Values* 12/2 (2000): 87.
4. The title of the book is a play on words, a reference both to the author's name and to Genesis 21:33. "Grove of Abraham" follows the King James Version. Wahrman was a student of the famous Hasidic rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev; his *Eshel Avraham* is one of numerous works of commentary, clarifications, descriptions of customs, and cross-references that adorn the side and bottom margins and back pages of each volume of traditional editions of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*. Unfortunately, two other works are also named *Eshel Avraham*, which makes locating Wahrman's book confusing even for those highly familiar with Jewish legal literature. The other works are Abraham Oppenheim's *Eshel Avraham*, "a collection of famous Geonic responsa," according to the title page, usually printed in the margins of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* itself; and the *Eshel Avraham* published in *Pri Megadim* (Lemberg [Lviv, Ukraine]: Pessl Balaban, 1883–84), reprinted in the back of most editions of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*. The *Eshel Avraham* of the rabbi of Buczacz is printed after the *Pri Megadim* in many (but not all) traditional editions of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*. In all cases, references to the *Shulḥan 'Arukh* and any of the works that are printed with it are to the section (in this case, **Orah Hayyim**, dealing with life cycle, Sabbath and festivals, prayer, and ritual), followed by chapter or paragraph numbers, not pages. Wahrman's *Eshel Avraham* is not particularly well known to traditional Jews today; presumably that is why this book is omitted from some traditional editions of the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*. But his views on this subject were cited in a popular work by Abraham I. Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Minhagim (The Reasons for Customs)* (Jerusalem: Eshkol, 1960–61), paragraphs 833–34. Wahrman is Sperling's only source for these ideas. The Sperling text corresponds exactly with that of the *Eshel Avraham* printed in the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*, which I examined.
5. Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei*, paragraph 833, corresponding to *Eshel Avraham* on **Orah Hayyim**, paragraph 665. See next note about the quotation from *Avot*.
6. This is the translation of Philip Birnbaum, *Ha-Siddur ha-Shalem: The Daily Prayer Book* (New York: Hebrew Publishing, 1949). *Avot* 5:22 is the enumeration in traditional Talmud editions; Birnbaum and many Mishnah editions enumerate this as *Avot* 5:25. It may be of interest to note that a manuscript reading may suggest a link with Joshua 1:8. Manuscripts have "turn it and turn it and meditate about it, for everything is in it"; see Yosef Kah, *Mishnah with the Commentary of Moses Maimonides* (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1964–65), 307. (In Kafih's edition, this passage is *Avot* 5:19.) Compare Joshua 1:8: "and thou shalt meditate therein [in the Book of Moses] day and night"; "meditate" has the same Hebrew root in both Joshua and the Mishnah.

7. Sperling, *Sefer Ta'amei*, paragraph 834, *Eshel Avraham*, no. 665. The Sperling *Eshel Avraham* texts follow the biblical text closely but not exactly. "Prince" is the King James Version's translation for the Hebrew *nasi*; other Bible translations often use "leader."

8. It is not clear what relationship the reversing of the Torah scroll has to the pronouncement of extra blessing formulas.

9. R. Moses Isserles (d. 1572), in the *Shulḥan 'Arukh*, *Orah Ḥayyim* 669:1.

10. *Vayikra Rabbah* 2:3; my translation of *yafeh u-me'uleh* as "most excellent and celebrated" follows Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1953), 2:138. Ginzburg leaves out the reference to "Leader of the Tribes" and says "will be called Ephrati after thee." This Midrash is also cited more or less in Ginzburg's wording in the *Encyclopedia Judaica* article "Ephraim." See Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, 5:366, for a list of parallels, to which may be added *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer* 45: "every prince and great man who arose in Israel had his name called an Ephrathite," as translated by Gerald Friedlander (1916; reprint, New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1981), 353. *Pirque de Rabbi Eliezer*, however, makes no reference to the blessing of Ephraim. See Abraham Even-Shoshan, *Ha-Milon he-Hadash (The New Dictionary)* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1969), s.v. "Efrati," no. 3, for medieval and modern references to *efrati* used to mean "noble" or "elite."

11. On Elkanah, see 1Samuel 1:1 and 1Chronicles 6:28 (this verse is numbered 1Chronicles 6:13 in Hebrew Bibles); on David, see 1Samuel 17:12. On *efrati* for a member of Ephraim's tribe, see 1Kings 11:26 and Judges 12:15. In the King James Version, "Ephrathite" and "Ephraimite" are both used to translate *efrati*.

12. Compare Exodus 40:17, and, for example, Rashi on Numbers 7:1 and 12. The discussion about this date—and its falling on Sunday—is found in *Seder 'Olam Rabbah* 7 and in TB *Shabbat* 87a. Based on rabbinic traditions about the year in which the exodus occurred, many traditional Jewish sources would date Ephraim's sacrifice almost a year later, Nisan 8, in the year 2449 of the creation, corresponding to Saturday, 4 April 1312 B.C.E. I believe talmudic references to dates should be considered as years since the creation of Adam, not strictly the "creation era" used by Jews today; in this system the traditional date for the dedication of the sanctuary corresponds to spring, 1310 B.C.E.

13. *Bamidbar Rabbah* 14:2, end.

14. Ibid.

15. TB *Sukkah* 48a, top, with parallels noted there.

16. Rafael Jospe, Truman Madsen, and Seth Ward, eds., *Covenant and Chosenness in Mormonism and Judaism* (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickenson University Press, 2001).

17. Taken from the Latter-day Saint scripture Doctrine and Covenants 93:36, this was chosen as the title of a lecture series and book by Jacob Neusner, *The Glory of God Is Intelligence: Four Lectures on the Role of Intellect in Judaism* (Salt Lake City: BYU Religious Studies Center, 1978).