

Torah Thoughts Shabbat Chol HaMoed Sukkot

5779:

There is a tradition at Jewish weddings for the bride to circle the groom seven times just before entering the huppah. During the many weddings I have performed over the years, I have seen every possible variation on this, sometimes with the groom circling the bride, sometimes with each of them circling each other. No matter how the couple chooses to do this ritual, I explain that the symbolism remains the same; circling is a sign of creating a protective space, of drawing a border around our beloved as a sign of the protection that we will provide for them.

Circling is also a custom of the holidays of Sukkot and Simhat Torah. Each day of Sukkot, we circle the sanctuary carrying lulav and etrog, creating a procession around the room through which we call out to God in thanks for the natural world and for protection from it. On Simhat Torah, we dance in circles to celebrate the completion of one cycle of Torah reading and the beginning of the next cycle. We express our joy in a shared life based on the values and wisdom of the traditions the Torah represents.

In both cases, our circles also symbolize the protection that community provides. During Sukkot, we create a circle around our shared belief in the God whose handiwork this world is. We then leave that circle concerned about the welfare of God's earth. On Simhat Torah, we circle around the Torah scrolls, whose words and values we protect and maintain through our study and observance. We then leave that circle reinvigorated and ready to start a new year of learning and engagement in the world. In each case we do having taken a stand in that world.

As the new Jewish year and school year get under way, we should leave these circlings as would a bride and groom, with joy and anticipation about a wonderful year ahead.

Mo'adim l'simha, and Shabbat Shalom.