

**An encounter with greatness**  
**Rabbi Ariel Rackovsky**  
**Sukkos Day II- Congregation Shaare Tefilla**

When my father was about 16 years old, he went with my grandparents to Israel for the first time. They spent most of their time in Jerusalem, where my grandfather's extended family (including several siblings) lived, but one day, my grandfather z"l told my father to get ready for a trip- they were going on a very special adventure. They boarded a rickety bus (there were probably no other kinds of buses other than rickety ones) and headed to Bnei Brak, which was not like it is now; at the time, it was a sleepy suburb of Tel Aviv that was still largely Chareidi, much of it in the physical and metaphorical shadow of an enormous building at the top of a hill. That building was, and still is, the Ponevezh Yeshiva, and the person they went to meet was the great Ponevezher Rav, Rav Yosef Shlomo Kahaneman zt"l. Rav Kahaneman had built three Yeshivos and an orphanage in Lithuania and was a member of the Lithuanian parliament before the Holocaust, which wiped out the vast majority of his students and family. He came to Israel and started from scratch, building a remarkable Yeshiva which spawned numerous others, whose students spread Torah throughout the world. Rav Kahaneman traveled tirelessly around the world fundraising for his Yeshiva, and it was in that context that he met and grew close with my grandfather. My grandfather really wanted my father to meet and receive a *beracha* from the Ponevezher Rav, and decades later, my father still tells of that meeting.

דברים פרק לא

(י) ויצו משה אותם לאמר מקץ שבע שנים במעד שנת השמטה בחג הסכות:  
(יא) בבוא כל ישראל לראות את פני יקוק אלהיך במקום אשר יבחר תקרא את התורה הזאת נגד כל ישראל באזניהם:  
(יב) הקהל את העם האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך אשר בשעריך למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו ויראו את יקוק אלהיכם  
ושמרו לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת:

**10** And Moses commanded them, saying: 'At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of tabernacles, **11** when all Israel is come to appear before the LORD thy God in the place which He shall choose, thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. **12** Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and thy stranger that is within thy gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the LORD your God, and observe to do all the words of this law;

This is the Mitzvah of Hakhel, the penultimate mitzvah in the Torah, in which the entire Jewish people gathered in Yerushalaim in the Sukkos after the Shemittah year to hear the king read from select passages in the Torah. This year marks a Hakhel year, as it is the Sukkos after a shemittah year. The Talmud (Chagigah 3a) asks a simple question: The Torah insists on bringing the children to this mass gathering. Pragmatically, this makes sense- who is going to watch the kids otherwise? But programmatically, what purpose does bringing the kids serve? Kids make noise, they constantly grab at their parents' tunics, they can't sit still and would disrupt the Torah reading. What good would bringing them do? The Torah offers an answer: so that the children will learn to fear God. For some reason, however, the Talmud offered another explanation- in order that the children "bring reward to those who bring them." What is the purpose of the explanation of the Talmud, when the Torah explicitly and adequately answers the question?

The Abarbanel explains that each of these explanations- that of the Talmud and that of the Torah- speak to a different kind of child. The verse that describes the purpose as learning to fear

God refers to the future children of the adults present at *hakhel* now. So impactful would this experience be that parents would talk to their future children about how glorious it was, and attempt to transmit some flavor of the experience to them. The passage in the Talmud that viewed children's participation "bringing reward to those who bring them" refers to the current children. But how do the current children bring benefit, and give reward, to those who brought them?

I believe there are three lessons to be learned from the Abarbanel's explanation, two of which will answer the difficulty with his interpretation. The first lesson is that children will only learn to fear God if they hear their parents talk about the *hakhel* with reverence and awe. There is a verse in Mishlei (27:21)-

מִצָּרֶף לְפָסֶף וְכוּר לְזָהָב וְאִישׁ לְפִי מִהֲלָלוֹ.

The simple translation is, "As the crucible tests silver and the furnace tests gold, man is tested by the praise he receives." Rabbeinu Yonah offers a different and radically insightful explanation. *אִישׁ לְפִי מִהֲלָלוֹ* means that people are tested not by how they are praised, but by what *they* praise. You can tell a great deal about a person's values by what they praise the most and what they talk about soonest- whether it is Torah, or cars, or houses, or sports, or spiritual people. This is how the fear of God would be passed to the next generation by those who attended *hakhel*. When they see that this is what their parents praise, they will learn that spiritual pursuits are worthwhile and praiseworthy.

But that does not answer how bringing children accrues reward to those who brought them. Are children objects that exist merely to provide reward to others? What is the Talmud trying to add? Perhaps we can suggest parents receive reward for bringing their children, because that is how they *show* children what is important to them. It's insufficient to *talk* about how wonderful *hakhel* is. Children will only internalize its lessons if they see their parents participating in it. When we think something is so important, so exciting and so interesting that we want to bring our children, they will feel the same way. If it is a sporting event, that is how they will feel about sports, and if it is shul, that is how they will feel about shul, and if it is a Torah event, that is how they will feel about Torah. That is why my father remembers the meeting with the Ponevezher Rav so clearly. My grandfather was not the most effusive person and, as a dyed in the wool *Litvak*, he was not excited about seeking *brachos* from others. As a pulpit Rabbi, he was also sparing in his praise of Rabbinic colleagues, many of whom he felt were undeserving. For him to travel to meet the Ponevezher Rav, and to take my father to meet him, was an extraordinary event and left an indelible impression on him. And that's why parents receive reward for bringing the children- because it's not enough to *say* Judaism is important, observance is important, Torah is important, Chessed is important- we have to *show* it is important by bringing our children to it, and by our own example.

I think, though, that there is a third reason why it is so important for parents to bring their children, and why it is such a source of reward. The Torah wanted us to bring children along so we could experience the event through the eyes of a child. As adults, we are jaded and cynical; very little is impressive to us, and there are very few experiences in life that leave us slack-jawed

with amazement and wonder. Can you imagine what it is like for an innocent child to experience *hakhel*? Coming up the winding road into Yerushalaim, with throngs of Jews streaming in from all over Eretz Yisrael, everyone standing in rapt attention to the king, dressed in grandeur, surrounded by the elite Torah scholars of the nation- can you imagine how amazing that would be for a child? As adults, our challenge is to recapture those moments of wonder and amazement, and find ways to increase them in our lives.

Regrettably, we are not in Jerusalem to participate in *hakhel* commemorations, but on this day of Sukkos, in the year after the Shmittah year, its lesson resonates powerfully for us, even as we are far away- the lesson that we are defined by what we praise, that praising is only worthwhile if accompanied by action and that we must find ways to reintroduce wonder into our lives. May we and our children truly merit the blessing the Torah promises to those who participate in this gathering-

ושמרו לעשות את כל דברי התורה הזאת:

We will safeguard and carry out the words of the Torah.