Paired Perspectives on the Parashah: Nitzavim-Vayelekh

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Nitzavim–Vayelekh:

Renewing the Covenant through Hakhel

Among the Torah's great educational institutions, *Hakhel* (Deuteronomy 31:9-13) stands alone. At the conclusion of every *Shemittah* (sabbatical) year, during the festival of Sukkot, the entire nation assembled to hear the Torah read publicly:

"Assemble the people: the men, the women, the children, and the stranger in your gates, so that they may hear and so that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe faithfully every word of this Torah" (Deuteronomy 31:12).

Unlike most public religious obligations, *Hakhel* explicitly includes every member of the covenantal community: men, women, children, and resident aliens. Torah belongs to all who reside in the Land of Israel.

The Torah never identifies who was to read the Torah publicly. The Mishnah (Sotah 7:8) assigns this responsibility to the king, whereas Josephus attributes it

to the High Priest (*Antiquities* 4:8:12). The Talmud (Sotah 41b) likewise describes the Torah scroll being ceremoniously passed through several leaders before reaching the king. Several later commentators, including Ralbag, Malbim, and Netziv, suggest that when Israel lacked a king, another national leader such as the High Priest or head of the Sanhedrin fulfilled this role. Ezra's public Torah reading after the Babylonian exile (Nehemiah 8) likewise demonstrates that the nation's spiritual leader could gather Israel around the Torah even without a monarch.

Rambam identifies the deeper purpose of *Hakhel*. Rather than viewing it merely as a public Torah reading, he explains that every participant should experience the gathering as though standing once again at Mount Sinai (*Laws of Hagigah* 3:5-6). The Torah itself points in this direction. Earlier in Deuteronomy, Moses recalls God's command at Sinai, "Gather (*hakhel*) the people to Me, that I may let them hear My words" (Deuteronomy 4:10). The

same rare root, *k-h-l*, links the original revelation at Sinai with the national assembly every seven years. *Hakhel* therefore serves as a covenantal reenactment of Israel's formative religious experience.

Why, however, does the Torah command *Hakhel* specifically during Sukkot following the *Shemittah* year? Rabbi Yaakov Medan offers a compelling explanation. Ordinarily, Sukkot celebrates the completion of the agricultural year. The crops have been gathered, and Israel thanks God for the year's abundance before beginning a new agricultural cycle with prayers for rain on Shemini Atzeret. Sukkot therefore became *he-hag*, "the Festival," when the greatest number of pilgrims naturally assembled in Jerusalem.

The year following *Shemittah*, however, is fundamentally different. Since the land lay fallow throughout the seventh year, there is no ordinary harvest to celebrate. Ibn Ezra accordingly observes that *Shemittah* became a year devoted to Torah study. Rabbi Medan develops this idea further. During *Shemittah*, the Land of Israel itself temporarily resembles the wilderness. Just as Israel depended entirely on God's daily provision of manna after leaving Egypt, so too during the sabbatical year the nation relinquishes normal agricultural labor and relies upon God's blessing. At the culmination of that remarkable year, the celebration shifts

naturally from agricultural abundance to spiritual renewal. Instead of celebrating the produce of the land, Israel celebrates the Torah that gives the land its meaning.

Hakhel is therefore far more than a periodic public reading. Every seven years, after experiencing a year of radical dependence upon God, the nation gathers once again as it gathered at Sinai. The covenant is renewed, the Torah is heard anew, and every generation is invited to stand once more before God alongside its ancestors. The ultimate celebration of the Land of Israel is not its harvest alone, but the covenant that transforms the land into the home of God’s people.