



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

SUKKOT 5776 • 2015

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

September 29, 2015
Sukkot Day 2

**Gathering Jews: 3 Lessons
From Hakhel**



Meaningful Sermons

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ABSTRACT

Imagine every single Jew – man, woman, child – was gathered together in one room, listening to the same words.

Imagine how noisy it would be!

If a rabbi's sermon cannot capture the attention of 100 Jews, what words could ever capture the attention of all the Jews?

The Mitzvah of Hakhel, that's what. When the king reads, all the people listen.

This year – the one following the Shemittah year – is called a Hakhel Year, a year of assembly or gathering. The Torah mandates, that on the second day of Sukkot following the Shemittah year, "assemble the people: the men, the women, and the children" and the king of Israel should read portions of the Torah before all Israel, "in order that they hear, and in order that they learn and fear God and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah... all the days that you live."

We recreate these gatherings and derive lessons for them as we honor Hakhel this year, especially on this second day of Sukkot, when the original mitzvah was performed.

The Talmud relates three profound lessons in gathering together: 1) harmony within diversity; 2) we attest God's oneness, God attests ours; 3) different opinions (different sheep) but only one shepherd.

A humbling story from R' Pinchas of Koritz ties this sermon into a unified bundle of oneness – all under one Sukkah.

GATHERING JEWS: 3 LESSONS FROM HAKHEL

1. Jewish Rowing Team (Joke)

The Yeshiva's new rowing team was the embarrassment of the entire sports department (which wasn't so hot to begin with!). They not only finished dead last in every competition, but consistently crossed the finish line many minutes, even hours, after their opponents.

Finally, as they prepared to compete in the Olympics, they sent Goldfarb to spy on the top-rated Harvard crew team, in the hopes of gaining some helpful insight. Lurking in the Cambridge boathouse, he watched the team practice in the Charles River. For an entire week he observed their methods.

Finally, he returned to New York, where his teammates anxiously awaited to hear his information.

"I figured out their secret!" he told them excitedly.

"Nu!? Tell us! Tell us!" demanded his teammates.

"They have *eight* guys rowing and only *one* guy yelling!!"

2. Big Box Store (Alternate Joke)

Max, a *Vaadnik* (union head) is addressing a union meeting at a certain unnamed Israeli government-owned company.

"Comrades – *Chaverim*. We have agreed on a new deal with the management. We will no longer work five days a week."

"Hooray!" goes the crowd.

"We will finish work at 3 PM, not 4 PM."

"Hooray!" goes the crowd, again.

"We will start work at 9 AM, not 7 AM."

"Hooray!"

"We have a 150% pay rise."

"Hooray!"

"We will only work on Wednesdays."

Silence...then a voice from the back asks, "Every Wednesday?"

3. Gather In

A crowd of Jews can accomplish anything – even a one-day workweek.

The question is: What's accomplished when Jews gather together, is it merely to argue and bark orders, to negotiate for better union terms or is it something else.

We are in the midst of the most crowd-oriented festival on the Jewish calendar. Each of the *sholosh regalim*, the three festivals of pilgrimage to the Temple in Jerusalem, were all crowded affairs, with large gatherings in the holy city.

But Sukkot especially is built for gatherings and gatherers. A Sukkah, an informal hut, is the perfect unassuming space for all types of Jews to meet, and greet, and be welcome. Indeed, in addition to *Sukkot*, the festival is also called *Chag Haasif*, the festival of ingathering, when traditionally Israel would gather in all of the agricultural product.

The mitzvah of *lulav* and *etrog* is also all about gathering and binding together the four kinds – which represent the four kinds of Jews – into one collective whole, *agudah achas*.

4. Crowd Control

This year there's also an added something special – a Mitzvah that comes around once every seven years and is all about gathering together as one unified community.

This Mitzvah is called *Hakhel* – which means assemble or gather – and it celebrated the year after *Shemitta*. It is celebrated after the first day of Sukkot.¹ All the Jews, men women and children, would gather together and the King of Israel would read to them from the Torah.

