

Was the Hakhel Gathering in the Seventh or Eighth Year?

By Yossi Ives

Here's a little riddle: What do you call the eighth year of a seven-year cycle? Turns out it's not so simple.

The Biblical agriculture system follows a seven-year cycle. For the first six years, farmers work their fields and vineyards, and in the seventh year—the *shemita*, or sabbatical year—the land is left to rest. In the year after the *shemita*, there was to be a mass gathering – called *hakhel* – in which all men, women and children would assemble at the Temple to hear the Torah read aloud:

At the end of [every] seven years, at the time of the *shemita* year during the festival of Sukkot... assemble the people: the men, the women, and the children, and your strangers in your cities, in order that they hear, and in order that they learn and fear the L-rd, your G-d, and they will observe to do all the words of this Torah.¹

So, when should this gathering take place? It seems clear: at the end of the seventh year. The problem with that is that the verse also tells us it should occur during the festival of Sukkot, which falls very much at the beginning of the year (two weeks in, to be exact). If the mass gathering must be held on Sukkot, then by definition it would either be at the beginning (not the end) of the seventh year, or the beginning of the eighth year – it cannot be both on Sukkot and at the end of the year!

7+1=8

Fortunately for us, Rashi was on to this problem. His explanation is that the gathering was to take place during Sukkot at the beginning of the eighth year, but the Torah still refers to it as the end of the seventh year for a particular reason:

During the first year of the *shemita* cycle, which is the eighth year. But (if it is the eighth year) why is this eighth year referred to here as "*shemita*" (which is, by definition, the seventh year)? Because the agriculture laws of the seventh year still apply to the harvested produce that grew during the seventh year.

So, apparently, all is reconciled. According to this, when the Torah says the seventh year, it really means the beginning of the eighth year, calling it the seventh year because at that early point many of the agriculture restrictions of the previous year are still in effect.

Why Not Just Say "Year One"?

But surely, that is very difficult to accept. The reality is that the eighth year in a seven-year cycle is not the eighth year at all, but the first year in the next cycle. By very definition, there cannot be an eighth year in a seven-year cycle! Why, then, does the Torah not just refer to it as the first year – which is most certainly what it is?

This is not the only problem. Given how confusing this has all become, why did the Torah bring in the whole issue of *shemittah*? We could have been spared a great deal of confusion had the Torah avoided all mention of the sabbatical year, which does not seem to have any relevance to our topic. After all, the *shemittah* is for the duration of the seventh year, and the Hakhel gathering takes place during the year that follows – so the two seemingly have nothing to do with each other.

In his iconic style, the Rebbe identifies a glaring illogic in our text, through which all becomes clear.

Why Wait to the End?

Reading the Torah's explanation for the Hakhel gathering, we understand that the purpose is to inspire the entire nation with fear of G-d. It seems odd, therefore, that this event would take place "at the **end** of the seventh year." Surely, such an event should take place at the **beginning**, to launch the new cycle with the best possible start? There seems to be little point in motivating people after a period has come to an end; the idea is to inspire them before it begins.

This is the problem that Rashi seeks to address. His solution: Indeed, the Hakhel gathering did occur at the beginning of the cycle. Hence, Rashi's comment begins with the words: "During the first year of the *shemittah* cycle." This makes sense, given the purpose of the gathering. It also makes sense because the gathering was to take place on Sukkot, and that festival is set at the beginning of the year.

But that leaves us with the rather big question of why the Torah refers to it as taking place in the seventh year if the real intention is the first year – as indeed it must be.

The Bridge

To explain this, Rashi highlights the way the Torah connects the Hakhel gathering to the prior *shemittah* year. Rashi also deliberately uses the term "the eighth year," and not "the first year," even though these are one and the same. In so doing, Rashi is aiming at the central point about the timing of Hakhel.

What took place during the seventh year? Virtually all agricultural activities are to cease during this year-long "sabbath to the L-rd."² Since agriculture was the main occupation, most people put down their work tools and engaged in holy pursuits for the duration of the year.

The Hakhel gathering took place at the beginning of the first year, but the idea was that it would take place during the first major festival immediately after the spiritual high of the Sabbatical year. Rashi conveys this by emphasizing how the great assemblage would occur in the "eighth year" – in other words, in the aftermath of

shemita. This was the most fitting time to reach the spiritual crescendo of Hakhel, having had a full year of spiritual build-up in preparation.

Now we understand why the Torah links the Hakhel gathering to *shemita*, even though they seem to be entirely separate. Timing the event immediately after the *shemita* year ends was intended to give it the greatest power and impact. Although the year of Hakhel was the first year of the cycle, the Torah wants us to think of it as the “eighth year,” insofar as it was merely two weeks after the holy seventh year had ended and a perfect time to hold such an inspirational event.

Here we have – coming from a surprising angle – a fundamental truth about Judaism. Whatever we gain spiritually must ultimately be channeled towards inspiring our real lives towards greater goodness and G-dliness. The Sabbatical year afforded an extended period for spiritual rejuvenation, but the goal was that this should inspire people during the next six years of tilling and toiling. The aim of the Hakhel gathering was to carry over the inspiration of the *shemita* year, so that even when they resumed their mundane work lives, they would feel some of the spiritual power in which they were immersed in the previous year.

Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 24, Parshat Vayelech I.

FOOTNOTES

1. [Deuteronomy 31:10-12](#).

2. [Leviticus 25:2](#).

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