

Thematic Connections between Hakhel & Sukkot

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The penultimate mitzvah of the Torah [as counted by the author of the *Sefer HaChinuch*] is the ceremony of *Hakhel* (Deut. 31:10-13), the gathering of men, women and children once every seven years to hear the reading of selections from Sefer Devarim. Every seven years since 1945 the ancient ceremony has been symbolically reenacted and a reading commemorating the ancient practice is now held in the plaza of the Kotel on Chol haMoed Sukkot, most recently in 2008.

What do we know about *Hakhel* from the *pesukim* and the explanations of Chazal and the Rishonim? What is the significance of and reason for the mitzvah? When does it take place? How does the timing help to achieve its goal? Here are the *pesukim*:

And Moshe commanded them, saying: at the end of seven years, in the appointed time of the year of release, during the holiday of Sukkot, when all of Israel comes to be seen at the presence of the Lord your God in the place in which He shall choose, you shall read this teaching before all of Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones and the stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and they may learn, and fear God, and observe to do all the words of this teaching. And that their children who have not known, may hear, and learn to fear God, all the days you live on the soil that you will be crossing the Jordan to possess.

Devarim 31:10-13

וַיִּצְוּ מֹשֶׁה, אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר: מִקֵּץ שִׁבְעֵי שָׁנִים, בְּמוֹעֵד שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה--בְּחַג הַסּוּכּוֹת. בָּבוֹא כָל-יִשְׂרָאֵל, לְרֹאשׁוֹת אֶת-פְּנֵי ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ, בְּמָקוֹם, אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר: תִּקְרָא אֶת-הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת, נֹגֵד כָּל-יִשְׂרָאֵל--בְּאָזְנֵיהֶם. הִקְהֵל אֶת-הָעָם, הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׂימוֹת וְהַטַּף, וְגֵרְךָ, אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֵיךָ--לְמַעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלְמַעַן יִלְמְדוּ, וְיָרְאוּ אֶת-ה' אֱלֹקֶיכֶם, וְשָׁמְרוּ לְעֲשׂוֹת, אֶת-כָּל-דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת. וּבְנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּ, יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלְמַדּוּ--לְיִרְאָה, אֶת-ה' אֱלֹקֶיכֶם: כָּל-הַיָּמִים, אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם חַיִּים עַל-הָאָדָמָה, אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם עֹבְרִים אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה, לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.
דברים לא:י – יג

When does *Hakhel* take place? The *pasuk* gives some parameters- במועד שנת, מקץ שבע שנים- בחג הסוכות, השמיטה. The phrase *מקץ שבע שנים* is notoriously difficult to pin down in this context and is the subject of a well-known disagreement between the medieval commentators Ibn-Ezra and Ramban.²⁵ It is noteworthy that the identical phrase is used in Deut. 15:1 where the mitzvah of *shemittah* (the Sabbatical year) is described.

²⁵ Ibn Ezra insists that the word "*miketz*" here and in Deut. 15:1 and 9:11 is susceptible to variant meanings. He reads these three instances of *miketz* in Sefer Devarim to refer to the beginning, not the end of the time frame being considered. Thus God handed Moses the Tablets of the Law at the beginning of the 40th day, not at the end of that

At the end of seven years you shall make a release... And this is the matter of the release- every creditor shall release that which he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact the repayment of his neighbor and his brother because a release to the Lord has been proclaimed.

Devarim 15:1-2

מקץ שבע-שנים, תעשה שְׁמִטָּה וְזוֹה, דְּבַר הַשְּׁמִטָּה—שְׁמוֹט כָּל-בְּעַל מִשָּׂה יָדוֹ, אֲשֶׁר יִשֶּׂה בְּרֵעֵהוּ: לֹא-יִגַּשׁ אֶת-רֵעֵהוּ וְאֶת-אָחִיו, כִּי-קָרָא שְׁמִטָּה לַיהוָה.
דברים טו, א-ב

The Rambam in his code, summarizing the view of the Sages, sees both 15:1 and 31:10 as referring to the end of the seventh year continuing into the eighth year (or the first year of the new cycle). The phrase מקץ שבע שנים in Deut 15:1 is a reference not to the laws forbidding working the land and harvesting its produce - those are the subject of the laws of *shemittah* found in Lev. 25: 1-7, where the word “*miketz*” is not used. Rather, Deut. 15 is focused on *shemittat kesafim*, the cancellation of loans, which is effective only at the end of the seventh year. Similarly the phrase מקץ שבע שנים used in connection with *Hakhel* refers to a date following the end of the seventh year, in the first weeks of the eighth year:

