

THE YEAR OF HAKHEL, THEN AND NOW



SICHOS IN ENGLISH
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Publisher's Foreword

In ancient times, when the *Beis HaMikdash* stood atop the Temple Mount, the Jewish people would converge on Jerusalem once every seven years to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. There, as the king read out selected passages of the Torah, they would all relive the experience of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai. They were then ready to return to their homes, having revitalized their reverence for the Giver of the Torah.

Eventually, however, the *Beis HaMikdash* was destroyed. Over 1900 years passed by, and even in observant circles the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* was spoken about very little.

Then, in the year 5741 (1980), *Hakhel* sprang into life. That year, for the first time, the Rebbe delivered a *sichah* after *Maariv* every evening of Sukkos. Drawing on the wellsprings of *Chassidus*, the Rebbe explained what makes Sukkos the Season of our Rejoicing. As soon as that talk was over, night after night, all the chassidim present went outside and danced with gusto in the streets of Crown Heights. This sequence became an annual custom.

With the approach of Sukkos seven years later, in the year 5748 (1987), the theme of *Hakhel* appeared prominently in many of the Rebbe's talks and letters. In response, in excited anticipation of Sukkos, an even greater number of chassidim than usual, from all around the world, decided to spend the month of Tishrei at "770."

During that period, predictably, the Rebbe demanded action. Specifically, he urged his listeners to learn a lesson from the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* — to reach out to their fellow Jews and assemble them in appropriate settings to teach them Torah and instill in them an awe of G-d. The directives the Rebbe issued on those occasions were summarized and published in 5748, and were edited afresh for publication in the present essay.

Today, with the approach of Sukkos in the upcoming *Hakhel* year of 5762 (2001-2002), we join our readers in looking forward to the ultimate *Hakhel*, when, together with all our brothers and sisters, we will assemble in the Third *Beis HaMikdash* and eagerly quench our thirst with the Torah teachings of *Mashiach*.

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🌀 A TASTE OF SINAI

In ancient times, when the *Beis HaMikdash* stood atop the Temple Mount, the Jewish people would converge on Jerusalem once every seven years — in addition to the three pilgrim festivals of every year — to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. There, as the king read out selected passages of the Torah, they would all relive the experience of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai. They were then ready to return to their homes, having revitalized their reverence for the Giver of the Torah.

The Torah is eternal. Thus, even when the physical frame of the *Beis HaMikdash* is no longer visible on the Temple Mount, the spiritual message of the *Hakhel* assemblage continues eternally to inspire Jews everywhere.

Today, too, that message can be passed on by everyone.

🌀 WHAT IS THE MITZVAH OF HAKHEL?

*Rambam*¹ defines it in these words:

It is a positive commandment to assemble the entire Jewish people, men, women, and children, after the close of every *Shemita* year, when they have gone up [to Jerusalem] to make the pilgrimage, and in their hearing to read passages from the Torah that will vitalize their observance of the commandments and fortify them in the true religion. As it is written,² “At the end of every seven years, at the appointed time of the *Shemita* year, in the festival of Sukkos, when all Israel have come to appear [before the L-rd your G-d in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this Torah before all of Israel and in their hearing]. Assemble the people, the men and

1. *Hilchos Chagigah* 3:1.

2. *Devarim* 31:10-12.

the women and the little ones, and your stranger who is within your gates..."

Rambam further explains the details:

When did they read? At the close of the first festive day of the Festival of Sukkos, which is the beginning of the intermediate, semi-festive days of the festival, in the eighth year.

It is the king who reads in their hearing; and the reading took place in the Court of the Women....

How does he read? Trumpets are sounded throughout Yerushalayim to assemble the people and a large dais of wood is brought and set up in the middle of the Court of the Women. The king ascends and sits there so that they may hear his reading...³

This *mitzvah* was observed only while the *Beis HaMikdash* stood and "the Jewish people dwelled upon their land." With the Destruction and the exile, it fell into disuse.

ONE GOAL

The goal of this assembly was to inspire all those present with an awe of G-d. The Torah states this explicitly:⁴

...so that they will hear, and learn to stand in awe of the L-rd your G-d, and vigilantly observe all the words of this Torah. And their children who do not know will hear, and will learn to stand in awe of the L-rd your G-d, as long as you live in the land...

