

# VAYEILECH

## GLORIOUS GATHERING

Among the subjects discussed in *parashas Vayeilech* is a fascinating *mitzvah* called *bakbel*:

Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of seven years, at the time of the Sabbatical year, during the Sukkos festival, when all Israel comes to appear before Hashem, your God, in the place that He will choose, you shall read this Torah before all Israel, in their ears. Gather together the people – the men, women, and the small children, and your stranger who is in your cities – so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they shall fear Hashem your God, and be careful to perform all the words of this Torah. And their children who do not know, they shall hear and they shall learn to fear Hashem, your God, all the days that you live on the land to which you are crossing the Jordan, to possess it.<sup>1</sup>

Every seven years, the *mitzvah* of *bakbel* was mandatory for the entire Jewish nation. On the first day of Chol HaMoed Sukkos, all the Jewish people, regardless of age or gender, were required

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<sup>1</sup> *Devarim* 31:10-13.

to gather at the *Beis HaMikdash*. At that time, the king was obligated to read specific passages from a *sefer Torah*.<sup>2</sup>

Although this section is only four *pesukim* long, it presents the reader with several questions for further study. First, why does the Torah specify that *hakbel* took place “at the end of seven years, at the time of the sabbatical year”? It would have been simpler to state that it occurred “at the beginning of the eighth year.”

Moreover, on the calendar, the holiday of Sukkos begins on the fifteenth of Tishrei, a full two weeks into the new year. Although the date for *hakbel* occurs well into the eighth year, the Torah emphasizes *hakbel* taking place after the completion of the past *shemittah* year. What is the reason for the mention of the previous sabbatical year? What is the connection between the *mitzvos* of *shemittah* and *hakbel*?

Second, we may wonder why the *mitzvah* of *hakbel* must be observed during Sukkos. One might think there is a practical reason. Sukkos is one of the pilgrimage festivals, when the Jewish people were obligated in *aliyah l'regel*, to travel to Yerushalayim to present offerings in the *Beis HaMikdash*. With so many people already near the Temple, perhaps the Torah wanted to join the two *mitzvos* of *aliyah l'regel* and *hakbel*. The flaw in this logic is that certain people were exempt from *aliyah l'regel*. By contrast, every single person was obligated to come to *hakbel*.<sup>3</sup> So why is *hakbel* purposely performed on the holiday of Sukkos?

Furthermore, having the king reading the Torah in front of the entire Jewish nation appears to be a mini-reenactment of *matan Torah*. The ritual of *hakbel*, therefore, would seem to be more suitable to observe on Shavuot, when we commemorate the giving of

<sup>2</sup> From *sefer Devarim* 1:1–6:9, 11:13–21, and 14:22–28:69.

<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Moshe Reiss, *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 366.

the Torah. What is the underlying connection between *hakbel* and Sukkos?

Third, this passage unmistakably underscores the presence of children. In fact, they are mentioned twice – in the list of all the populations, *האנשים והנשים והטף וגרך* (the men, the women, and the small children and your stranger), and again later, *ובניהם אשר לא ידעו* (and their children who do not know). The word *טף* connotes very young children, such as babies and toddlers. Rashi asks the obvious question: why did such young children come to *hakbel*? He answers his own question cryptically: to give reward to those who bring them.

From both the *pasuk* and Rashi's comment, it is unclear what the purpose was that the obligation was also upon children below the age of *chinuch* (formal education). The term *טף* mentioned here refers to babies that are too young to understand what is happening, so why were their parents required to bring them? How could these children with immature intellects possibly benefit from the *mitzvah* of *hakbel*? Furthermore, why would bringing babies to a public gathering earn parents a reward? For what do these parents deserve merit?

Finally, without the *Beis HaMikdash*, what significance does the *mitzvah* of *hakbel* have for us today? By studying its parameters, what lessons may we glean for our lives? How are these messages appropriate during Elul and the period of the High Holidays?

