

RITUAL OF INSTALLATION - RABBI LEAH CITRIN
SUNDAY, OCTOBER 16, 2023 - SIMCHAT TORAH 5783
RABBI JONATHAN BLAKE

Hinei ma tov, u'ma na'im, shevet achim gam yachad!

What a good feeling for all of us to be together! This is an afternoon of celebration. We call this holiday *Simchat Torah*. It means, “Happiness in the Torah,” and that’s exactly what it’s all about.

In just a few minutes, we will unroll the entire Torah scroll and encircle the congregation. We will then chant the last words of the Torah, and immediately start over by chanting the first words of the Torah.

The Torah is not like any other book. Most books you read cover to cover, start to finish. There’s a beginning, a middle, and an end. You may love a book so much that some day, you go back and read it again. But only Torah do we read start to finish, and then immediately go back to the starting point. It’s like that big circle we will make with the scroll: when you read the Torah this way, it has no beginning and no ending. It just keeps going round and around. Jewish people have been reading Torah this way for hundreds, even thousands, of years, and we will be reading Torah this way long after all of us are gone.

The very last word of the Torah is “*Yisrael*.” It means “Israel” which is not only the world’s only Jewish State; it is also a name for the Jewish People.

The word Israel finishes the Torah because the Torah is all about the story of the Jewish people. At the very end of the Torah, Moses has been leading the people for more than 40 years and his end is near. When he finally dies, at the ripe old age of 120, the Torah tells us that no one who ever lived was like Moses, who did so much for the People of Israel.

The very last word of the Torah is *Yisrael* and that means the very last **letter** of the Torah is a ***lamed***, which is the root of a word meaning “learning.”

The very first word of the Torah is *Bereshit*, which means “in the beginning.” *Bereshit* starts with a *Bet*, which is the root of a word meaning “house.”

You have a *lamed* for learning, and a *bet* for house.

On Simchat Torah, when we turn the Torah into a circle, the *lamed* and the *bet* connect, and something magical happens. Actually, two magical things happen.

1. We build a **learning house** out of the *lamed* and the *bet*. Wherever Torah is studied and shared, that place becomes a learning house. Here at WRT, we have built an incredible learning house--our Jewish Learning Lab or JLL for short--where we learn about Torah, Judaism, holidays and life-cycles, Hebrew language and Jewish values, our history and culture, prayers and rituals, our *mitzvot* and even about the meaning of life. Between Kindergarten and 12th grade,

culminating in a high school senior class trip to Israel, all of us--students, families, teachers, rabbis and cantors--are engaged in building a learning house.

2. The other magical thing that happens when we connect the Hebrew letters *lamed* and *bet* is that we build the Hebrew word *lev*, which means “heart.” An old Broadway show features a song called “(You Gotta Have) Heart,” which in the show is actually about keeping your chin up when the Yankees are losing ([check the series stats](#)). As in baseball, so in life: you gotta have heart! Nothing we do here at WRT would matter without *heart*. When we pray we say, “Love Adonai your God with all your heart.” When we want to say “Pay attention!” in Hebrew, we actually say, “*Sim Lev*,” which means, “Put your heart in it!”

My friends, I share this magical bit of Torah with you not because it explains not only why we celebrate *Simchat Torah*, but also why we are so thrilled to welcome Rabbi Leah Citrin as our new Director of the Jewish Learning Lab at WRT.

Because Rabbi Citrin knows what it means to **build a learning house**. And Rabbi Citrin knows that if you want Torah to be joyful not just one day a year, but every day, then **you gotta have heart**.

Rabbi Citrin grew up here at WRT. She was deeply involved in the life of the temple. I first met her as a high school student. And from that day to

this day, I could see that here is a person who puts her heart into everything she does.

As a High School senior, she volunteered to work at WRT as our intern during her senior options period. She was--and is--so dedicated, caring, smart, funny, honest, and real. I knew even then that any Jewish community would be lucky to have her -- even before she knew she was going to be a rabbi.

Bates College followed, where she was an honors student and played softball for all four years. In her senior year alone, she played in 25 games and finished the season with three doubles, 14 RBI's and 26 total bases, although no hits against my alma mater, Amherst College - not that I ever personally swung at a pitch. My only college sport was a cappella.

Before entering Hebrew Union College in Cincinnati (also my alma mater!) to study for the rabbinate, Rabbi Citrin spent a year teaching locally at Windward.

And after five years in rabbinical school, Rabbi Citrin served a wonderful congregation in Raleigh, North Carolina, for the last seven years. So to say that Rabbi Citrin is qualified for her new, important, and demanding job would be an understatement.

But what makes a great Jewish educator and rabbi is not how hard she works, or how smart she is, or even her skills with a softball, which are, by

the way, quite impressive. Just last Sunday night, she took a single pitch from behind the dunk tank line and managed to drop me in the water without even batting an eye.

No, what makes Rabbi Citrin such an amazing educator and rabbi is that everything she does, she does with a lot of heart. With love for you--our children and parents. With love for this community that nurtured her and her spiritual and professional path. With love for our amazing staff and faculty who have big hearts, because they've decided to give a lot of their time and energy to teaching here at WRT--and that's a big deal. With love for God, Torah, and Israel.

And what makes Rabbi Citrin such an amazing educator and rabbi is her commitment to building this learning house, together. Not to rest on our laurels but to keep innovating, growing, improving, learning along with all of us. To build a learning house where joyful Jewish memories are made, confidence in Jewish learning and leadership is earned, and commitment to the Jewish people and the Jewish tradition is forged.

But she can't do this alone. She can't succeed if *your* heart isn't in it, too. If *you* are just going through the motions; if *you* are not particularly into building this learning house together; if *you* are not putting your heart into it, then the Torah we teach here will be diminished. It certainly won't be a source of *Simcha*, of joy.

So let's make this our *Simchat Torah* pledge. Let's put our hearts into this place, into the Jewish Learning Lab, into Westchester Reform Temple, into our heritage and our Jewish values, a living, vibrant Judaism. Let's not settle for just having good attendance. Attendance is boring. Living our Judaism with heart, and soul, and might, is where the real magic happens. It's not enough that the rabbi cares; *you* gotta have heart too.

With God's help, may our new Rabbi go from strength to strength, as she helps us build this learning house. And with God's help, may all of our hearts be joined in the joy of Torah. *Amen.*