

Parshat Vayelech Shabbat Shuvah 5776

“Moshe went and spoke these words to all of Israel. He said to them, I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I can no longer go out and come in...” As Rashi notes, parshat Vayelech takes place on the last day of Moshe Rabbeinu’s life. On this day, Moshe appropriately gave chizuk to the people in general and to the new leader Yehoshua in particular. He then presents the written version of the Torah to the Kohanim and elders. This would have been an appropriate conclusion. The next section (ch.31/10-13) - **the mitzvah of Hakhel** – therefore seems glaringly out of place. Have not all the mitzvot already been given? So, why does the mitzva of Hakhel suddenly appear in the middle of our parsha rather than together with the numerous mitzvot listed in perakim 12-26 of Sefer Devarim? The peculiarity of this mitzva becomes apparent in light of the following questions which relate to the details of the mitzva: Why are the specific passages (listed in the Mishna in Sotah) chosen to be read? Why does the ceremony take place only once every seven years? Why is it the king who reads it? Why does the subject of hakhel appear for the first time on the last day of Moshe’s life? Why must even small children, who are unable to understand, be brought to participate in this occasion?

The answer to these questions lies in an idea suggested by several meforshim, according to which the mitzva of Hakhel is not a matter of public Torah study but is an attempt to **recreate and relive the experience of Matan Torah**. From time to time, Am Yisrael is required to 'return' to this historical experience in order to fully appreciate that the Torah and the mitzvot are "our whole essence and our crowning glory" (Sefer Hachinuch). This involves not a cognitive understanding of the parshiot but rather the **experience** of hearing Hashem’s word. Even small children who were not able to understand had to participate in this experience, just as all the people had been present at Matan Torah. This idea is supported by the very similar wording used in both parshat hakhel and in the description of matan Torah in parshat Va’etchanan: Parshat Hakhel: **“gather** together the people....in order that they may **hear** and in order that they may **learn** and they shall **fear** Hashem”. Parshat Va’etchanan: “the day that you stood before Hashem, your G-d, at Horeb, when Hashem said to me, **“Gather** the people to me and I shall let them **hear** My words, so that they shall **learn to fear** Me”. Furthermore, Matan Torah is actually referred to as "the day of the gathering" in several places in sefer Devarim (9/10 and 18/16).

This helps us to answer the questions we posed above. The mitzva of Hakhel is to read these specific parshiot, because they are parshiot which deal with awakening and remembrance of hearing Hashem’s words at Har Sinai. It is understandable that this mitzva was given at the end of Moshe’s life, after which the nation would enter the land. It was not necessary to give this mitzva earlier, when the experience of receiving the Torah was still fresh in their memory. Likewise, the person commanded to read the selected portions is the king, who in a sense represents Moshe Rabbeinu. Since the purpose of the ceremony is to awaken and strengthen the people, it is not necessary that it be held often. It is more effective as a special ceremony held once every seven years. As the Rambam writes in Hilchot Chagiga (3/6): “they must prepare their hearts and listen with awe and fear and trepidation **like the day the Torah was given at Sinai**. Even great Sages, who know the entire Torah, are obligated to listen with exceedingly great concentration... for the Torah commanded this only **in order to strengthen our religious consciousness**, and each should **see himself as though he is being commanded at that moment**.”

Monumental events are important from time to time for the sake of infusing new energy and reinforcing the national consciousness of being a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This, however, is not sufficient. History has shown that the impact of such events tends not to endure. Even the awesome experience of matan Torah was not able to prevent the Jewish people from sinning with the Eigel. Alongside the magnificent experiences which come along from time to time, there is also the need for modest and private daily activity. Moshe Rabbeinu received the second set of luchot privately without any fanfare. It was this second set of luchot that became permanent. In our parsha, after the mitzva of Hakhel is given, Moshe Rabbeinu instructs the people “so now, write this song **for yourselves** and teach it to the Children of Israel, **place it in their mouth**” As well as the need for a major Hakhel ceremony once every seven years to infuse the people with enthusiasm, there is also the need for the daily consistent approach of teaching and “placing it in their mouth”. As we look forward with great trepidation to the holiest day of the year, we should also think about the post-Yom Kippur challenge of trying to maintain a high level of kedushah **in our daily lives** after the annual spiritual intensity of Yom Kippur has passed.