## Mindset for the Mundane

To address the above array of questions, we first need to analyze the *mitzvah* of *shemittah*. The sabbatical year is a commandment exclusive to *Eretz Yisroel*; every seven years, landowners must let their land lie fallow for a full year. In Judaism, time has value,

independent of how we decide to utilize it. The Torah teaches us that **time itself** is holy. As Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis explains, in Judaism every specific moment bears significance.<sup>4</sup> For example, Shabbos is not simply the commemoration of a historical event – the completion of Hashem creating the world. Shabbos, like all special dates or seasons on the calendar, radiates a unique spiritual energy, and that energy radiates every time it recurs.

The cycle of seven and the concept of Shabbos represent a paradigm of the world's natural order, and the energy of seven is manifest on multiple chronological planes. Hashem created the world in six days of a seven-day week, and then ceased from that work on the seventh day. The concept of seven is expressed in years, as well, through the *mitzvah* of *shemittah*; farmers work the land for six years and then cease in the seventh year. If the number seven represents completion and rest, then the number eight represents the beginning of the next cycle of time.

Through the *mitzvos* of Shabbos and *shemittah*, the cycle of seven is evident on the micro level. However, the spiritual significance of seven is also manifest on the macro level of the universe. It cannot be arbitrary that the *mitzvah* of *hakhel* must be performed at the very beginning of the new cycle of seven. Quoting Rabbeinu Bachya, Rabbi Eli Munk explains that the Torah's emphasis on the sequence "at the end of seven years, at the time of the sabbatical year" is a veiled reference to the cycle of seven on a cosmic level.<sup>5</sup> The very beginning of time is described by the first words in the Torah: בראשית ברא אלוקים. Our Sages expound that the word בראשית may be separated into the prepositional prefix ב (with) and noun ראשית, which together can be rendered 'with *reishis*' – or rather, 'because of Torah' (which is

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<sup>4</sup> *The Committed Life*, p. 206.

<sup>5</sup> *The Call of the Torah*, p. 340.

called *reishis*).<sup>6</sup> In other words, God created the world for the sake of Torah.

The *midrash* continues by stating that Hashem “considered the Torah” before creating the world.<sup>7</sup> The world will exist for seven millennia, and the seventh will commence a new era. On the micro level, *bakbel* requires the entire nation to gather for a public reading of the Torah at the inauguration of the new cycle. This *mitzvah*, therefore, symbolizes the same principle as the above *midrash* – that Torah is the foundation of the world’s creation and existence. Just as Hashem “considered the Torah” at the beginning of time, Hashem will consult His Torah to fashion a new world in the eighth millennium.

Torah is integral to the initiation of each new rotation of seven. Rabbi Moshe Reiss explains the significance of *bakbel* taking place during this transition period between cycles.<sup>8</sup> Prohibited from working the land, farmers spent the *shemittah* year engaged in Torah study. The phrase “at the end of seven years, at the time of the sabbatical year” connotes the period immediately following a year spent in wholly spiritual pursuits. During this interlude between cycles, society shifted from spiritual immersion to mundane endeavors.

The *mitzvah* of *bakbel* was performed at this auspicious time of transition. As the people returned to the land to earn their own livelihood, they would first gather for *bakbel* for a spiritual boost. Listening to the king read from the Torah served as an important reminder that although by necessity they would be involved in physical agricultural work, their most important work and true

<sup>6</sup> *Mishlei* 8:22. See below, *parashas V'zos Habrachah*.

<sup>7</sup> *Bereishis Rabbah* 1:1.

<sup>8</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 366.

life's purpose is serving Hashem. Thus, even as they farmed the land and engaged in earthly pursuits, Torah would remain the central focus.

The spiritual energy of the sabbatical year is fueled by both immersion in Torah study and complete dependence on Hashem for sustenance. *Shemittah* compels a person to relinquish his sense of control and as a result, it is the prototypical *mitzvah* for cultivating *emunas Hashem*.<sup>9</sup> Farmers override their instinctual apprehension due to disengaging from work; they surrender their fields and trust that Hashem will provide.