*Then, Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of seven years, at an appointed time, in the Festival of Succoth, the year of release, When all Israel comes to appear before the Lord, your God, in the place He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all Israel, in their ears. Assemble the people: the men, the women, and the children, and your stranger in your cities, in order that they hear, and in order that they learn and fear the Lord, your God, and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah. And their children, who did not know, will hear and learn to fear the Lord, your God, all the days that you live on the land, to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess.”*²

The written Torah conveys truth in its most distilled and concentrated form; the oral Torah, whose main body is the Talmud, elaborates and reveals some of the mysteries secreted in the concise words of the Torah verse (mind you, the Talmud itself is relatively quite succinct, this is why we have commentary upon commentary.)

The Talmud³ relates three lessons from Hakhel:

5. Lessons 1: Harmony Within Diversity

Once Rabbi Yochanan ben Beroka and Rabbi Elazar ben Chisma went to visit Rabbi Yehoshua in Peki'in. He asked them, “What new things were said today in the study hall?” They replied, “We are your students and drink from your waters.” “Even so, there is no study hall without new ideas. Who gave the discourse this week?”

¹ Sotah 41a.

² Deuteronomy 31:10-13.

³ Chagigah 3a-b.

“Elazar ben Azaria.” “What did he teach about today?” They said to him “Hakhel.” “What did he teach?” *“Gather together the men, women and children, if the men come to learn, the women to hear, why do the children come? In order to give reward to those that bring them.”*

Upon hearing this Rabbi Yehoshua reacted with excitement: “He said to them ‘You had such a gem and you sought to withhold it from me?’”

What novel idea did Rab Elazar ben Azariah innovate by explaining that the “men come to learn, women come to listen, children come to reward those who bring them?”⁴ Why was Rabbi Yehoshua so excited by this interpretation, to the point that he called it a gem?!

Reb Elazar ben Azariah is coming to teach us something profound. One could presume that when the nation gathers together in *Hakhel* they suppress their unique personalities. As we have witnessed time and again how people’s individual rights were compromised in the name of the “good” of the group.

Says Reb Elazar ben Azariah: No! Gathering together does not and should not suspend our individuality. Even as we gather as one in *Hakhel* each member retains his or her unique self and role: “men come to learn, women come to listen, children come to reward those who bring them.” The men are unique as men, the women are unique as women, and the children are unique as children.

When R’ Yehoshua heard this idea expounded upon by Reb Elazar ben Azariah he excitedly exclaimed “what a gem”! Because it is no small matter to maintain your individuality even as you gather together as a united nation.

6. Lesson 2: We Gather God, God Gathers Us

The Talmud continues and teaches us a second lesson from Reb Elazar ben Azaria:

⁴See Likkutei Sichot vol. 19, pp. 363-370.

He continued: 'You have declared God today [to be your God]⁵ and [in the next verse it says] 'God has declared you [to be His chosen nation]'.⁶ God said to Israel 'You made Me one entity in the world, I will make you one entity in the world. You made Me one entity in the world as it says 'Listen Israel, the Lord is our God, God is one',⁷ and I will make you one entity in the world, as it says 'Who is like you, Israel, one nation in the land'⁸

Just as we proclaim oneness of God, God does the same for us. We make God one and He makes us one.

One of the portions the king reads during *Hakhel* is the Shema. In the Shema, Israel proclaims the unity of God. Our existence bears witness to the unity of God. Our grandparents gave their lives to proclaim the unity of God.

Every time a Jew was killed simply because he or she was a Jew – as it was most recently in the Holocaust – that Jews sanctified God's name. Because the only reason that Jew's life was taken was because of his or her Jewishness and connection with God.

Yet, often times we seem to be a fragmented nation. And sadly, sometimes even a divisive nation. How can one nation – one family, one organism – be so separated, God forbid? Is it conceivable that the right arm should hurt the left arm of the same body?!

The only reason such absurd disconnection can exist is because we don't feel that we are one. Tragically, it sometimes takes a Hitler (may his name be erased) to remind us in hatred that there is no distinction between one Jew and another, despite their differences.

Enter the Mitzvah of Hakhel: Says God, just as you proclaim My unity with the Shema, I shall proclaim your unity with the mitzvah of Hakhel.

⁵ Deuteronomy 26:17.

⁶ Ibid. 18.

⁷ Deuteronomy 6:4.

⁸⁰ Chronicles I 17:21.

God declares: All Jews, men, women and children, regardless of background – gather together in love.

In other words: the oneness and unity of the Jewish people is contingent upon and a result of the way Israel proclaims the unity and oneness of God.