Likewise *Rambam* explains:⁵

As for proselytes who are not knowledgeable, they must ready their hearts and alert their ears to listen with dread

3. *Hilchos Chagigah* 3:3-4.

4. *Devarim* 31:12-13.

5. *Hilchos Chagigah* 3:6.

and awe and with trembling joy, as on the day that [the Torah] was given on Sinai. Even great scholars who know the entire Torah must listen with the utmost devout attention..., for Scripture ordained [this reading] solely for the strengthening of true religion.

The intent of that memorable gathering, as *Rambam* goes on to say, was that every man, woman and child, every proselyte and every scholar present —

regard himself as though the Torah had been commanded to him at that moment, and as though he now heard it from the mouth of the Almighty, for the king is an ambassador to proclaim the words of G-d.

SINAI REVISITED

The Children of Israel who stood at the foot of Mount Sinai *saw* the sounds of the mighty thunder.⁶ A man can *hear* something and yet remain aloof from it, because the sense of hearing is more abstract and indirect; to *see* something is to know it and experience it as an immediate reality. At Mount Sinai the people *saw* the sounds: they experienced the truth of “I am G-d your G-d” as a personal reality.

At the seven-yearly gathering of *Hakhel*, the generations who had not physically experienced Sinai were now enabled to *see* Divinity, and this empowered them to obey all the words of the Torah. Instead of merely recalling their presence at Sinai from an academic distance, the Jews who assembled in Jerusalem and *relived* it were able to truthfully regard themselves as once again receiving the Torah from the mouth of G-d.

6. *Shmos* 20:15.

JEWISH UNITY

In addition, this massive assembly of all the Jewish people — men, women and children — fused them into one united community. And one prominent factor that unified them was the fact that *Hakhel* inspired an awe of G-d.

As far as the knowledge and comprehension of the Torah are concerned, there are Jews of all levels. When we speak of awe, however, all Jews are on the same humble level. Awe brings about self-nullification: as people of different levels become increasingly aware of the awesome presence of G-d, they become less preoccupied with their own individual worth and relative status.

This was the degree of awe that the revelation of Divinity at Sinai engendered. Echoing this experience, the goal of the *Hakhel* assembly was not so much to increase knowledge as to nurture the awe and fear of Heaven. And, just as at Sinai, this awe dwarfed the people's preoccupations with their individual differences and relative worth, and brought together all levels and all types of Jews.

At the *Hakhel* assembly the Torah was not read to the people by members of the *Sanhedrin*, who would normally be responsible to teach them. It was read out by the king, for it is the *fear* of G-d that is taught at *Hakhel*, and only the king, before whom the people stand in awe and fear, can bring them to sincere submission. Besides, since the king is the "heart of the congregation of Israel,"⁷ it is he who welds them into a cohesive unit, imbuing them with a fear of G-d and the acceptance of the yoke of Heaven.⁸

7. Rambam, *Hilchos Melachim* 3:6. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, Vol. 19, p. 165ff.

8. *Tzemach Tzedek, Derech Mitzvosecha*.

🌀 THE HAKHEL YEAR FOLLOWS THE SHEMITAH YEAR

It now becomes obvious why the *Hakhel* assembly always followed the year of *Shemita*. During *Shemita*, which was a *Shabbos* year — a year of rest — all agricultural work was suspended. In this way the fallow year proclaimed G-d's sole sovereignty over all existence — man rested, the earth rested, and the produce of the earth was ownerless. This relinquishment of mortal self-assertion in the *Shemita* year expressed the people's awe of G-d, as a foretaste of the awe which they were soon to experience at the *Hakhel* assembly.

Indeed, we find that the year following *Shemita* is referred to as coming "at the end of seven years"⁹ and not "in the eighth year," thus highlighting the connection between the year of *Shemita* and the year of *Hakhel*.

During the year of *Shemita* the people could devote themselves to spiritual pursuits. Even field workers, when given the opportunity to be free during *Shemita*, "will be awakened to seek G-d."¹⁰ And indeed, the *Shemita* year enabled the people at large to devote increased time and attention to their Divine service, whether through Torah study, through prayer, or through the observance of the commandments. And the upgraded closeness to G-d, which they now shared with all their contemporaries, in turn intensified their sense of unity as His people.

The *Shemita* year thus served as a fitting preparation for the awe and unity which the mass pilgrimage of *Hakhel* aroused.

