



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

FINDING FAITH IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS



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בש"ד

ניצבים-וילך תש"ף
Nitzavim-
Vayelech
5780

How to Renew a Nation

** KEY IDEA OF THE WEEK **

As a nation we must strive to stay as connected to the Torah as we were at our start



PARSHAT NITZAVIM-VAYELECH IN A NUTSHELL

In Nitzavim, Moses brings the entire people together – leaders, tribes, elders, officials, children, wives, and strangers – to renew their commitment to the covenant before they enter the land of Israel. He also warns them that their future depends on whether they keep the covenant. If they break it, they will suffer defeat, destruction, and exile. But even then, Hashem will still keep His promises. Even during exile, if the people find their way back to God, He will return to them and bring them back to their land. The choice will always be ours. Therefore, "Choose life, that you and your children may live" (Devarim 30:19).

Vayelech is the shortest parsha in the Torah, only 30 verses long. Moses speaks with great emotion, telling the people, "I am now 120 years old, and I can no longer go out and come

in" (Devarim 31:2). He cannot lead them across the Jordan and into the Promised Land. He calls his successor Joshua and, in front of all the people, gives him words of support.

Next, God speaks privately to Moses and Joshua, warning them that the Israelites may eventually break the covenant. He commands them to write down the Torah and teach it to the people, as a permanent record of the covenant itself. God then encourages Joshua, reassuring him that He will be with him as he leads the people.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

Why is it important to note that all the people were present to hear this final speech from Moses?



THE CORE IDEA

There are 613 mitzvot in the Torah, but the numerical value of the word Torah is only 611. The Talmud suggests one answer to this difficulty - Moses gave us 611 commands, while the other two – "I am the Lord your God," and, "You shall have no other gods beside Me," (the first 2 of the 10 Commandments) – the Israelites received not from Moses but directly from God Himself.

But a possible second answer is that there are 611 commands, and at the very end of the Torah, in the second of our two parshiot this week, Vayelech, there are two *meta*- (all-encompassing) commands *about* the commands. They are Hakhel, the command to assemble the people every 7 years for a public reading of the Torah, and the command to write, or take part in writing, our own Sefer Torah.

These two commands are set apart from all the others. They are inserted into the story in which Moses hands on leadership to his successor Joshua. The connection is that both these two laws and the story are about *continuity*. The laws are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written afresh in every generation, will never be forgotten by the people and will never stop being its guiding document as a nation. The nation will never abandon its founding principles, its history and identity, its connection to the past and its responsibility to the future.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

- What similarities and differences are there between these two mitzvot?
- Do we still have these mitzvot? Are there other traditions we follow to achieve the same goals?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

On a bright, crisp winter morning on the 20th January 2009, Barack Obama was sworn in as the 44th President of the United States of America, the first African-American to hold that office. It was a historic moment, and the almost two million people who crowded around the Washington monument – the largest crowd ever gathered in America for a political event – were intensely aware of this. The nation that had fought a civil war over the abolition of slavery had finally conferred its highest office onto, as Obama put it, 'a man whose father, less than sixty years ago, might not have been served at a local restaurant.'

It was a redemptive moment. Obama's inaugural address touched on the many problems facing America and the world. But at the same time it followed the protocol – the language,

imagery and key ideas – of almost every other Presidential Inaugural Address since Washington's first in 1789. What Barack Obama was doing was something that sets America's political culture apart from all others in the world. He was renewing the covenant, a form of politics born in the Torah.

(Rabbi Sacks, *Future Tense*, p. 155)

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What covenant was President Obama "renewing" with the American people?
2. How is this story connected to our parsha?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

There is a beautiful complementarity between these two commands of Hakhel and of writing a Sefer Torah. Hakhel, the national assembly, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Hillel's words, "If I am not for myself, who will be, but if I am only for myself, what am I?" In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good. Hence the Sefer Torah – our written constitution as a nation – must be renewed in the life of the individual (mitzvah 613) and of the nation (mitzvah 612).

This is how the Torah describes the mitzvah of Hakhel:

"At the end of every seven years, in the year for cancelling debts, during the Festival of Tabernacles, when all of Israel comes to appear before the Lord your God at the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before them in their hearing. Assemble the people—men, women and children, and the strangers in your towns—so they can listen and learn to revere the Lord your God and follow carefully all the words of this Torah. Their children, who do not know, shall hear it and learn to fear the Lord your God." (Devarim 31:10-13).

