

**At the end of each seven years, after the time of the Shemittah year, on the festival of Sukkos...in the place that He shall choose, read this Torah in front of all Yisrael, in their ears (so that they may hear it). Gather the nation... so that they may learn and fear Hashem your G-d. (31:10,11)**

The *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*, communal gathering, was required every seven years. The impressiveness of this *mitzvah* is underscored by the fact that every Jew, regardless of age, rank or position, assembled in the courtyard of the Bais *Hamikdash* on the second day of *Succos*, in the first year after the previous *Shemittah* cycle had concluded, to listen as the *Melech Yisrael*, Jewish king, read aloud special sections of the *Torah*. The *Shem M'Shmuel* observes two distinctions concerning this *mitzvah*. First, the king himself reads from the *Torah*. Second, the gathering is held during the year following *Shemittah*. It is well known that during the *Shemittah* year the farmers, who comprised a large component of *Klal Yisrael*, did not work the land. They now had extra time to designate for studying *Torah* and to reacquaint themselves with concepts that they might have ignored during the previous six years.

Bearing this in mind, would it not have been more logical for *Hakhel* to have been executed during the *Shemittah* year, when the majority of the nation had the time to attend to its message? Also, why did the *Torah* select the king to read from the *Torah*?

The *Shem M'Shmuel* cites the *Rambam* in *Hilchos Melachim* 3:6, that compares the *Melech Yisrael* to the heart of all *Klal Yisrael*. The king is the central focus for *Klal Yisrael*, the seat of their communal needs, like the heart is to the human body. Because the king maintains such a critical position in *Klal Yisrael*, he is the individual who is to read from the *Torah*. *Hakhel* represents a unique moment for all of *Klal Yisrael*, as they reattach themselves to their source by internalizing the most significant messages of the *Torah*. It is, therefore, appropriate that the king, symbolizing the heart of *Klal Yisrael*, infuse these lessons, just as the heart pumps blood throughout the human body.

We now understand why the *Hakhel* experience occurs during the year after *Shemittah*. The most significant event will leave a lasting impression only upon one who has been attuned to it. *Torah* refines a person as it subconsciously influences him. *Torah* makes him receptive to matters of spiritual ascendancy. Indeed, only after one has studied *Torah* does its message and observance have lasting meaning. *Chazal* teach us that if one confronts the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, if he is challenged by its blandishments, he should "pull him/it into the *Bais Medrash*." This means, if one studies *Torah*, hopefully the *yetzer hora* will have no effect upon him. If that is not effective, if the pull of the *yetzer hora* is greater than the pull of the *Bais Medrash*, "recite *Shema*," accept upon yourself the yoke of Heaven, attach yourself closer to the Almighty. If that also has no effect and you feel you are losing the battle, "remember the *yom ha'missah*, day of death". Confront your own

mortality and you will realize that deferring to the *yetzer hora* is futile.

Obviously, the last effort is the most successful. Why, then, should one wait until he has exhausted the first two avenues of attack before he concedes to the third? The answer, comments **Horav Zalmen Sorotzkin, zl**, is that unless one has first been sensitized through Torah study, confronting his own mortality will have little effect. One must first value the meaning of life before the possibility of losing it will be meaningful.

This powerful statement helps us to appreciate why the *Torah* requires us to observe the *Hakhel* ceremony after the *Shemittah* year has been completed. *Klal Yisrael* must spend a year engaged in *Torah* study and introspection before the *Hakhel* will engender a lasting impression.

Perhaps we can advance this idea further. In order to be inspired by *Torah*, one must be inclined to listen to its message. He must have a propensity for listening to its message with both ears, applying all of himself to understanding the word of *Hashem*. The *Midrash Tanchuma* says regarding the *pasuk*, "*He shall read this Torah...in their ears*," that a person who is deaf in one ear is exempt from attending the *Hakhel* service, since the *Torah* cannot be read in both ears. Rabbi Tanchuma contends that perfect hearing is essential for the achievement of the goals of the *mitzvah* of *Hakhel*. Two ears are necessary. Is that right? Do we not have other *mitzvos* that require hearing which do not exclude one who is hearing impaired? The blessing one makes prior to the blowing of the Shofar, "*Lishmoa Kol Shofar*," "*to listen to the sound of the Shofar*" indicates that a requisite of the *mitzvah* is to hear the sound of the *Shofar*. Yet, we do not find an exemption for one who is hearing-impaired. Why is *Hakhel* different?

Homiletically, we may suggest that the *Midrash* is teaching us that *Torah* study demands that one listen with both ears, i.e. have a strong willingness to hear and to learn. Some individuals are ignorant of their Jewish traditions and unaware of their heritage. Yet, they have a burning desire to study, an unquenchable thirst to soak up as much knowledge as they can get. They listen with both ears. They respect the lesson and its teacher.

There are those, however, who due either to their ingrained misconceptions or negative attitude, absolutely refuse to listen to the *Torah's* message. They continue to resist instruction, regardless of the vehicle of transmission or the experience. They are not hearing-impaired; they are hearing resistant. The information they process goes in one ear and out the other. Is it any wonder they should not be included in the injunction of *Hakhel*?