Loans are not nullified until the conclusion of the Sabbatical year. This is derived from the pasuk (Devarim 15:1-2) which reads, “[a]t the end of seven years, you shall effect a remission. This is the matter of the remission.” And in Devarim 31:10 we read “At the end of seven years, in the appointed time of the year of release, during the holiday of Sukkot.” Just as in that instance [i.e. Hakhel] [the event takes place] after the seven [years], so too, the nullification of the debts takes place after the [seven years].

Rambam Hilchot Shemita V’Yovel 9:4

אין שמיטת כספים אלא בסופה שנאמר מקץ שבע שנים תעשה שמיטה וזה דבר השמיטה ושם הוא אומר מקץ שבע שנים במועד שנת השמיטה בחג הסוכות. מה שם אחר שבע אף השמטת כספים אחר שבע. לפיכך הלזה את חבירו בשביעית עצמה גובה חובו כל השנה וכשתשקע חמה בלילי ראש השנה של מוצאי שביעית אבד החוב.
רמב"ם הלכות שמיטה ויובל ט:ד

The timing of *Hakhel*, which Chazal took as a given, teaches us, through use of the word “*miketz*” in both contexts, that nullification of debts takes place only at the end of the seventh year. But how do we know what the Torah meant in using the word “מקץ” with respect to *Hakhel*? Why should *Hakhel* take place specifically at the end of the seventh year? And if *Hakhel* is to take place during the holiday of Sukkot, how can the phrase שנת השמיטה be used? Does not Rosh HaShanah mark the end of the *shemittah* year?

day, and *shemittah* kicks in at the beginning of the seventh year, not at its end. Similarly, the *Hakhel* ceremony was held, in his view, at the beginning of the seventh year (i.e., Sukkot of year seven, not the Sukkot of the year following *shemittah* which is the traditional approach.) Those who disagree with Ibn Ezra need to parry the ostensible proof from 15:1 which, assuming that it refers to the agricultural laws of the Sabbatical year, apply throughout the year, not only at its end.

Chazal (*Sifrei* Devarim section 111) take rather a different view. Starting with the principle that *Hakhel* takes place following the conclusion of the *shemittah* year, they read the *pesukim* beginning with Deut. 15:1 to refer to the extinguishing of financial debt (*shemittat kesafim*), rather than the prohibitions relating to working the field and gathering the harvest. (See Rambam’s summary in the text). Ramban, though, challenges the Ibn Ezra on the latter’s own ground and insists that *miketz* in Deut. 31:10 refers to the period following the Sabbatical year, even as the same word as used in Deut. 15:1 refers to the beginning (or does he mean the entirety?) of the seventh year.

The Netziv offers a rationale for why the term מועד שנת השמיטה is used and why Chazal understood the phrase to refer to Sukkot, particularly Sukkot of the eighth year:

“At the appointed time of the year of release” – [The Torah] refers to the eighth year as the Shemittah year [even though it is the seventh year in which work in the field is forbidden] because the reality of the prohibitions are more apparent during Chol haMoed Sukkot of the eighth year, when one feels the absence of the harvest season, than during Sukkot of the seventh year when the granaries are full.

Netzi’v, Ha’Emek Davar Devarim 31:10

- במועד שנת השמיטה, קרא שנת השמינית שנת השמיטה, משום שיותר ניכר שביתת הארץ בחול המועד סוכות של שמינית שלא היה קציר ואסיף לפניו מחול המועד סוכות של שנת שביעית עצמו שהגרנות מלאים בר.
הנצי"ב בהעמק דבר דברים לא:י

Along the same lines, the Talmud notes that produce grown during the end of the seventh year and harvested during the eighth has the prohibitions of *shemittah* year produce.

R. Assi said in the name of R. Yochanan, and the same was said in the name of R. Yose of Galilee: it is written [Devarim 31:10] “At the end of seven years, in the appointed time of the year of release, during the Feast of Tabernacles.” What has the year of release to do with Tabernacles; it is already the eighth year [because the pasuk says at the end of every seven years?]. It is only to tell us that all grain which was one-third ripe before Rosh HaShanah [of the eighth year] must be regarded even in the eighth year as the product of the Shemittah year...

