



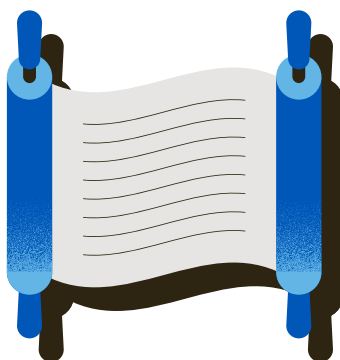
# DANCING INTO FORGIVENESS

As this period of Teshuvah comes to an end, I keep finding myself returning to one painful thought. For the past month or so, we've been asking God for forgiveness and repeating the thirteen attributes of mercy. We invoke various verses and prayers, reminding us of the idea that They are merciful and They forgive us, and while that may be true, I don't know if I forgive myself. I don't know if I can forgive myself for what I did and who I was this past year. And for anyone else who may be able to relate, you can understand how hard it is to look forward to a holiday of dancing and fun, Simchat Torah, carrying that sense of distress with me.



But perhaps, that is what Simchat Torah is for. We spend a whole month praying to God for forgiveness. Then, right before Simchat Torah, we celebrate Hoshana Rabba on the final day of Sukkot, whereupon we take the “aravot” or willow branches of our lulav and smash them on the floor. Their fallen leaves represent the sins we are ridding ourselves of. Hoshana Rabba is also the last day Jews recite Tashlich, the symbolic releasing of our sins and mistakes as they wash away with the current of a river. It's a transition period, a time when we do our best to make physical changes in our lives. This can be cathartic for a lot of people, but some of us need a bit more to really feel the sense of letting go and a new beginning the new year is supposed to present. These actions can be powerful but empty — like following a script.

Simchat Torah speaks to us in two ways. First, the completion and renewal of the Torah can show those of us stuck in or holding onto the past that we can begin again, and we aren't alone in our need for a fresh start.





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Second, when all else fails, sometimes we just need to move our body. Simchat Torah provides a jumpstart of fun, excitement and dance we can use to pull ourselves out of our own heads and into our bodies, which can serve as a form of informal dance therapy.



Dance therapy, or Dance/movement therapy (DMT), is defined by the American Dance Therapy Association (ADTA) as the “psychotherapeutic use of movement to promote emotional, social, cognitive and physical integration of the individual for the purpose of improving health and well-being.” Not only does dance therapy create an opportunity to integrate our physical and mental beings; it provides individuals a “basic nonverbal vocabulary” (Karkou et al., 2017, p. 219) and can be used for those moments when our emotions are too complex to express verbally.

Studies have found that dance therapy has a significant impact on individuals and groups. By boosting the body’s endorphins and cortisol, which happens when we exercise and move, it can potentially change the makeup of the brain (Karkou et al., 2017). Dancing as therapy has been found to strengthen group coherence, increase an individual’s willingness to help others, improve self-esteem and self-confidence, and reduce anxiety. It can help us overcome emotional struggles from such things as breakups, eating disorders, loneliness and fatigue, and it can positively affect one’s physical, cognitive, social, emotional, spiritual and creative processes. Studies have shown it can enhance self-esteem, improve relationships and reduce the risk of falling for older adults, therefore increasing their confidence and independence. Overall, it can help people feel good, have more energy, relax more easily and experience euphoria more often.

On Simchat Torah and all year long, dance can bring us to a place of acceptance, joy and love for our inherited tradition, our community and ourselves.