



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת נצבים-וילך תש"ע 5770 Parshas Nitzavim-Vayeilech

HAKHEL AND THE GUEST LIST

In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, a singular event would take place every seven years. The Jewish population would assemble in the Temple, where they would listen to the king read sections of Sefer Devarim from a Torah scroll.

One of the most intriguing aspects of this mitzvah ceremony centers upon the list of invitees. As the verse states in *parshas Vayeilech*: **הַקָּהֵל אֶת הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂאִים וְהַטַּף** “Assemble the nation: the men, the women, and the children,” (*Devarim 31:12*).

Chazal grapple over the constitution of this audience. The participation of the adults is understandable: The men folk are Biblically obligated in the commandment of Talmud Torah (Torah study); hence, they come to learn. While women are technically exempt from Talmud Torah, they nevertheless gain tremendously by merely hearing the sacred words of this *sefer*, which contain numerous and essential teachings and admonitions. It is the inclusion of the children that presents a puzzle.

(One may have reasoned that the children, as well, gain at their level; whatever little they can absorb can have a profound and long-lasting influence. However, as the Ramban [*ibid.*] explains, Chazal had a tradition that even the presence of small *infants* was mandated, although they lacked any comprehension at this point.)

And so the Gemara (*Chagigah 3a*) reaches the following, remarkable conclusion: “Why do the babies come? **לְתַת שְׂכָר לְמַבְיְאֵיהֶם**” “To grant reward for those who bring them.”

The obvious question is, *how does this resolve the*

issue? If the children’s presence was necessary, it would be understandable that the parents would be rewarded for shepherding them to the scene. But why pay for a chaperon if their chaperoning serves no inherent purpose?

BACK AT SINAI

R’ Yitzchok Hutner (*P’ninim Mishulchan Gavohah, parshas Vayeilech*) understands that the children’s attendance was indeed purposeful. In fact, his explanation sheds much light on the overall nature of this entire unique event.

The picture emerges by examining the selections that were read to the people. As stated, the king reads portions of Sefer Devarim from a Torah scroll. The Mishnah in Sotah (7:8) provides a list of the selections:

וְקוֹרָא מִתַּחֲלַת (דברים א) אֶלֶּה הַדְּבָרִים עַד שְׁמַע, וְשָׁמַע (שם ו), וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַע (שם יא), עֲשֹׂר תַעֲשֹׂר (שם יד), כִּי תִכְלֶה לַעֲשֹׂר (שם כו), וּפְרֻשֵׁת הַמֶּלֶךְ (שם יז), וּבִרְכוֹת וּקְלֹלוֹת (שם כח), עַד שְׁגוֹמֵר כָּל הַפְּרָשָׁה.

“He reads from the beginning of Devarim until *Shema* (*Devarim 1:1 - 6:9*), followed immediately by *V’hayah im shamo’a* (*11:13-21*); (he then skips to) the portions concerning *ma’aser* (tithes) (*end of ch. 14, and 26:12-15*); followed by the portion concerning the king (*17:14-20*); and then the blessings and curses (detailed in *parshas Ki Savo*) until the end of that section.”

The manner in which the Rambam transcribes this list in his *halachic* code (*Hilchos Chagigah, 3:3*) is quite curious. Commenting on this final section of the

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blessings and curses, the Rambam spells out exactly which verse (*Devarim 28:69*) ends this section: "... Aside from the covenant that was forged with them at Choreiv (Har Sinai)." To which the Rambam appends the word: ופוסק ("and then he stops").

The intent, explains R' Huntner, is apparent from the way the Rambam goes on to describe how the congregation should listen to the Torah-reading. "They should hear with awe and fear and rejoice in trepidation, like the day it was given at Sinai" (*halachah 6*). The *hakhel* assembly, it seems, was an effort to recreate the scene of the Revelation at Sinai.

The Rambam was particular, then, to point out that the absolute final verse to be read at this occasion was the one that mentions Mount Sinai. After that, no other verse or subject may be broached, as it would detract from the intended atmosphere of the ceremony: namely, a re-enactment of sorts of the Sinai experience.

It is for this reason that the presence of the children is necessary. The entire Jewish people were present at Sinai – children included. And so the parents who escort their children to the *hakhel* assembly receive special reward. By bringing their offspring, they are enhancing the "Sinai re-enactment" by providing the full backdrop that existed at that seminal event.

FOR LACK OF BABYSITTERS...

R' Ya'akov of Lissa (known as the "Nesivos" for his magnum opus, *Nesivos Hamishpat*) takes a totally different approach to this issue. He understands that the presence of the children was not necessarily intended to impact the *hakhel* gathering per se; rather, the directive to bring them is another example of Hashem's unfettered kindness and benevolence toward the Jewish people.

Chazal tell us (*Makkos 23b*) that amongst the *mitzvos* of the Torah, there are numerous ones that can be characterized as "easy" ones – things we would have kept on our own, even without a formal commandment. So why did Hakadosh Baruch Hu expressly prohibit the eating of weasel-meat, for example? This is simply an act of love towards Klal Yisrael, so that Hashem can bestow reward upon us for that which we were already prepared to do.

Bringing the children to the *hakhel* experience, explains the *Nesivos* (*in the sefer Nachlas Ya'akov*), follows in this vein as well. The fathers and mothers are mandated to attend. By necessity then, they *must* "schlep" their children along for the ride; after all, they couldn't just leave them at home! And so the parents were set to bring their children even if they had not received a specific directive to do so. What did Hashem do? He gave them a mitzvah to bring their children, enabling them to collect reward for doing that which they would have done in any event.

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