In the post-*shemittah* period however, another challenge arises. When the people return to their fields, they might mistakenly think their livelihood is now in their hands alone. How then will they continue to recognize that despite their physical efforts, Hashem is the source of all blessing – especially their livelihoods? During the *shemittah* year, the people were conditioned to relying on Hashem. At this post-sabbatical juncture, therefore, *bakbel* serves to preserve and reinforce the nation's level of *emunas Hashem*.

The *bakbel* experience was designed to uphold the fundamental faith gained from the *mitzvah* of *shemittah*. A similar notion is found on another chronological plane, in the cycle of the seven-day week, explains Rabbi Bernard Weinberger.<sup>10</sup> Quoting the *Mei Shiloach*, he notes that in the *Beis HaMikdash*, the psalm sung on the first weekday began as follows: לה' הארץ ומלואה, תכל ויושבי בה (Hashem's is the earth and all its fullness, the inhabited land and those who dwell in it).<sup>11</sup> After the cessation of creative labor on Shabbos, Sunday marks the commencement of the new work week.

<sup>9</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Vayikra, parashas Behar*.

<sup>10</sup> *Shemen HaTov*, p. 369.

<sup>11</sup> *Tehillim* 24:1.

When a person returns to routine activity following a day of complete rest, he needs to be reminded that *לה' הארץ ומלוואה*.<sup>12</sup> All our earthly achievements are contingent on Hashem's assistance, and we need to maintain this mindset when we return to the mundane. Likewise, after a year of rest for the land, farmers needed to bear in mind that their agricultural success in the next six years will only result from Hashem's beneficence.

This underlying message of faith derived from the *mitzvah* of *hakhel* sheds light on its observance during Sukkos.<sup>13</sup> A central aspect of basic *emunah* is manifest during the holiday of Sukkos.<sup>14</sup> The *mitzvah* of *sukkah* is referred to as "sitting in the shade of faith."<sup>15</sup> A person abandons the security of his home and dwells outside in a temporary, fragile hut-type structure. Human instinct is to seek protective shelter, yet the *mitzvah* of *sukkah* requires both the suppression of that urge and the consequential reliance on Hashem's protection.

Similarly, the *shemittah*-observing farmer surrenders his fields, his source of income, and trusts that Hashem will support him. Both *mitzvos* of *shemittah* and *sukkah* trigger a sense of vulnerability; this intuitive sense affords the opportunity to cultivate *emunas Hashem*, believing that He is the ultimate Provider and Protector. Therefore, this transition period – in the aftermath of *shemittah* and amidst Sukkos – was an ideal time for the *mitzvah* of *hakhel*. Both seasonal elements created an atmosphere conducive for reinforcing faith, reminding the nation that their lives are ultimately in Hashem's Hands.

<sup>12</sup> Without the *Beis HaMikdash*, we continue this tradition by reciting this psalm every Sunday.

<sup>13</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 366.

<sup>14</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Bamidbar, parashas Balak*.

<sup>15</sup> *Zobar, Vayikra* 103, as cited by Rabbi Pinchos Roberts, *Through the Prism of Torah*, p. 198.

## The Power of Preparation

Thus far, we have discussed how the *mitzvah* of *hakbel* was designed to preserve the *emunah* engendered by the *shemittah* year. However, not only did *hakbel* perpetuate the spiritual benefits of *shemittah*, but in fact *shemittah* enabled the nation to reap the full spiritual benefits of *hakbel* as well. According to Rabbi Moshe Reiss, *shemittah* observance needed to precede the performance of *hakbel* because the former was a grooming process for the latter.<sup>16</sup> The entire nation gathering to hear the king read from the Torah was an awe-inspiring experience. The cultivation of genuine *yiras Hashem* and reverence for Torah requires much preparation. The nation's participation in *hakbel* would not instill authentic awe of Hashem unless they were pre-conditioned to be suitable participants.