Rosh HaShanah 12b

אמר רב אסי א"ר יוחנן ומטו בה משמיה דרבי יוסי הגלילי אמר קרא [דברים לא:י] מקץ שבע שנים במועד שנת השמיטה בחג הסוכות שנת השמיטה מאי עבדתיה בחג הסוכות שמינית היא אלא לומר לך כל תבואה שהביאה שליש בשביעית לפני ראש השנה אתה נוהג בו מנהג שביעית בשמינית...
תלמוד בבלי ראש השנה יב:

Thus, the מועד שנת השמיטה does not occur during the actual year of *shemittah* [the seventh year] but rather during the early days of the eighth year when the effects of *shemittah* are actually being felt.

Why is it so important to conduct the ceremony of *Hakhel* at this juncture- at the culmination of the seventh/*shemittah* year, during the holiday of Sukkot? Several Acharonim offer different perspectives on what has been gained during the year of *shemittah* and how these gains ultimately contribute to the overall objective of *Hakhel*.

The Malbim (1809-1879) focuses on the holiness theme of the *shemittah* experience. Since we are prohibited from working the land, we have more time to devote to learning Torah. The spiritual growth experienced during the *shemittah* year, coupled with that experienced during the month of Tishrei (with Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur and the preparations for Sukkot) enable the Jewish people to reach for a closer relationship with the Almighty.

This is the most beneficial time for the [reading of the “Torah” – Sefer Devarim, in fact] to take place, because during the shemittah year when the land was holy and undergoing a Sabbatical year, Bnai Yisrael were not working the land and were occupied with learning Torah. Now while it is true that the

במועד שנת השמיטה בחג הסוכות- העת המכושרת שתפעל בהם השמיעה, מפני ששנת השמיטה היתה שבת הארץ לה', והארץ היה גם כן קודש, וגם לא התעסקו כל השנה בעבודת-האדמה

shemittah year concluded [some weeks before Sukkot], the Jews were busy with Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur and then with building their sukkot and acquiring a lulav and etrog. Rather, Hakhel is celebrated, "as all of Israel came to revel in the presence of God" - and God who knows the inner working of every person's hearts knows that each one is preparing his heart for God.

Malbim Devarim 31:12

ועסקו בתורה. ואף שכלתה השמיטה בראש השנה, אבל היה ראש השנה ויום הכיפורים ועסקו בסוכה וד' מינים: "בבוא כל ישראל לראות את פני ה'" - וה' בוחן-לבות, וכל אחד מקשט לבבו נוכח ה'.
מלבי"ם על ספר דברים לא:י-יא

Rav David Tzvi Hoffman (1843-1921) expressed a different perspective. Emphasizing the lack of produce that has been harvested during the previous year, he explains that we gather together at *Hakhel*, at the conclusion of the *shemittah* year, to thank God for sustaining us even during a year in which there were no normal economic activities and to show that we are willing to dedicate our lives to God regardless of the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

And now, with the conclusion of the shemittah year, a year in which there was total abstention from working the land, in which they honor God by not planting and by not harvesting, Bnai Yisrael - men, women and children - are commanded to appear before God, to praise Him for providing their sustenance even during a year when the land is not planted or harvested, and so that they can accept upon themselves the Torah as they accepted it in the desert, and to promise, in this way, that they are willing to dedicate their lives to the service of God in all times and in all situations.

Rav David Tzvi Hoffman on Devarim 31:10

ועכשיו עם גמר שנת השמיטה, ששבתו שנה שלימה מעבודת קרקע לכבודו של ה', ולא זרעו ולא קצרו, נתחייבו כל ישראל אנשים נשים וטף לבוא לפני השי"ת, להודות לו שנתן להם פרנסתם אף בשנה זאת אשר אין בה חריש וקציר, לקבל עליהם שוב את התורה כמו שקבלו אז במדבר, ולהבטיח בזה, שהם מוכנים להקדיש את חייהם לעבודתו ית"ש בכל זמן ובכל מצב.
רב דוד צבי הופמן דברים לא:י

The *Kli Yakar* (R. Ephraim Luntschitz, d. 1619) sees *teshuva* as the crucial goal for the ceremony of *Hakhel*. Rather than emphasize the religious growth fostered during the year of learning Torah, or the reliance on God that we must feel during the year we do not harvest, he looks at the social equality created as a result of a year in which no one earns more than any other. This leads to harmony generated by a lack of striving over property and profits. This is essential for the goal of *Hakhel* which is to achieve a communal sense of *teshuva*. [The *Kli Yakar* adds that this is why even the youngest children must be brought since ultimately if God will not forgive us for our sins, we ask Him to forgive us for the sakes of the youngest members of society who have not sinned.] Obviously his comments on equality are directed at an agricultural community whose wealthy members must give up their profits for the year - the explanation is less relevant for societies in which wealth is not directly tied to agriculture.

