

TIMELESS TORAH

VAYEILECH - Teshuvah for All Ages

Teshuvah for All Ages

The final two mitzvot of the Torah — the mitzvah of *Hakhel*, in which the king reads select portions of the Torah to the people gathered in the Beit HaMikdash, and the mitzvah to write a Sefer Torah — are described by Rav S R Hirsch (d.1888) as the ‘summing up mitzvot’, relating to the Torah as a whole and serving to preserve the Torah in the hearts and the minds of the people. There is, however, a different theme that runs through these two mitzvot that connects them very much to the time of year in which this parashah is always read.

In the mitzvah of *Hakhel*, the entire nation gathers to the Beit HaMikdash on the first day of Sukkot following a *shemittah* year and listens to the king recite key passages from the Sefer Torah. Perhaps the most defining feature of this mitzvah, though, is that all segments of the nation are expected to be present; the verse explicitly requires that men, women and children must take part in this mitzvah, with a specific emphasis on even babies who are too young to understand what is going on. Indeed, this condition is unique among all the mitzvot of the Torah, which are directed only to adults who possess the mental maturity to fulfil them properly. Commenting on this, the Sages cryptically teach that the purpose of bringing young children to the *Hakhel* ceremony is purely to increase the reward for their parents who must exert extra effort to do so.

According to the Kli Yakar (d.1619), every facet of this mitzvah, including the need to

bring the children, is focused on teshuvah. *Hakhel* invariably takes place immediately after the Ten Days of Repentance, during which every person’s personal repentance and prayer is accepted willingly. Sukkot, then, marks the beginning of the period in which repentance is best done communally, and it is precisely then that we are commanded to perform the ultimate communal mitzvah, reviewing the essential mitzvot of the Torah and ensuring that we are not remiss in any of them. With this perspective, the Kli Yakar understands that the small children are to take part in the mitzvah not for their own benefit but for the benefit of the adults. As the adult part of the nation repents and prays, they can point to the innocent children, by nature free of sin, and beseech Hashem for mercy, ‘if not for our sake, then for the sake of the youngest children’.

Hakhel, seen from this angle, drives home to the nation their responsibilities not only to themselves as individuals, or even as a community, but also to future generations of the eternal nation. It is incumbent on us to uphold every letter of the Torah, and even if we have been somewhat remiss, it is our duty to nevertheless ensure that future generations should merit the full opportunities that the Torah and its mitzvot offer.

Days of Awe

The intended purpose of the mitzvot is normally concealed from us, and they are generally not mentioned in the Torah. There are, however, certain exceptions to this rule; some mitzvot include an explicit verse explaining what might be achieved by the



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correct performance of that mitzvah. *Hakhel* is such a mitzvah, and the verse states (31:13-13) that by taking part in this event, one will be able to acquire *yir'at Shamayim* – fear of Heaven.

The Netivot Shalom (d.2000) discusses this concept at length. He writes that although love of Hashem is the ultimate aim of our Divine service, it is not possible to reach that level without first acquiring fear of Heaven. Of course, fear of Heaven does not mean a paralysis of terror when contemplating a higher Being. Rather, *yir'at Shamayim* means to instil within us a sensitivity of our deficient physical state in comparison to the vast and infinite majesty of Hashem.

When used in its proper manner, fear of Heaven is empowering. Rav Soloveitchik (d.1993) used to comment on the phrase from the Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur *Amidah*, 'v'chen ten pachdecha- and also cast Your dread'. Some might think that encouraging fears is damaging, but Rav Soloveitchik explained that the opposite is true; when one fears Hashem, they realise that their other fears are not real. Indeed, as the Netivot Shalom concludes, this is the purpose of the Yamim Noraim. As their name suggests - the Days of Awe - this is the time of year when we work on our *yir'at Shamayim*, looking at ourselves in the context of the Creation and the Creator.

Personal Growth

While there is no question that *Hakhel* is critical for our own spiritual growth, we have shown that there is a particular emphasis placed on passing on the messages

of repentance, prayer and *yirat Shamayim* to children from the very youngest ages. When a child inculcates such lessons at a very early stage in life, we can be assured that they will be far less distracted from their life's mission than if they would have to learn these values at a later stage. The disadvantage of this, however, is that a child is likely to take their opportunities for spirituality for granted and go through their Divine service by rote, devoid of meaning.

This, perhaps, is the link to the next mitzvah - writing a Sefer Torah. The Torah commands every Jewish man to write a Sefer Torah for himself, or to commission one to be written for him. Even if a person receives a Sefer Torah as an inheritance, he must still undertake the project of writing one for himself.

The lesson from this mitzvah, maintains the Ktav Sofer (d.1871), is that even if one has been given the wonderful gift of being born into a religiously observant family, the only pathway towards genuine growth is through making an effort to acquire the values of the Torah for oneself. Spiritual achievements cannot be inherited and they cannot be attained by passively absorbing the surrounding atmosphere. The only way to grow in these areas is by looking inwards at oneself and making the changes necessary to move forward.

The Timeless Torah weekly shiur will resume on Wednesday, 22nd October, Parshat Noach