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Divrei Torah about Hakhel & Sukkos 5783

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The Mitzvah of Hakhel: Inspiration & Torah Learning

Harav Yona Reiss
Av Beth Din



In *Parshas Vayelech*, which we read this year right before Yom Kippur, we are instructed regarding the 612th *mitzvah* of the Torah, which is the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. *Hakhel* is observed every seven years, immediately following the *Shemittah* year, so technically we are now entering into the period of the observance of this *mitzvah*. The Torah teaches us (*Devorim* 31:10-13) that מקץ שבע שנים במעד שנת –at the conclusion of the seven-year period culminating with the observance of the *Shemittah* year, during the ensuing holiday of Sukkot, תקרא את התורה הזאת נגד – כל ישראל באזניהם – there is a giant assembly in the *Beit Hamikdash*, during which time portions of the Torah are read in the presence of the entire congregation of Israel. Accordingly, there is a requirement of הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף – to gather the men, the women and the children for this special occasion, למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו ויראו את ה' א-לקיכם ושמרו לעשות – so that the entire people will hear the words of the Torah, and so learn to fear Hashem and observe all the words

of the Torah.

The details of this *mitzvah* are spelled out in greater detail in the Talmud (*Sotah* 41a – 41b, and *Chagigah* 3a), and in the *Sefer Hachinuch* (*Mitzvah* 612). The ceremony of *Hakhel* took place on the second day of Sukkos, at which time a special platform was placed in the women's section of the *Beit Hamikdash*, from which the king of Israel would read from the beginning of *Sefer Devorim* through the first paragraph of *Shema Yisroel* in *Parshas V'eschanan*, and then would read the second paragraph of the *Shema* in *Parshas Ekev*, and then from "Aser Te'aser" in *Parshas Ekev* until the end of the sixth *aliyah* of *Parshas Ki Savo* (i.e., the conclusion of the blessings and curses and the sealing of the covenant). This special reading of the Torah was accompanied by special benedictions recited on this occasion.

In his *sefer Oros Chag Hasukos*, Rabbi Shlomo Wahrman zt"l raises the question as to whether the essence of the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is to teach Torah, similar to the weekly reading of the Torah portion

in the synagogue, or whether the essence of the *mitzvah* is to inspire adherence to the Jewish faith. He notes that the *Mishna* (*Sotah* 41a) which states that the Torah reading of *Hakhel* can technically be read by the king even when he is sitting down, indicates that the *mitzvah* is in the realm of a normal Torah reading, which, if necessary, can be performed even while sitting. On the other hand, the Rambam (*Hilchos Chagigah* 3:1) writes that the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is to read from sections of the Torah שהן מזרזות אותן – במצות ומחזקות ידיהם בדת האמת – “that propel the congregation to perform *mitzvot* and strengthen their hands in following the true religion.” The Rambam’s formulation seems to be in line with that of the *Targum Yonatan ben Uziel* (*Devorim* 31:12) who writes that the purpose of *Hakhel* was דייחמון איקר דאורייתא – so that the people palpably experience the honor given to the Torah, indicating that it was for the purpose of strengthening Torah observance.

Based on these different approaches towards understanding the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*, Rabbi Wahrman suggests a few different ramifications. There is a dispute as to the meaning of the phrase וגרך אשר בשעריך – the stranger within your gates – as to whether this simply means that *Hakhel* was incumbent upon converts to Judaism as indicated in the *Midrash Pesikta Zutrassa* (and is the interpretation

accepted by R. Meir Simcha M’Dvinsk in his commentary *Meshech Chochma*) or whether this phrase even encompasses a “*Ger Toshav*” – a non-Jew who has accepted upon himself the seven Noachide laws, as understood by Ibn Ezra (ad locum), who writes that such a person is brought to the *Hakhel* ceremony because אולי יתיהד – maybe he will convert to Judaism. Rabbi Wahrman suggests that according to the *Midrashic* explanation, the purpose of *Hakhel* is to learn Torah, from which a *Ger Toshav* is exempt, while according to the explanation of the Ibn Ezra, the purpose of *Hakhel* is to inspire people with respect to the truth of the Torah, which is appropriate for a *Ger Toshav* as well.