7. Lesson 3: Disagreeing To Agree

The Talmud continues with a third lesson from Hakhel taught by Reb Elazar ben Azaria:

He continued and said *The words of the wise are like spurs, and like nails well planted [are the sayings] of the masters of assemblies, given from one shepherd.*⁹ Why are words of Torah compared to spurs? Just as spurs direct the cow [pulling the plow] along its furrows in order to bring forth life to the world [the fruits and vegetables that will grow from the seeds planted in the furrow], so too, the words of Torah direct their students from the paths of death to the paths of life.

‘The masters of assemblies’ – these are the wise scholars who gather and sit together in various groups and occupy themselves with the study of Torah. There are those scholars who declare an item ritually impure, and there are those that pronounce it clean. There are those who prohibit and those who permit; those who disqualify and those who declare. Lest a person say ‘How can I ever learn Torah, when every issue is subject to debate and disagreement? – the verse tells us that all the opinions are “given from one shepherd.” One God gave them, one leader proclaimed them from the mouth of the Master of all matters... Thus you should open your ears like a funnel and acquire for yourself an understanding heart to hear the words of those who declare a thing impure and the words of those who pronounce it pure, the words of those who forbid and the words of those who permit, the words of those who disqualify and the words of those who declare it fit.

⁹ Ecclesiastes 12:11.

We all know that when you have three Jews you have six opinions. This tradition is found every time you open up a *Gemara*. Debates aren't the exception but the norm. Indeed, debate is how the sages discover the deepest kernels of truth and meaning.

But the underlying key is that they are not debaters and arguers. They are *masters of assemblies* – they are collectors and gatherers, they gather together and collect ideas, they stretch the ideas from one extreme to the next, all in search of one truth, which was “given from one shepherd.”

You see, there are debates that break people apart; and there are debates that collect people and unite them together.

When you sit in a Sukkah, or listen to the king reading from the Torah, this is unity, this is a collective.

Healthy disagreements and debates among people who come from one nation does not create fragmentation. Rather, it is meant to reach something larger and bigger, something that transcends our differences, and binds us together. Our differences – our individuality – they actually enhance our unity. Because each of us, in all our rich diversity, originate from “one shepherd.” We therefore complement each other as we express our individual opinions.

When we have one Torah, with one shepherd, surrounded by one Sukkah, we are united in such a way that disagreements themselves become holy.

This is Hakhel.

8. Sukkot And Jewish Oneness (Story)

Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz was a spiritual giant in his generation. At first his greatness was mostly unknown to his contemporaries, but that suited him just fine. He spent his days and most of his nights in Torah study, prayer and meditation. Rarely was he interrupted.

But then, word began to spread, perhaps from fellow disciples of the Baal Shem Tov, that Rav Pinchas was an extraordinary giant. People began to visit him on a regular basis, seeking his guidance, asking for his prayers, and beseeching his blessing. The more he helped them, the more they came. The trickle to his door became a stream, and the stream became a night-and-day constant flood of increased knocks and outpourings of personal needs and requests for help.

Rav Pinchas was bewildered. He felt he was no longer serving God properly, because he no longer had sufficient time to study, pray and meditate as he should. He didn't know what to do. He needed more privacy and less distraction, but how could he turn away dozens, and even hundreds of people who genuinely felt that he could help them? How could he convince them to seek elsewhere, to others more willing and qualified than he?

Then he had an idea. He would pray for heavenly help in the matter. "Let God arrange it that people not be attracted to seek me out!" he thought. Let God make him be despicable in the eyes of his fellows!

"A tzaddik decrees and Heaven agrees," they say. Rav Pinchas prayed, and so it was.... In a short time, people stopped visiting him. Not only that, on those occasions when he went to town, he was met with averted heads and a chilly atmosphere.

Rav Pinchas didn't mind at all. Indeed, he was delighted; now he had all the time he could desire for study, prayer and meditation. The old pattern was restored, and rarely was he interrupted. No one was coming to him to seek his guidance, request his prayers or beseech his blessing.

Then the Days of Awe – Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur – passed, and there remained only four brief busy days to prepare for the Sukkot festival. Usually (or rather, every year until now), there had always been some yeshivah students or local townspeople who were only too glad to help the pious rabbi construct his sukkah. But this time, not a single soul arrived. No one liked him, so no one even thought to help him.