The *sefer Lesischa Elyon* asks: Doesn't it seem preferable to perform the *mitzvah* of *hakbel* at the **beginning** of the *shemittah* year? If the whole sabbatical year was spent immersed in Torah study, shouldn't that season have a powerful inauguration procedure like *hakbel*? Rabbi Shammai Tzahan's approach addresses the reason why this *mitzvah* needed to **follow** *shemittah* year, and could not initiate it. For *hakbel* to make its intended meaningful impression on the people, they required a full year of preparation.<sup>17</sup> The months of learning Torah and strengthening *emunah* were the spiritual training necessary to prepare the nation to absorb the full impact of the *hakbel* experience. Thus, the sabbatical year was a year of spiritual development and improvement in *avodas Hashem*. This process conditioned the people, enabling them to capitalize on the spiritual benefits of *hakbel*.

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<sup>16</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 368.

<sup>17</sup> *Lesischa Elyon*, p. 379.

The understanding of *shemittah* as a preparatory period for *hakbel* touches on a broader fundamental concept in *avodas Hashem*. Rabbi Uri Weissblum notes that spiritual growth is dependent on the degree to which one is a receptive vessel for holiness.<sup>18</sup> *Mitzvos* are opportunities for personal development and closeness to Hashem, yet one must be a ready receptacle to absorb their spiritual influence. This message is particularly pertinent for Elul and the High Holiday season, when *parashas Vayeilech* is read. As Rosh Hashanah arrives, we stand before Hashem beseeching Him to inscribe us in the Book of Life. We earnestly try to access the holiness of the day, and strive to internalize the reality of Hashem as King. Yet, oftentimes, we emerge unaffected and unmoved by the Rosh Hashanah experience. How can this be?

In order to be influenced by the unique power of Rosh Hashanah, we need to spend the month of Elul in preparation.<sup>19</sup> Elul is meant to be a spiritual training course, so that we arrive at Rosh Hashanah ready to absorb its impact. Preparation enables us to fully access and benefit from the spiritual energy of the holidays. Similarly, the *mitzvah* of *hakbel* taking place after *shemittah* illustrates that preparation is crucial for our development.

The prerequisite of preparation does not apply exclusively to Elul, but rather to all of our *avodas Hashem*. For many people, the biggest challenge in personal growth is not in performing *mitzvos*, but in maximizing the effectiveness of their *mitzvos*. Modern society generates pressure to move quickly and to multi-task. The emphasis is on quantity, not quality, and therefore slowing down is perceived as being inefficient or incompetent.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ha'aras Derech, Moadim*, p. 386.

<sup>19</sup> *Lesischa Elyon*, p. 379.

Rabbi Weissblum describes the result of rushing as “falling into *mitzvos*” – the trend to begin a *mitzvah* suddenly and hastily.<sup>20</sup> Although the Torah **does** value alacrity in seizing *mitzvah* opportunities, doing the *mitzvah* itself in a fast manner is discouraged. Rushing into *mitzvos* does not permit any time to contemplate or prepare. As a result, we remain unaffected by our *mitzvos* observance.

Even if we technically carry out many *mitzvos* throughout the day, rushing prevents us from fulfilling the ultimate purpose of these *mitzvos*. We do not become more refined individuals nor enhance our relationship with Hashem. To fortify our *mitzvos* performance we need to slow down and think before we act. *What mitzvah am I about to do? In front of Whom am I about to perform it? What am I truly trying to accomplish with this act? I am about to carry out the will of Hashem.* How can we expect to be spiritually influenced by our *avodas Hashem* if we do not prepare ourselves mentally with these basic questions?

