

SICHA SUMMARY

Likkutei Sichos, Vol. 34

Vayelech, Sicha 1

The Context:

The final two mitzvos communicated by Moshe at the end of his life were 1) the mitzvah of Hakhel, for the king to gather the entire Jewish people every seven years to the Beis Hamikdash and to read portions of the Torah that inspire adherence of the mitzvos (Devarim 31:10); and 2) the mitzvah for every person to write a Torah scroll for themselves (Ibid, 31:19).

The Question:

Of all mitzvos, why were these two chosen to be the last given by Moshe before his passing and the entry of the people into the Land of Israel?

The Contextual Explanation:

The narrow, literal meaning of the mitzvah to “write this song” refers not to the entire Torah, but to the parshah of Haazinu, the song of the Torah. Thus, this mitzvah is introduced in its appropriate time, just

before the text of the song is communicated. The mitzvah of Hakhel, too, can be seen as part of Moshe’s exhortation to Yehoshua prior to his assumption of leadership. Moshe makes clear to Yehoshua that the people’s success in the land is dependent on their observance of the Torah. Thus, Moshe strengthens Yehoshua by telling him to gather the people periodically to be reminded of their need to fear G-d and observe His commandments so that they remain on the land.

The halachic definition of writing the “song,” however, applies to the entire Torah, and therefore requires another explanation. The mitzvah of Hakhel, too, according to some opinions, is not the king’s obligation to ensure fealty to the Torah, but applies to the entire community of Israel. Thus, it is not just related to Yehoshua, and thus requires an additional explanation.

The Explanation:

The purpose of the mitzvah of Hakhel, according to the Rambam, is to recreate the assembly at Sinai and the national acceptance of the mitzvos that was

established there. (Hilchos Chagigah, 3:6) The writing of an entire Torah scroll, too, accomplishes a similar purpose. It allows each person to have access to the entire Torah that was given at Sinai.

On the day of his passing, and as the Jews were preparing to leave the desert, the scene of the giving of the Torah, into the land of Israel, Moshe had to ensure that the national memory of that foundational event would not be forgotten. Thus, it was the proper time to command the people about the need to gather every seven years to recreate Sinai, and to write a scroll of the law that was given then.

On closer inspection, these two mitzvos serve two functions within this larger goal of remembrance. The Hakhel gathering was focused on a) the people gathering as a community, and b) on the commitment to the observance of mitzvos. The writing of a Torah scroll is a) undertaken by each individual separately, and b) meant to enable study of the Torah. That is why in modern times the mitzvah is no longer to simply write a scroll, but to ensure one has access to any books of Torah and its commentaries (Rosh, Hilchos Katanos, Sefer Torah).

The revelation at Sinai contained both goals: It was when the people committed to observing the mitzvos, and it was when the Torah was given to be studied. Thus, Moshe communicated two mitzvos before his passing that would enable the Jewish people to maintain both elements of Sinai — Hakhel, related to mitzvos, and writing the scroll, related to study.

This is also why Hakhel is a communal mitzvah and writing a scroll is an individual mitzvah. Mitzvah observance is equal across the community, every person performs the same mitzvah. Torah study is differentiated according to the individual, every person studies differently.

The general need for recreating the atmosphere of Sinai is due to the unique novelty of that experience. Torah was not just heard or understood, it was seen and viscerally experienced. Thus, it is not sufficient to simply recall Sinai, since recalling is an intellectual form of relating to an event. We need to actually gather, and to actually write a physical scroll, since we are attempting to recreate the sense of “seeing” the revelation itself.
