



5780 Divrei Torah on Jerusalem by Rabbi Yosef Bronstein Parashat Vayeilech / פרשת וילך

Recreating Sinai in Yerushalayim

The only mitzvah in this week's parsha is that of Hakhel. Every seven years, the entire Jewish community – men, women and children – would gather in Yerushalayim to hear the king read from the book of Devarim. What was the meaning of this ritual? Surely each community had many learning Torah opportunities over the course of the year. What is there to be gained by this public reading?

In his description of the mitzvah, the Rambam leaves a hint to the significance of the experience:¹

Converts who do not understand are obligated to concentrate their attention and direct their hearing, listening with reverence and awe, rejoicing while trembling as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai. Even great Sages who know the entire Torah are obligated to listen with exceedingly great concentration.

The function of Hakhel is not necessarily for the cognitive understanding of the content. Rather, it is an experience that harkens back to Sinai.

At Sinai, God appeared to the Jewish people with a great and fear-inducing sensory display and gave them the Torah. It seems that this divine revelation was of primary importance, even over and above the fact that God taught us the Torah. According to one midrash, God first said all of the Ten Commandments in a single moment, completely unintelligible to the human ear and brain.² Rather, God realized that there would be time enough for the learning and analysis of the Torah, but at the beginning there needed to be a powerful experience of the Giver of the Torah in order to tether all of the subsequent learning to God himself.

¹ Chagigah 3:6. Translation is from https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/1062893/jewish/Chagigah-Perek-3.htm.

² Rashi to Shemot 20:1.



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As the midrash teaches us, this divine revelation was predicated upon the great feelings of unity that the Jewish people experienced around the mountain – as one person with a single heart.³ It is only when the Jewish people are bound together that they are able to feel the overpowering presence of the Almighty.

Hakhel attempts to recreate this dual experience of unity and spirituality, centered around the Torah. All of the Jewish people gather together and hear words of Torah from the awe-inspiring King who is one of God's representatives in this world. The goal is to listen, soak in the experience and learn to fear God himself, the giver of the Torah.

It is for this reason that the only possible location for Hakhel is Yerushalayim. While Sinai was the original location of this confluence of unity, spirituality and Torah, all of these qualities blend beautifully and eternally together in Yerushalayim. It is the city that makes all Jews into friends⁴ and simultaneously is the gateway to heaven.⁵ Most importantly, Yerushalayim is God's home and allows for the Jewish people to collectively and individually encounter the Giver of the Torah.

³ Rashi to Shemot 19:2.

⁴ Yerushalmi Chagigah 2:6.

⁵ Bereishit 28:17.