The concept of preparation is applicable on the macro level as well. Our Sages offer a famous analogy: “This world is like a vestibule before the World to Come. Prepare yourself in the vestibule so that you may enter the banquet hall.”<sup>21</sup> Our physical world is only the preliminary stage of existence; it is like the lobby or foyer where one prepares himself to cross the threshold into the “banquet hall” of the future world. The purpose of *mitzvos* is to condition ourselves to be equipped to absorb the holiness of the World to Come.

This same idea is demonstrated with another metaphor: Imagine a king who opened up his treasury and invited a poor person

<sup>20</sup> *Ha'aras Derech, Moadim*, p. 386.

<sup>21</sup> *Pirkei Avos* 4:16.

to keep whatever wealth he could carry. This person would be sure to bring many suitcases with him! Only a fool would show up unprepared, with no bags, because he could only take whatever fit into his meager pockets. We need to spend our lives readying our spiritual luggage, preparing ourselves to be ready for the World to Come.

## Readiness to Receive Revelation

The significance of preparation is also powerfully illustrated by the model of *matan Torah*. In the famous *Dayeinu* passage in the *haggadah*, we sing, “If You had only brought us to *Har Sinai* and not given us the Torah, (*dayeinu*) it would have been sufficient for us.” The obvious question is, how can we claim that standing at *Har Sinai* was adequate without receiving the Torah? What separate advantage did we gain from the positioning adjacent to *Har Sinai*? Evidently, the Jewish people benefitted from the *Har Sinai* experience independently of receiving the Torah.

Our Sages explain that when the serpent convinced Chava to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, he spiritually polluted her. This impurity was perpetuated through the generations, but when the Jewish people stood at *Har Sinai*, the contamination ceased.<sup>22</sup> Rabbi Weissblum underscores that the original purity was restored when the Jewish people **stood** at *Har Sinai*, and not when they **received the Torah** at *Har Sinai*. Standing at the foot of the mountain was merely the prelude to accepting the Torah; yet it was ‘sufficient’ – effective enough to cleanse them of the spiritual contamination from that first sin.

Rabbi Weissblum outlines the elements that characterized their preliminary purifying experience at *Har Sinai*. First, a vital aspect

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<sup>22</sup> *Shabbos* 146a.

of the *Har Sinai* experience was **national unity**. The verse states *ויחן שם ישראל* (Israel camped there). A famous comment by Rashi highlights that the verb *ויחן* is conjugated in the singular, to convey solidarity and social cohesiveness. At *Har Sinai* they encamped “as one person, with one heart,” in contrast to previous encampments in which there had been strife and complaints.<sup>23</sup> Coupled with this solidarity was the second element, their **universal willingness to commit unconditionally** to Torah. The people expressed this collective loyalty: “And all the people answered together, and they said, ‘All that Hashem has spoken, we will do!’”<sup>24</sup>

Third, **they did *teshuvah*** for their past mistakes. In *parashas Yisro*, in the passage preceding the *matan Torah* account, the verse states: “And when they departed from Refidim and came to the wilderness of Sinai.”<sup>25</sup> Rashi comments that the reader was already informed of their location in the previous chapter. Therefore, the mention of departure from Refidim is not presented as geographical information, but rather as a philosophical observation. “Just as their arrival in the wilderness of Sinai was with repentance, so too was their departure from Refidim with repentance.”<sup>26</sup>

What do these three components of unity, receptivity, and repentance have in common? Preparation! Standing at *Har Sinai* was the preparation for the goal of accepting the Torah, yet this spiritual pre-conditioning process of *Har Sinai* had its own independent impact.

With all these components, *hakhel* is comparable to a reenactment of the *Har Sinai* experience; in the same way that the Jewish

<sup>23</sup> Rashi on *Shemos* 19:2.

<sup>24</sup> *Shemos* 19:8.

<sup>25</sup> *Shemos* 19:2.