Another distinction noted by Rabbi Wahrman is regarding whether someone who does not understand Hebrew, which was the language in which the words of the Torah were read at the *Hakhel* ceremony (see *Sotah* 32a), is exempt from the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. According to the *Turei Even* (*Chagigah* 3a) such a person is exempt because he or she will not be able to properly hear or learn from the words that are read, and thus would not fulfill the mandate of למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו – so that you will hear and learn. However, the Rambam (*Chagigah* 3:5) indicates that such an individual would still be obligated to attend

Hakhel (as he writes that the reading is in Hebrew “despite the fact” that there are attendees who speak foreign languages). The opinion of the *Turei Even* makes more sense if the purpose of the *mitzvah* is learning Torah, because a person who does not understand the language will not be able to learn. However, if the purpose of the *mitzvah* is to enhance one’s appreciation for the Jewish religion, which the Rambam himself indicates, then we understand why the Rambam holds that even a person who cannot understand the words being read should attend because such a person will still be inspired by the grandiose pomp and ceremony accompanying the reading of the Torah.

One of the aspects of the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*, as the *Sefer Hachinuch* (id.) writes, is that it needed to be read by the king of Israel. (Indeed, the reading of *Hakhel* is described as “*Parshat Ha-melech*,” the king’s Torah portion.) However, the *Minchas Chinuch* (ad locum) concludes that if there is no king, then the Torah reading would be performed by the *Gadol Hador*, the most prominent personage in the generation. The Netziv in his commentary to the Torah draws the same conclusion, except that he specifies that the most important personage, if there is no king, would be the *Kohen Gadol* (the High Priest). However, from the words of the *Sefer Yereim* (*siman*

266) it seems that the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* was incumbent only upon the king himself, without the allowance of substitutes.

Perhaps here as well we can distinguish between the two suggested reasons for *Hakhel*. If the purpose of *Hakhel* was to teach Torah, then the major objective would be to have the major Torah leader, whether it be the king, the *Kohen Gadol*, or the *Gadol Hador*, read from the Torah. If, however, the purpose was to create a grandiose experience of paying tribute to the Torah and religious life amongst the nation, then it would be understandable why this role might need to be performed specifically by a king.

We can also relate this analysis to the question of the age of children who are brought to *Hakhel*. R. Eleazer ben Azarya explained (*Chagigah* 3a) that the children were included כדי ליתן שכר למביאייהו – to bring reward to the parents who would bring them to the *Hakhel* ceremony. The Ramban in his commentary to the Torah writes that it must be that the children had already reached the age of *chinuch* (Torah education) or close to that age, so that the experience would satisfy the mandate of ליראה – that they would learn to fear Hashem (as the concluding verse of *Hakhel* states) in the future, although he notes that

the simple reading of R. Eleazer ben Azarya's statement does not sound that way. Similarly, Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik quoted his grandfather, Rav Chaim Soloveitchik (*Nefesh HaRav* by Rav Hershel Schachter shlit"א, *Parshas Vayelech*) as stating that the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* only applies to children who had reached the age of *chinuch*, and that this was the meaning of the statement of R. Eleazer ben Azarya as well. However, the Maharsha (*Chagigah* 3a), and the *Minchas Chinuch* (id.) both concluded that the *mitzvah* applies to infant children. The *Meshech Chochma* explains on this basis why the Talmudic passage in *Chagigah* states that R. Yehoshua rejoiced over the explanation of R. Eleazer ben Azarya, since it validated his personal experience as evidenced by a passage in the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (*Yevamos*, end of first chapter) that R. Yehoshua's mother used to bring him as an infant to the synagogue when he was still in his crib.