The year of shemittah also leads to Hakhel and to societal harmony due to the fact that no one is harvesting and nothing is growing and the poor of the land eat alongside [and with equal rights to] the land owners since the latter are not allowed to harvest their land during this year, and without doubt there will be more peace between members of society since many arguments

כי שנת השמיטה גורם גם כן ההקהל והשלום על ידי שלא יזרע ולא יצמיח בו ואכלו אביוני עמו כי אינו ראשי להחזיק בתבואת שנת השבע כבעל הבית, וזה בלי ספק סיבת השלום כי כל דברי ריבות נמשכין ממדת שלי שלי זה אומר כולה שלי וכל זה אינו

result in the attitude that what is mine is mine or the attitude that all is mine- and this is not so at all during shemittah... and even more so during the holiday of Sukkot when we all step outside our permanent homes to live in the temporary home of the sukkah. On the first day of Chol HaMoed the king is commanded to emphasize the value of peace, and that is the purpose of Hakhel since all the preparation is for the process of doing teshuva and that is why the king reads from the beginning of Devarim and the section dealing with tochechah and that is why all members of society are commanded to come... the children are brought to bring a reward to those who bring them. What is the reward? That we can appeal to God for mercy. And if God will not forgive our sins for our own sakes, He should forgive them on behalf of the young children who are still nursing from their mothers and have not sinned.

Kli Yakar Devarim 31:12

Having examined various reasons for the timing of *Hakhel*, let us turn our attention to reasons for some of the other details. Who performs the reading? One would expect that a ceremony taking place in the Bet HaMikdash would feature the Cohen Gadol [or perhaps even the head of the Sanhedrin.] In fact, the Abravanel notes that it was a common practice to read from the Torah during the holiday of Sukkot during the other years of the seven year cycle, and during those years the Cohen Gadol or a prophet or judge would indeed read from the Torah. At *Hakhel*, though, it is the king who must read.

And I have already read, that every year it was either the Cohen Gadol or a prophet or judge or the greatest of the generation who would read a portion of the Torah on Sukkot. And he would complete reading from Sefer Bereishit, and Shemot, and Vayikra, and Bamidbar in six years. And on the seventh year, the year of Shemittah, the king would read from Sefer Devarim. And he would complete reading in this manner... and from here stems the modern custom on the eighth day, the holiday of Atzeret, which is also called Simchat Torah, that on this day we conclude the reading of the Torah. And an elder of the community stands and concludes the reading. And he reads by himself without the meturgeman [translator] to echo what the king would do in those days.

Abarbanel Devarim 31:14

כל כך בשנת השביעית... וכן בחג הסוכות שכל אחד יוצא מדירת קבע לדירת עראי ויושב תחת סוכת שלומו הנה ביום א' של חול המועד נצטווה המלך לעשות רושם אל השלום, וזהו ענין ההקהל כי כל זה הכנה אל התשובה וקורא לפניהם מן אלה הדברים בדברים כבושים ותוכחות, וזה"ש אנשים ללמוד כו' טף למה באים ליתן שכר למביאים, כי בזמן שישראל עושים תשובה אז מבקשים תחנונים מלפניו יתברך על מחילת העון ויאמרו אם לא לענינו יעשה אזי יעשה בשביל גמולי חלב שלא פשעו **כלי יקר על דברים לא:יב**

וכבר ראיתי כתוב, שבכל שנה ושנה היה הכהן גדול או הנביא או שופט וגדול-הדור, קורא בחג הסוכות חלק מן התורה, ושהיה משלים ספר- בראשית, ואלה שמות ויקרא ובמדבר-סיני בשש שנים, ובשנה השביעית שנת-השמיטה בחג היה קורא המלך ספר אלה דברים... ובשנה ההיא השביעית היה המלך מסיים התורה באופן ההוא- ושמכאן נשאר המנהג שיום השמיני חג-עצרת אחרון נקרא יום שמחת-תורה, שבו ביום אנו משלימים את התורה, ועומד הגדול שבקהל ומסיים אותה, והוא בעצמו קורא בלי מתורגמן פרשת וזאת הברכה, לדמיון מעשה המלך בזמן ההוא. **אברבנאל על ספר דברים לא:יז**

Still, why the king? The *pesukim* give us no clue.²⁶ Two different quotes by the Rambam help to place the reading by the king in context. The quote from *Hilchot Chagigah* reminds us that the king is the representative of the people but is also entrusted to deliver the words of God to the people.