Note the inclusivity of the event. It would be anachronistic to say that the Torah was egalitarian in the contemporary sense. Yet the Torah regarded it as essential that women, children and strangers should be included in the ceremony of citizenship in the republic of faith.

Who performed the reading? The Torah does not specify, but tradition ascribed the role to the King. That was extremely important. To be sure, the Torah separates religion and politics.

The King was not High Priest, and the High Priest was not King. This was revolutionary. In almost every other ancient society, the head of state was also the head of the religion, as part of the pagan vision of religion as power. But although he was not the spiritual leader, the King of Israel was bound by the Torah. He was commanded to have a special Torah scroll written for him; he was to keep it with him when he sat on the throne and read it "all the days of his life" (Devarim 17:18-20). And by reading the Torah to the assembled people every seven years, he was showing that the nation as a political entity existed under the sacred canopy of the Divine word. We are a people, the King was implicitly saying, formed by covenant. If we keep it, we will flourish; if not, we will fail.

This is how Rambam describes the actual ceremony:

"Trumpets were blown throughout Jerusalem to assemble the people; and a high platform, made of wood, was brought and set up in the centre of the Court of Women. The King went up and sat there so that his reading might be heard ... The chazzan of the synagogue would take a *Sefer Torah* and hand it to the head of the synagogue, and the head of the synagogue would hand it to the deputy high priest, and the deputy high priest to the High Priest, and the High Priest to the King, to honour him by the service of many persons ... The King would read the sections we have mentioned until he would come to the end. Then he would roll up the *Sefer Torah* and recite a blessing after the reading, the way it is recited in the synagogue ... Converts who did not know Hebrew were required to direct their hearts and listen with utmost awe and reverence, as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great scholars who knew the entire Torah were required to listen with utmost attention ... Each had to regard himself as if he had been charged with the Torah now for the first time, and as though he had heard it

from the mouth of God, for the King was an ambassador proclaiming the words of God."

Apart from giving us a sense of the grandeur of the occasion, Maimonides is making a radical suggestion: that Hakhel is a re-enactment of the Giving of the Torah at Sinai – "as on the day the Torah was given," "as though he had heard it from the mouth of God" – and thus a covenant renewal ceremony. How did he arrive at such an idea? Almost certainly it was because of Moses' description of the Giving of the Torah in Va'etchanan:

The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Assemble [hakhel] the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children." (Devarim 4:10).

The italicised words are all echoed in the Hakhel command, especially the word Hakhel itself, which only appears in one other place in the Torah. Thus was Sinai recreated in the Temple in Jerusalem every seven years, and thus was the nation, men, women, children and strangers, renewed in its commitment to its founding principles.

Tanach gives us vivid descriptions of actual covenant renewal ceremonies, in the days of Joshua (Joshua 24), Josiah (2 Kings 23), Asa (2 Chronicles 15) and Ezra and Nehemiah (Nehemiah 8-10). These were historic moments when the nation consciously rededicated itself after a long period of religious relapse. Because of Hakhel and covenant renewal, Israel was eternally capable of becoming young again, recovering what Jeremiah called "the devotion of your youth" (Jeremiah 2:2).

What happened to Hakhel during the almost 2000 years in which Israel had no king, no country, no Temple and no Jerusalem? Some scholars have made the intriguing suggestion that the *minhag Eretz Yisrael*, the custom of Jews in and from Israel, which lasted until about the thirteenth century, of

reading the Torah not once every year but every three or three-and-a-half years, was intended to create a seven year cycle, so that the second reading would end at the same time as Hakhel, namely on the Succot following a sabbatical year (a kind of septennial Simchat Torah).

I would suggest a quite different answer. The institution of the reading of the Torah on Shabbat morning, which goes back to antiquity, acquired new significance at times of exile and dispersion. There are customs that remind us of Hakhel. The Torah is read, as it was by the King on Hakhel and Ezra at his assembly, standing on a *bimah*, a raised wooden platform. The Torah reader never stands alone: there are usually three people on the *bimah*, the *segan*, the reader and the person called to the Torah, representing respectively God, Moses, and the Israelites. According to most halachists, the *reading* of the Torah is *chovat tzibbur*, an obligation of the community, as opposed to the *study* of Torah which is *chovat yachid*, an obligation of the individual. So, I believe, *keriat ha-Torah* should be translated not as "the *Reading* of the Torah" but as "the *Proclaiming* of Torah." It is our equivalent of Hakhel, transposed from the seventh year to the seventh day.