If the purpose of *Hakhel* is to create an excitement regarding the Torah and religious commitment, we can more readily appreciate the opinion of the Maharsha and the *Minchas Chinuch* that the *mitzvah* pertains to the bringing of infant children as well. On the other hand, if the purpose of the *mitzvah* is the teaching of Torah, then it is easier to understand the view espoused by

the Ramban and endorsed by Rav Chaim Soloveitchik that it would only apply to children who had reached or at least approached the age of *chinuch*.

Is *Hakhel* observed nowadays? The Torah describes the *Hakhel* ceremony as taking place in the *Beis Hamikdash* in the presence of all the people following a *Shemittah* year. Therefore, there is no question that *Hakhel* cannot be observed today on a Torah level since (a) there is no *Beis Hamikdash*; (b) we don't have the presence of all the people in Israel (or even a clear majority, although we are coming close), and (c) we do not observe *Shemittah* on a Torah level, but only on a rabbinic level (according to most rabbinic authorities).

Whether or not *Hakhel* should be observed today on a rabbinic level has been the source of controversy. Approximately one hundred and thirty years ago, the Aderet (R. Eliyahu Dovid Rabinowitz) argued that it is appropriate to make a "*Zecher l'hakhel*" – an "imitation" *Hakhel* ceremony in Jerusalem, as a way of commemorating this *mitzvah*. A pamphlet, called "*Kunterus Zecher L'Mikdash*" was published around eighty years ago setting forth the arguments in favor of this practice. However, the Chazon Ish wrote (*Igros*, 210) in a terse statement that it is "forbidden to do this."

Despite the Chazon Ish's opposition, many do perform a *Zecher l'hakhel* ceremony near the *Kotel* during the Sukkos following the *Shemittah* year, so those who are in Israel may witness this event during this upcoming holiday season. Generally, the Chief Rabbis preside over this ceremony, which also typically includes government dignitaries. Perhaps here too we can argue that if the purpose of *Hakhel* is to teach Torah, that is always a timeless value, and could be undertaken even if it cannot be performed in optimal fashion or in a way that satisfies the Torah obligation of *Hakhel*. However, if the purpose is to create an awe-inspiring event showcasing the grandeur of Torah and the Jewish religion, perhaps it needs to be reserved for a time in which the *Beis Hamikdash* is standing.

Finally, we can suggest that really *Hakhel* consists of both components – a public teaching of Torah, and an awe-inspiring spectacle of Torah grandeur to inspire us to reaffirm and reinforce our commitment to our faith. Indeed, the words of the *Sefer Hachinuch* (id.) seem to underscore both purposes. He writes, “the roots of this *mitzvah* include the fact that the foundation of the Jewish people is the Torah...therefore men, women and children are gathered so they can ask why they are all being assembled together, and the answer

will be to listen to words of Torah which is our essence, splendor and glory, and this will cause them to speak about the great praise and value of Torah and to feel a desire for Torah in their hearts, and through this desire they will learn in order to increase their knowledge of Hashem and merit goodness.” Thus, the purpose of *Hakhel* is to strengthen the faith of the Jewish people through the grandeur of the *Hakhel* ceremony, but the ultimate objective of that grandeur itself is to revitalize the thirst for Torah study. This revitalization of Torah study is of such importance that the *Sefer Hachinuch* writes that failure to participate in the *Hakhel* ceremony would incur “very great punishment.” Whether or not it is appropriate to make a “*Zecher l'hakhel*” nowadays, it is certainly vital to learn about this great *mitzvah* so that we can appreciate its message and purpose for greater Torah study and observance.

May we all merit to experience the optimal fulfillment of the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* together with the entirety of the Jewish people with the speedy rebuilding (hopefully in time for this Sukkos) of the *Beis Hamikdash*.

The Mitzvah of Hakhel: The Inner Meaning

Rabbi Baruch Hertz
Rabbi, Bnei Ruven



This year is the year of *Hakhel*, as said in *parshas Vayeilech*. “*Hakhel es ha’am*,” the Torah tells us, “Assemble the people the men, the women, and the children, and your stranger in your cities, in order that they hear and in order that they learn and fear the L-rd, your G-d, and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah.