<sup>26</sup> Rashi on *Shemos* 19:2, quoting *Mechilta*.

people prepared for *matan Torah* using this three-pronged approach at *Har Sinai*, so too the sabbatical year serves as preparation for the *mitzvah* of *bakbel* (with its latent symbolism of accepting the Torah). Social unity still resonated in the aftermath of the *shemittah* year. The fields had been ownerless for an entire year, and the boundaries between economic groups remained blurred.<sup>27</sup>

Another ripple effect after *shemittah* year was that the hearts of the people were especially open to Torah. After a year of intense focus on *avodas Hashem*, the people's personal agendas were still subdued. They arrived at the *Beis HaMikdash* as a nation emotionally ready to accept the Torah. Moreover, they came with an introspective, growth-oriented mentality; for the entire sabbatical year, their minds had been free of distraction, open to honest self-reflection and repentance.

The association of *bakbel* and *matan Torah* is more than a comparative parallel; the two are deeply interconnected.<sup>28</sup> The *mitzvah* of *bakbel* is, in a sense, reliving the *Har Sinai* experience. As mentioned, essential to *matan Torah* was the nation's expression of readiness and loyalty, with the fervent declaration: *na'aseh v'nishma!*<sup>29</sup> "We will do and we will listen!" This classic proclamation demonstrated the people's unprecedented fortitude to commit to Torah unconditionally, even before hearing the details. Our Sages described the elevated spiritual condition of the nation standing at *Har Sinai*:

Rabbi Elazar said: When the Jewish people accorded precedence in declaring "*na'aseh* (we will do)" over "*nishma* (we will hear)," a Divine Voice emerged and said to them: Who revealed to

<sup>27</sup> *Dorash David*, p. 484.

<sup>28</sup> *MeiRosh Tzurim*, p. 369.

<sup>29</sup> *Shemos* 23:7.

my children this secret that the ministering angels use? As it is written: ברכו ה' מלאכיו גברי כח עשי דברו לשמע בקול דברו (bless Hashem, oh angels of His, mighty ones in strength, that fulfill His word, to listen to the voice of His word)<sup>30</sup> **First**, the angels fulfill His word, and then **afterward** they listen.<sup>31</sup>

The nation's level of religious devotion is compared to that of the angels, whose Divine service is so absolute that they lack independent will. Based on the verse in Tehillim, the angels (and Jewish people approaching *matan Torah*) are described as גברי כח עשי דברו לשמע בקול דברו. Strikingly, a different *midrash*<sup>32</sup> similarly praises the resolve of those who observe *shemittah* by quoting the same *pasuk*:

ברכו ה' מלאכיו גברי כח עשי דברו לשמוע בקול דברו – to whom does this verse refer? R. Yitzchak says that it refers to *shemittah* observers. Normal human conduct is such that man performs a *mitzvah* once daily, once every Shabbos, once monthly ... yet a *shemittah* observer does not work his field or tend his vineyard [for a year] and still pays the taxes of the king and remains silent. Is there anyone mightier in strength than this person? If you would say that this verse does not refer to *shemittah* observers, the verse says עשי דברו, this “thing” is the matter of *shemittah*, as the verse states: וזה דבר השמיטה.<sup>33</sup> R. Huna said in the name of R. Acha, when Israel stood before *Har Sinai*, the text states that they prioritized “doing” before “hearing”, as it states: נעשה ונשמע.<sup>34</sup>

Not only does this *midrash* emphasize the fearlessness and resolve of *shemittah* observers, it openly compares this spiritual courage with that of the nation at *Har Sinai*. The *shemittah* year shaped the people's altruistic devotion to do Hashem's will, so

<sup>30</sup> Tehillim 103:20.

<sup>31</sup> Shabbos 88a.

<sup>32</sup> Vayikra Rabbah 1:1.

<sup>33</sup> Devarim 15:2.

<sup>34</sup> Shemos 23:7.

that they were fully prepared to hear and internalize the words of Torah at *hakhel*. So too the culmination of the nation's preparation at *Har Sinai* with the statement of *na'aseh v'nishma* is nothing less than the purest and highest level of *emunas Hashbem*. It is the preparation that made the nation receptive to accept the Torah in the fullest sense.