The king would read so that the people would hear... for the king is an agent assigned to broadcast the word of God.

Rambam Hilchot Chagigah 3:3-6

והמלך הוא שיקרא באזניהם... שהמלך
שליח הוא להשמיע דברי הא-ל.
רמב"ם הלכות חגיגה ג:ג-ו

The second quote from the Rambam identifies the king “as the heart of the entire congregation”. Thus, when he reads and internalizes something, it is as if all have read and internalized the same thing.

His heart is the heart of the entire congregation.

Rambam Hilchot Melachim 3:6

שלבו הוא לב כל קהל ישראל.
רמב"ם הלכות מלכים ג:ו

Furthermore, it is precisely because we do not expect the king to be the one reading that he leads the ceremony. The element of something different contributes to the overall feeling of awe and respect. As the Malbim says, when the king reads, it makes an impression.

The king, who has been chosen by God from amongst all the tribes of Israel, reads, and his words will make an impression on all of the listeners.

Malbim Devarim 31:12

תקרא- גם הקורא הוא המלך שבו בחר ה' מכל
שבטי ישראל, ודבריו יעשו רושם בלבבות
השומעים.
מלבי"ם על ספר דברים לא:יא

Another reason may be simply to add to the *kevod HaTorah* by having the king read from the Torah.

Even though [the Torah] says nothing about the king reading... and it appears to me that the king reads... as a form of according honor to the Torah.

Tiferet Yisrael Sotah 7:8 #52

אע"ג שלא נזכר שיקרא המלך דווקא... ונ"ל
דמה שהמלך קורא... כדי לתת כבוד לתורה...
תפארת ישראל על משנה סוטה ז:ח אות נב

Having looked at the timing, and some of the relevant procedures, we now turn to the integral question- what is main objective of *Hakhel*? The *pasuk* in Devarim clearly tells us that

... that they may hear, and they may learn, and fear God, and observe to do all the words of this law.

Devarim 31:12

למען ישמעו ולמען ילמדו, ויראו את-ה' אלקיכם,
ושמרו לעשות, את-כל-דברי התורה הזאת.
דברים לא:יב

²⁶ Moshe speaks the mitzvah to the Cohanim and the elders (Deut. 31:9-10), but the verbs “read” and “gather” are given in the singular. See הרב אהרון גרו, מצוות הקהל בספר הקהל, עורך הרב יהודה זולדן, מכון התורה והארץ (citing a note in the *Encyclopedia Talmudit* [volume 10 page 444]) that the original mitzvah was directed at Yehoshua. Since *Hakhel* occurs שנת השמיטה, it can only occur once the mitzvah of *shemittah* occurs. The counting of the seven years to lead toward a *shemittah* year could only be started after the land of Israel was conquered and divided, some fourteen years after *Bnai Yisrael* crossed the Yarden under the leadership of Yehoshua. Yehoshua (like Moshe) had the status of a king, indicating that it was a king who should read from the Torah at *Hakhel*.

One way of achieving the requisite fear is by recalling the day on which we first received the Torah, when there was thunder and lightning, heavy cloud cover and the call of the shofar, all of which contributed to a tense atmosphere pregnant with hope and expectation but also fear and trembling.

This is the mindset the Rambam feels we should achieve, as he notes in *Hilchot Chagigah* 3:6,

To listen with reverence and awe, rejoicing while trembling as on the day the Torah was given at Sinai.

לשמוע באימה ובריאה וגילה ורעדה כיום שנתנה בו בסיני.

Why is it so crucial to reenact and to remember the experience of Sinai on a regular basis?

The *Sefer HaChinuch* looks at the communal aspect of the mitzvah. The attention that the gathering will attract will, in turn, shine light upon the Torah ultimately leading to greater knowledge of God.