This *mitzvah* was carried out in *Bais Hamikdash* times once every seven years, at the end of the *Shemittah* cycle. On the first intermediate day of *Sukkos*, the entire Jewish nation would gather on the Temple Mount - הר הבית, in Yerushalayim, to see the king ascend a wooden platform and read sections of the Torah.

The Rambam writes that even those who do not understand the words of the Torah reading were obligated to be there and “listen with awe, reverence, and joyful trepidation as on the day that the Torah was given at Sinai.” At the same time, “even great scholars already versed in the entire Torah [were] obligated to listen with great concentration” as well.

What was the purpose of this mass Torah reading? And why was every Jew from the most uneducated to the greatest sage required to attend? What were they supposed to gain? Also, do you really think everybody could hear so well? There were millions of Jews on the Temple Mount - הר הבית, and there was no microphone or PA system. Plus, can you imagine the commotion?

I understand, it’s a *mitzvah* and we do *mitzvos* without questioning. But as Jews we try to understand *mitzvos* as well. So what did this mass Torah reading accomplish? If once in seven years, everybody needs a “refresher course” then maybe it would be better to have teachers go out and put together small classes according to skill level?

The answer to these questions about *Hakhel* actually touches upon the very essence of what it means to live a Jewish life, because if we will understand this, then we will also understand the true path to a relationship with G-d.

See It

So to answer our question, the purpose of *Hakhel* was to have a Torah experience. In the words of the Rambam quoted earlier: “to listen with awe, reverence, and joyful trepidation as on the day that Torah was given at Sinai.” In other words, the purpose of *Hakhel* was that once in seven years, the people should relive the experience of revelation.

What does it mean that Sinai was a revelation?

The main innovation at Sinai was not the giving of the Torah or the *mitzvos*. The Jewish people had access to Torah and *mitzvos* even before Sinai. The main feature, namely the signature of what made the event at Sinai unique, was seeing. “And all the people saw the thunder and the lightning... (*Shemos* 20:15) “You have seen that from the heavens I have spoken with you.” (*Shemos* 20:19) “Behold, the Lord, our God, has shown us His glory and His greatness...” (*Devarim* 5:21)

The difference between seeing and hearing is that what one hears remains abstract, while what one sees becomes tangible and concrete. One can talk about spiritual ideas, philosophies. That’s hearing, and it remains theory. But when one has an opportunity to see spirituality, it becomes real.

That’s just what happened at

Sinai. We saw. And that’s what was recreated every seven years in Jerusalem with the crowds. The point wasn’t to hear a Torah talk but to be there and to see, to have a real live Torah experience.

Hakhel in Our Time

The Biblical *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* is only in effect when all the Jewish people reside in the Holy Land and will be reinstated with the coming of Moshiach. Nevertheless, the Lubavitcher Rebbe *OBM* encouraged all Jews to make their own *Hakhel* gatherings of all sizes to live and experience Judaism.

The Rebbe particularly encouraged these assemblies on or around *Sukkos*, when the *Hakhel* gathering took place in the Holy Temple. But the entire year is a *Hakhel* year.

It’s not enough to hear, we need to see. We need to experience revelation. We need to get into it a little. Invite your friends over to your house on *Shabbos* for a big meal. Start a lunch & learn at the office. Help your kids invite their friends over for a *Shabbos* party. Get the whole town together or join with Jews from other towns to create real unity. In Chicago’s airport, terminal 1 is United. The main thing is to show up and have an experience. May we have the ultimate experience of seeing G-dliness with the coming of Moshiach now.

Sukkos: Why Now?