9. *Devarim* 15:1.

10. *Sforno* on *Vayikra* 25:4. See also *Sefer HaMaamarim 5630 (1870)*, p. 138.

🌀 HAKHEL IN OUR TIMES

The eternity of the Torah leaps over the bounds of time and place. Hence, even those *mitzvos* that are assigned exclusively to *Kohanim* and Levites, or that are restricted to the Temple precincts, also have a spiritual content which may be applied at all times, by all Jews.

Chassidus explains that every *mitzvah* exists at three levels — thought, speech and action. Thus, when a particular *mitzvah* cannot be carried out physically in action, it may still be fulfilled in the dimension of speech or thought. Our daily prayers, for example, were instituted to substitute for the sacrifices. In the words of the prophet, “We will render the prayer of our lips in place of the sacrifice of bullocks.”¹¹ For prayer, which the Sages term “the service of the heart,”¹² is a corresponding form of Divine service, except that it is fulfilled in speech and thought.

Likewise, the Sages teach that when one studies the laws relating to a sacrifice, this is considered as if he had actually offered the sacrifice, except that this *mitzvah*, too, is fulfilled in the dimensions of speech and thought.¹³

The commandment of *Hakhel* is singled out in *Sefer HaChinuch* (*Mitzvah* 612) as “a strong pillar and [source of] great honor for our religion.” True, its physical observance is suspended for the duration of the present exile, but its spiritual content applies at all times and at all places.

Moreover, whereas all the commandments are comprised of the revealed and the hidden, only the physical aspect of the *mitzvah* is usually revealed, while its inner meaning remains esoteric. *Hakhel* however, is explicitly intended to arouse an awe of G-d — and awe knows no bounds of time or place.

11. *Hoshea* 14:3.

12. *Taanis* 2a.

13. *Menachos* 110a.

In the days when the *Beis HaMikdash* stood, the *Hakhel* assembly took place in its courtyard. We have recently had occasion to speak about the Torah's command to build a Sanctuary, which our Sages have understood as including the obligation that every individual Jew and Jewess construct a mini-sanctuary within himself or herself. Moreover, people have recently been urged to sanctify their homes and environments as mini-sanctuaries where the Divine Presence may come to dwell.¹⁴

Now, as we speak of the commandment to muster the Jewish people in the Sanctuary for the assembly of *Hakhel*, these two concepts — the personal sanctuary and the environmental sanctuary — invigorate each other: every Jew should endeavor to muster a mini-*Hakhel* within himself and within his environment.

THE HAKHEL YEAR

Though the historic *Hakhel* was observed on one day in the holiday of Sukkos, the concept applies *throughout* the year, and the entire year is known as the *Hakhel* year.

Likewise with the jubilee (*Yovel*) that was celebrated every fifty years, when bondmen returned to the freedom of their homes and fields were restored to their original owners. The *Yovel* year is so called even though it centered around one high moment — the sounding of the *Shofar* on Yom Kippur.

Since the purpose of *Hakhel* is not the assembly in itself, but rather the heightened awe of G-d that results from it thereafter, the whole of that year is permeated with the spirit of *Hakhel*.

14. At a number of *farbrengens* (especially in Kislev, 5747/1986) the Rebbe encouraged children to transform their own rooms at home into mini-Chabad Houses.

🌀 A CALL TO ACTION

The opportunity beckons for everyone to be involved in the spiritual *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* at all times, in all places. Today, too, every Jew is obligated to disseminate *Yiddishkeit* by gathering together fellow Jews and teaching them Torah and the awe of G-d. And this must of course be done in a spirit of true *ahavas Yisrael* and Jewish unity.

Such initiatives are most appropriate in the year of *Hakhel*, when the potential for their success is great, because at this time we are granted additional powers from Above. The spiritual dynamics of the days of old are then not only *recalled* in their season; they are also *brought into being*.¹⁵

Active involvement in *Hakhel* in our times is not merely a matter of remembrance — and for this reason we find that the Jewish leaders of past generations did not organize *Hakhel* gatherings after *Shemitah*. Rather, we are speaking of the intrinsic, spiritual spark of *Hakhel*, which today, too, must be fanned in the spiritual sanctuary within every Jew.