Rav Pinchas could not get a single Jew in the neighborhood to lend him tools...

Not being handy in these matters, the rabbi didn't know what to do. Finally, having no choice, he was forced to hire a non-Jew to build his sukkah for him. But the gentile did not possess the tools that were needed, and Rav Pinchas could not get a single Jew in the neighborhood to lend him tools because they disliked him so much. In the end, his wife had to go to borrow them, and even that was difficult to accomplish due to the prevailing attitude towards her husband. With just a few hours remaining till the onset of the festival, they finally managed to complete a flimsy minimal structure.

As the sun slid between the forest branches and the rebbetzin lit the festive candles, Rav Pinchas hurried off to shul. He always made a point to attend the congregational prayers on the holidays; besides, he didn't want to miss the opportunity to acquire a guest for the festival meal, something so integral to the essence of the holiday.

In those days in Europe, people desiring an invitation to a meal would stand in the back of the shul upon the completion of the prayers. The householders would then invite them upon their way out, happy to so easily accomplish the mitzvah of hospitality, *hachnosas orchim*. Rav Pinchas, unfortunately, did not find it so simple. Even those without a place to eat turned him down without a second thought. Eventually, everyone who needed a place and everyone who wanted a guest were satisfied, except for the tzaddik, Rav Pinchas.

He trudged home alone, saddened and a bit shaken up at the realization that he might never have another guest, not even for the special festive meal of the first night of Sukkot. Alas, that too was part of the price of his freedom . . . It was worth it, wasn't it?

Pausing just inside the entrance to his sukkah, he began to chant the traditional invitation to the ushpizin, the "seven heavenly guests" who visit every Jewish sukkah. Although not many are privileged to actually see these exalted visitors, Rav Pinchas was definitely one of the select few who had this exalted experience on an annual basis. This year, he raised his eyes and saw the Patriarch Abraham, the first of the ushpizin and therefore the honored guest for the first night, standing outside the door of the sukkah, maintaining a distance.

Rav Pinchas cried out to him in anguish: "Father Abraham! Why do you not enter my sukkah? What is my sin?"

Replied the patriarch: "I am the embodiment of *chesed*, serving God through deeds of lovingkindness. Hospitality was my specialty. I will not join a festival table where there are no guests."

The crestfallen Rav Pinchas quickly reordered his priorities. He prayed that everything be restored to as it had been, and that he should find favor in the eyes of his fellow Jews exactly as before. Again, his prayer was answered. Within a few days, throngs of people were again finding their way to his door, seeking his guidance, asking his support, requesting his prayers and beseeching his blessing. No longer could he devote all, or even most, of his time to his Torah study, his prayer and his meditation. But thanks to his holy Sukkot guest, this was no longer seen as a problem.¹⁰

9. Gather Together Leads To Torah (Conclusion)

Sukkot and Hakhel teach us (amongst other lessons) that the most important thing is for Jews to gather together, to invite Jews into our Sukkot and into our homes, to emulate our father Abraham, to suspend everything selfish that gets in the way of our embracing our fellow Jews.

Of the 613 Mitzvoth, Hakhel is #612, right before #613, writing a Torah scroll.

The only way to complete a Torah scroll is to unite every single Jew, man, woman, and child, as one unified people – each one corresponding to one of the 600,000 letters in the Torah (Yisroel is the acronym of *yesh shishim riboi oisiyos l'Torah*, there are 600,000 letters in the Torah). If one person, one letter, no matter how big or how small, no matter how old or how young (*taf*), whether male or female, if even one person, if one letter is missing, the entire Torah is disqualified.

To reach Mitzvah #613 we must have Mitzvah #612 gathering together, men, women and children to hear the Torah which infuses them with divine awe all the days of their lives.

¹⁰ As composed by Rabbi Yerachmiel Tilles.

Beginning this Sukkot and throughout this *Hakhel* year let us commit and resolve to organize gatherings – in our homes, in our schools, in our synagogues, in our places of work. Let us assemble, men, women and children study and listen and commit to the words of the Torah.

Surely then, Hakhel will lead into the celebration of the Torah and the realization of the ultimate Hakhel with the coming of the ultimate Redemption, when we will all hear Moshiach, the King of Israel read the Torah in the Third and Eternal Temple. Amen!

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