Rabbi Aaron Kraft

Dayan Kavua, cRc Beth Din

Rosh Bais Midrash, Bais Chaim Dovid



When we consider the celebration of *Sukkos* at the end of *Tishrei*, we face a striking question raised by several *Rishonim*.¹ If the *Yom Tov* of *Sukkos* commemorates the shelter, either physical huts or the ענני הכבוד (Clouds of Glory) that ד' provided *Klal Yisrael* when leaving מצרים,² why do we observe this *Yom Tov* in *Tishrei* after the ימים נוראים (Days of Awe)? Would the holiday not fit more naturally in *Nisan* when we celebrate יציאת מצרים (Exodus from Egypt)? The *Tur*³ suggests that although *Sukkos* is “out of place,” this was done intentionally to showcase our devotion to the prescripts of the Torah. Had we observed *Sukkos* in the springtime month of *Nisan*, sitting outside in the *Sukkah* would appear logical – it is normal for people to spend time outside in beautiful weather. Keeping *Sukkos* in the colder month of *Tishrei* makes it readily apparent that the sole reason for sitting outside in huts is

to follow God’s command to do so. According to this, the connection between *Sukkos* and the ימים נוראים is circumstantial, based on an external calendric consideration.

Let us briefly explore some alternative approaches that indicate a more inherent connection between *Sukkos* and the ימים נוראים, making its placement during this time of year more natural and inherent.

One may suggest that *Sukkos* follows the ימים נוראים because it is a continuation of the ימים נוראים. We can highlight this perspective with the well-known idea that we still have the capacity to alter our final judgment through הושענא רבה (*Hoshana Rabba*). The ספר שבולי expresses this idea when he writes⁴ that יום ערבה (otherwise known as הושענא רבה) is the day ד' seals our judgment similar to *Yom Kippur*.

Alternatively we may posit that *Sukkos* follows the ימים נוראים because it is, in a sense, a response to the ימים

1. או"ח סימן תרכה *Tur* and רמב"ן ויקרא כג: מג See 1

2. ויקרא כג: מב-מג See 2

3. סימן תרכה 3

4. סדר חג הסוכות סימן שעא 4

נוראים. The ערוך השולחן⁵ explains that by virtue of the very command to observe *Sukkos*, Hashem shows *Klal Yisrael* that despite the fact that we've sinned and made mistakes, He still loves us and desires a deep connection to us. In this sense, our fulfillment of the *mitzvos* of the day represents our acceptance of God's intimate embrace. This may also account for the unique feature that characterizes *Sukkos* – that of excessive happiness רבונו של עולם⁶. After all, little in life can bring as much joy as the successful repair of our relationship with the

Finally, it is possible that *Sukkos* follows the ימים נוראים not as a continuation or response, but a natural outgrowth. Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (cited in הררי קדם (סימן קסה) identified a perplexing passage in the Talmud (סוטה מט.) that describes how after the *halachos* of טהרה (impurity) and טהרה (purification) ceased following the destruction of the *Bais Hamikdash*, fruits and vegetables lost their delicious taste and pleasant odor. This indicates that the laws of טהרה do not just impact our spiritual existence, but also the material world around us. There is a parallel between the physical world and our spiritual accomplishments and therefore, metaphysically, spiritual

elevation also expresses itself in physical enhancement. Without טהרה, not only do we lack spiritually, but we even experience a physical void. This can explain why *Sukkos* follows the ימים נוראים.

After achieving טהרה and being cleansed of our sins, we by definition, experience a different physical existence as well, which allows us to appreciate the fullness of life. In this way, the world around us changes. Nature is uplifted to parallel the spiritual strides that we made. This translation of spiritual accomplishment into the physical order can be seen through the *mitzvos* that we perform on *Sukkos*. The *mitzvos* of *Sukkos* relate to the physical and natural order and thus reflect the elevated status of the natural world following the ימים נוראים. After the ימים נוראים it is only natural to find *mitzvah*-observance and spirituality by living in huts with a roof made from plants and shaking ד' מינים (the Four Species) comprised of plants and fruit.

Although the *Yom Tov* of *Sukkos* comes on the heels of an intense and tiring period on the Jewish calendar, it is indeed an opportunity for tremendous joy as we internalize the messages of devotion, continued self-improvement, fulfillment and spiritual accomplishment that began during the ימים נוראים and continues throughout the *Yom Tov* of *Sukkos*.

⁵או"ח תרכה:ה

⁶דברים טז:טו

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