Experience has shown that people are enthusiastic when they are told how in Temple times the coming year would be a *Hakhel* year. Furthermore, in the spiritual sense one can fulfill the *mitzvah* now, too, by attending a *Hakhel* gathering which will encourage its participants to stand in awe of their Maker and which will foster Jewish unity.

🌀 THE HAKHEL PLAN

At opportune times and on auspicious days, such as *Shabbos* and festivals, assemblies should be convened in an atmosphere of sanctity to motivate Jewish unity and the awe of Heaven, by

15. Cf. the *AriZal* on *Esther* 9:28.

means of collective endeavors in Torah study, charity and prayer.

Every individual who fits the role of “king” in his/her sphere of influence — a spiritual leader, *mashpia*, educator, parent, and so on — and in fact anyone who can generate a positive reaction in his fellow Jews, whether relatives or friends, should utilize such opportunities to foster the goals of *Hakhel*.

At such gatherings Torah should be taught with diligence and sincerity, so that it will leave a lasting impression on people’s daily lives from this *Hakhel* year to the next. An appropriate time to initiate these joyous gatherings would be the festival of Sukkos, the Season of our Rejoicing, and they could then be continued at least once a month throughout the year of *Hakhel*.

HARMONIZING THE VOICES WITHIN

Just as individual Jews can be brought together to form cohesive communities, every individual can organize his own personal *Hakhel* — by marshaling and harmonizing all the diverse faculties within his own spiritual personality. He can gather together the man, woman and child within himself and instill in them the fear of G-d. An individual’s leadership qualities, his housekeeping instincts, his receptivity, his ability to learn from others — all these inner thrusts can be mobilized and directed toward the goals of *Hakhel*.

A *yeshivah* student can muster and consolidate all his positive potentials — his fortitude, his emotive attributes, his desire for inner order, his thirst for knowledge — and inspire them all with a renewed and productive awe of G-d.

In this way the ideal of *Hakhel* can direct a man to bring his microcosm in touch with its intrinsic sanctity, recharging his

determination to heed the words of the King, the Holy One, blessed be He.

ON A COMMUNAL LEVEL

The goal of *Hakhel* imposes a weighty responsibility on Jewish communal organizations. For the true role of every Jewish organization is to bring together individuals who share some common outlook. Thus, bodies serving G-d-fearing Jews should seek ways of encouraging the shared endeavors of their members or students in the observance of Torah and *mitzvos*. Reciprocally, encouragement of this nature will of course upgrade the sense of responsibility that members will develop towards their organization.

Every Jewish congregation, association, federation and institution — and certainly every *yeshivah*, *cheder*, *Talmud Torah*, kindergarten, and every other educational framework — would be well advised to lead the way in the *Hakhel* project proposed above. Gathering together from time to time — say, once a month — to study Torah, give *tzedakah* and pray in unison will also enable them to reach out to parents, relatives, friends and acquaintances, and include them all in activities which will foster the awe of G-d, and Jewish unity.

In addition, teachers may seek to encourage their students to organize themselves into groups for the periodic study of particular areas of Torah literature.

FROM RESOLVE TO REALITY

Positive resolutions are strengthened by being recorded in writing. Moreover, seeing the recorded commitment of one's friends generates widening circles of enthusiasm.

It is therefore recommended that in each congregation, educational institution or association, cards should be printed for distribution among all their members and students. Anyone who undertakes to organize or attend a *Hakhel* project can then jot down his first name and his mother's name, his address and telephone number, and his commitment to work for the ideals of *Hakhel*. It should be understood that people filling out such cards implicitly give permission that they be contacted from time to time with regard to the progress of their local projects and with offers of help with educational materials, for example, if needed.

Jewish organizations will no doubt lose no time in mobilizing this effort. It would then be advisable for individual groups to combine with others so as to create an overall body with a broadly-based sense of solidarity, and with centralized listing and effective publicity. Newspaper advertisements could include mail-in coupons.

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May the combined efforts of the entire Jewish people in the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* speed the fulfillment of the promise of the Holy One, blessed be He — that He will gather together all the Jewish people in a great assembly and bring us back to the Holy Land, to Jerusalem and to the *Beis HaMikdash*. There we will be privileged to fulfill the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel* physically, by hearing the Torah taught by David, King *Mashiach* — the messenger of G-d, with joy and with gladness, *now!*