It is hard for individuals, let alone nations, to stay perennially young. We drift, lose our way, become distracted, lose our sense of purpose and with it our energy and drive. **I believe the best way to stay young is never to forget "the devotion of our youth," the defining experiences that made us who we are, the dreams we had long ago of how we might change the world to make it a better, fairer, more spiritually beautiful place.** Hakhel was Moses' parting gift to us, showing us how it might be done.

QUESTION TO PONDER:

How does this mitzvah help the Jewish people keep the "passion of their youth"?



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

The very institution of American Presidential Inaugural address is an adaptation of a biblical command, the 612th, known as Hakhel. The Hebrew Bible contains historical accounts of such gatherings in the days of Joshua, Josiah, and Ezra and Nehemiah. In effect, these were national covenant renewal ceremonies, in which leaders recalled the nation's history, gave thanks to God, and rededicated themselves to the terms of their vocation.

Future Tense, p. 173



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Why are the mitzvot of Hakhel and writing a Sefer Torah considered "meta-mitzvot"?
2. What is the message contained in the difference between these two final mitzvot?
3. What is the goal of these two mitzvot and how do we achieve this goal today?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

IN A NUTSHELL

1. This last speech involved a renewing of the covenant, including Moses delivering of the final two mitzvot of the Torah – Hakhel and writing a Sefer Torah (which are both a way to continue the process of commitment to the covenant). It is critical that we realise that the entire people were present, just as they were present at the original covenant event (the giving of the Torah on Har Sinai) because the covenant is for all the people. It is a statement of inclusivity.

THE CORE IDEA

1. They are both *meta*-commands, commands *about* the commands. They are ways to maintain the people's awareness and loyalty to the covenant. However, they differ in that Hakhel is a communal mitzvah that involves the whole people, whereas writing a Sefer Torah is a mitzvah for the individual. This is a reflection of what a covenantal society must be – a balance between individual responsibility and collective responsibility.
2. While we still have a mitzvah to be involved in the writing of a Sefer Torah, we no longer have the original mitzvah of Hakhel (because we no longer have a king of Israel). However, a more recent equivalent mitzvah that tries to achieve the same end, albeit more regularly, is the weekly public Torah reading.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The inaugural presidential address is in effect a renewal of the covenant that is the basis for American society – the American Constitution.
2. This event takes place every four years when the President is sworn into office following an election. It is the American equivalent of Hakhel, the renewing of the biblical covenant governing Israelite society – the Torah.

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

1. Hakhel gives the people an opportunity, every seven years, to hear and understand the values that their society is based on. This is a re-enactment of Matan Torah at Sinai, the original event where these values were inscribed in the hearts of the Israelites as they witnessed God's revelation. These values are the core values of the Torah, and a renewal of the covenant every seven years provides a reminder of the passion of the original revelation where the covenant was bestowed upon the people.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

These questions are all open, to encourage thought and debate. There are no wrong answers. However, here are some thoughts to consider:

1. They are *commands about the commands*. They aim to achieve a continuous familiarity and commitment to the Torah by commanding each individual to have a role in the writing of a Sefer Torah (the experience itself meaningful, and also ensuring copies of the Torah would be widely available) and the communal reading of parts of the Torah every seven years by the King in front of the entire nation.
2. Hakhel is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed at individuals. This is the essence of covenantal politics. We have individual responsibility and we have collective responsibility. In Judaism, the state is not all, as it is in authoritarian regimes. Nor is the individual all, as it is in the radically individualist liberal democracies of today. A covenantal society is made by each accepting responsibility for all, by individuals committing themselves to the common good.
3. These mitzvot aim to give us a deeply personal and powerfully national connection with the covenant/Torah (hence the entire nation must be present at Hakhel and every individual must be involved in writing a Sefer Torah). They also encourage a continued loyalty and commitment to the Torah. Today, we still have the mitzvah for each Jew to be involved in the writing of a Sefer Torah, but without a Jewish monarchy, we no longer have the original mitzvah of Hakhel. However, we have instead the weekly public Torah reading which achieves the same goal.