Among the reasons for this mitzvah: since the raison d'être of Bnai Yisrael is the Torah, and that is what distinguishes us from all other nations, and through it we merit eternal life... therefore it is fitting that we all congregate together, at one time, to listen from its words, and to have people ask, among the men, the women and the children "What is the reason that everyone is gathering together?" And the answer will be, "To hear the words of the Torah, which is the source of who we are and our glory." Through this all will come to praise the Torah and to speak of its value, and all will desire the Torah, and the nation will desire to learn the Torah to know God. Through this all will merit good, and be happy in the ways of God...

Sefer HaChinuch Mitzvah 612

משרשי המצווה לפי שכל עיקרו של עם- ישראל היא התורה, ובה יפרדו מכל אומה ולשון, ולהיות זוכים לחיי עד... על כן בהיות כל עיקרן בה, ראוי שיקהלו הכל יחד, בזמן אחד מן הזמנים לשמוע דבריה, ולהיות הקול יוצא בתוך כל העם, אנשים ונשים וטף, לאמור: מה הקיבוץ הזה שנתקבצנו יחד כולנו? ותהיה התשובה: לשמוע דברי-תורה, שהיא כל עיקרנו והודנו והתפארתנו, ויבואו מתוך כל לספר בגודל-שבחה והוד-ערכה, ויכניסו הכל בלבם חשקה, ועם החשק בה ילמדו לדעת את השם יתברך, ויזכו לטובה, וישמח במעשיו...

ספר החינוך מצווה תריב

The Rambam sees a more integral reason for the gathering. The original revelation is the source of belief in Moshe and the Torah that he presented us on behalf of God. We need a constant reminder of this revelation to be constantly reminded of the power of Moshe's prophecy and the legitimacy of *Torat Moshe*.

The Jews did not believe in Moshe, our teacher, [as the prophet of God] merely because of the wonders that he performed. What is the source of our belief in him? The revelation at Har Sinai. Our eyes saw, and not a stranger's. Our ears heard, and not another's. There was fire, thunder and lightning... How is it known that the [revelation] at Har Sinai alone is proof of the truth of Moshe's prophecy that leaves no shortcoming? As it says [Shemot 19:9] "Behold, I will come to you in a thick cloud, so that the people will hear Me speaking to you, [so that] they will believe in you forever." It appears that before this happened, they did not believe in him with a faith that would last forever,

משה רבינו לא האמינו בו ישראל מפני האותות שעשה... ובמה האמינו בו במעמד הר סיני שעיינינו ראו ולא זר ואזנינו שמעו ולא אחר האש והקולות והלפידים... ומנין שמעמד הר סיני לבדו היא הראיה לנבאותו שהיא אמת... שנאמר הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב הענן בעבור ישמע העם בדברי עמך וגם כך יאמינו לעולם. מכלל שקודם דבר זה לא האמינו בו נאמנות שהיא עומדת לעולם אלא נאמנות שיש אחריה הרהור ומחשבה.

but rather with a faith that allowed for suspicions and doubts.

Rambam Hilchot Yesodei HaTorah 8:1

רמב"ם הלכות יסודי התורה ח:א

It is interesting that the Rambam notes a requirement for all members of *Bnai Yisrael* to participate in *Hakhel*, even *talmidei Chakhamim*. We all need this reminder- no one is too important to exempt himself from the obligation.

Even great Sages who know the entire Torah are obligated to listen with exceedingly great concentration

Rambam Hilchot Chagigah 3:6

אפילו חכמים גדולים שיודעים את כל התורה כולה חייבין לשמוע בכוונה גדולה יתרה רמב"ם הלכות חגיגה ג:ו

The wording of the requirement to participate in the ceremony of *Hakhel*, that is found in *Hilchot Chagigah*, is very similar to the language that the Rambam used to describe another ceremony- the Pesach Seder. Both have an injunction to the Sages that they, too, must participate. Both require the involvement of women. Both are directed to include the children as well.

Even great Sages are obligated to tell the story of the Exodus from Egypt and those who elaborate at great length in telling of the events that occurred are to be praised.

Rambam Hilchot Chametz U'Matza 7:1

אפילו חכמים גדולים חייבים לספר ביציאת מצרים וכל המאריך בדברים שאירעו ושהיו הרי זה משובח. רמב"ם הלכות חמץ ומצה ז:א

Why? In what other ways are the mitzvot of *Hakhel* and Pesach seder connected?

The final mitzvah enumerated in the *Sefer HaChinuch* is the requirement that each individual write a Sefer Torah. According to the *Sefer HaChinuch*, the aim of the mitzvah is to ensure that each Jew owns a copy of the Torah in order to learn from it. The mitzvah is about ensuring our continuity as a people centered around God, and living a life focused on His commandments.

Among the reasons for this mitzvah, since it is known that people act based on their available resources, the Almighty commanded us that each member of Bnai Yisrael should have a Sefer Torah ready to read from constantly without a need to seek it in one's friends home.

Sefer HaChinuch Mitzvah 613

משרשי המצווה, לפי שידוע בבני אדם שהם עושין כל דבריהם לפי ההכנה הנמצאת להם, ועל כן ציוונו ברוך הוא להיות לכל אחד ואחד מבני ישראל ספר תורה מוכן אצלו שיוכל לקרות בו תמיד ולא יצטרך ללכת אחריו לבית חברו. ספר המצוות מצוה תריג

The first mitzvah directed towards *Bnai Yisrael* as a group (שמות יב:ב החודש הזה לכם) is the command to establish a calendar. This requirement is first and foremost a sign of independence. As Nahum Sarna writes in *Exploring Exodus*, (pg. 81):

A people newly freed must henceforth be sustained by its open native resources if it is to achieve true national independence, it is no longer to be a passive object of history, subservient to a dominant but alien culture. A liberated people must evolve and stress its own distinctive autonomous culture, devise its own structures for national existence, and forge its own institutions, one of its first desiderata is the establishment of a uniform calendar. Such an institution is a powerful instrument of societal, cultural and religious cohesion.

Beyond the statement of independence, the establishment of the Jewish calendar, based as it is on the cycle of the moon, also provides an important religious and spiritual framework for who we are as a nation. As Rav Hirsch says (Shemot 12:1)

The renewal of the moon serves as an example and as a model - that without a periodic desire for renewal, without return to God anew, and without continuously renewed reception of divine light and warmth, we would grow farther and farther from Him... Therefore, this commandment was set at the very establishment of our nation. The truth that this commandment teaches is a cornerstone of the Jewish heritage that separates us completely from the gentiles.

This first group mitzvah thus sets the parameters of how our nation is to be established- that we must focus our attention on fulfilling God's mandates, that even if at times we drift away we will, like the moon, cycle back to our destiny.

If this first mitzvah helps to set the stage for what the Jewish people are to become, the last mitzvah provides a means for maintaining that identity. We may find a similar connection between the second mitzvah given to the Jewish people – the Pesach holiday - and *Hakhel* which as we have seen is second from the end.

The holiday of Pesach, the main thrust of the second mitzvah, is celebrated on the micro level, with families originally gathering to share the Korban Pesach, and today gathering to share in the Seder [שמות יב:ג שה לבית אבות שה לבית]. We celebrate in our homes thanking God for the freedom that He granted us by redeeming our ancestors from slavery. Sukkot is celebrated on the macro level. We leave our homes to take up residence in Sukkot as we proclaim to the world at large our dependence on God for our protection. Even the *korbanot* that are offered reflect a more universal attitude. Famously the seventy “*parei haChag*,” the seventy bulls sacrificed over the course of Sukkot are said to be “*keneged shiv'im umot (Sukkah 55b)*” thus exhibiting concern for all peoples of the world. At the same time, we never forget our own unique status and mission - on Shmini Atzeret there is just a single bull and the Gemara there comments, “*par yechidi lama? Keneged uma yechida*” (Why a single bull? To recall a singular nation).

Every year, as we move from Pesach to Sukkot, we transition from the micro to the macro, from the commemoration of the Exodus to the reenactment of our encampment in the desert in flimsy booths which God's protection rendered impregnable. And then, once every seven years, we introduce an additional element to Sukkot by reenacting the giving of the Torah and stressing that our existence as a people is tied to hearing the words of the Torah and incorporating its teachings into our lives.

Perhaps that explains why the language of the Rambam in describing participation in *Hakhel* and participation in the seder is so similar, and why everyone, the greatest scholars, the unlearned, even children are required to be present. We cannot fulfill our role in history without acknowledging that which set us apart from other nations. We cannot remain *Bnai Yisrael* without understanding the heritage of the ancient pre-Sinaitic covenants, the *Brit ben Habetarim* and *Brit Milah*. And we cannot keep our tradition fresh and vital without recalling the fear and hope, the light and the clouds and the voice of Hashem on that unique moment at Har Sinai.