The *Sefas Emes* explains that this deeper connection between *hakhel* and *shemittah* is alluded to by our Sages in their famous question on the opening verse of *parashas Bebar*.<sup>35</sup> Why is the *mitzvah* of *shemittah* the only *mitzvah* written in this verse as being specifically commanded at *Har Sinai*? *Shemittah* and *Har Sinai* are juxtaposed because they are both paradigms of the spiritual preparation that is fundamental to our *avodas Hashbem*.

## Department of Departure

Thus far, we have discussed at length the significance of *hakhel* taking place immediately after the *shemittah* year. It was an auspicious time of transition between seven-year cycles. *Hakhel* was performed as the nation departed from this total spiritual immersion and returned to physical, mundane endeavors. Yet there is another possible facet to the unique timing of *hakhel* during this poignant transition. The complete focus on Torah in the *shemittah* year itself was a transformative spiritual experience. Without any distractions regarding livelihood, the year created an ideal environment for nourishing the soul. The *mitzvah* of *hakhel* is therefore intentionally performed immediately after *shemittah* to symbolize the people's desire to delay the cessation of its spiritual benefits.

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<sup>35</sup> Rashi's Commentary on *Vayikra* 25:1, quoting *Sifra*.

Rabbi Yosef Tzvi Dunner elaborates on this approach, explaining that the purpose of *hakbel* was to demonstrate a reluctance to leave the spiritual paradise of *shemittah* year.<sup>36</sup> After this preparation period, when the people involved themselves exclusively in *avodas Hashem*, how could they separate from that experience so quickly?

As mentioned above, the nation needed to express that their true innermost desires were for Torah study and closeness to God, as was substantiated in the *shemittah* year. During the other six years in the cycle, they were compelled to be industrious in pursuing a livelihood as Hashem told Adam HaRishon: “By the sweat of your brow, will you eat bread.”<sup>37</sup> The national ingathering for a public Torah reading conveys a message of yearning to stay connected to Hashem and His Torah. *Hakbel* symbolized their hesitance to return to their fields, as expressed by lingering in a Torah-focused environment for just one more day.

We live in a physical world that necessitates distinction between holy and secular. Therefore, the shifting between modes of sacred and mundane is a regular and familiar recurrence. The *mitzvah* of *hakbel* emphasizes the importance of the actual way in which one transitions between modes. This concept is illustrated by our Sages, who relate the following dialogue between Hashem and the non-Jewish nations, when the latter requested an opportunity to earn spiritual reward.<sup>38</sup> The gentiles asked to observe the Torah just like the Jews, so Hashem tested them with the “easy” *mitzvah* of *sukkah*. They did build *sukkos* and remain in them, until the sweltering heat of the summer solstice arrived, thereby breaking the gentiles resolve to uphold the *mitzvah*. In their frustration,

<sup>36</sup> *Mikdash HaLevi*, p. 650.

<sup>37</sup> *Bereishis* 3:19.

<sup>38</sup> *Avodah Zarah* 3a-3b.

the gentiles abandoned their *sukkos*, kicking them on their way out. Our rabbis note that one who is physically suffering in the *sukkah* is exempt, but nonetheless the non-Jewish nations failed the test **because of how they conducted themselves when departing**. The way in which a person leaves an experience – their deportment upon conclusion – is indicative of how he felt about the experience itself.

In this light, it is fitting that the *mitzvah* of *hakbel* was instituted as a mechanism for the Jewish people to express to Hashem how dearly they valued the spiritual atmosphere of the *shemittah* year. They would not exit the *shemittah* year with a sense of relief, but rather with heartfelt regret. It is not arbitrary that the above *gemara* uses the example of *sukkah*, since *hakbel* was observed during Sukkos. After the intensity of the Ten Days of repentance, we go out into the *sukkah* to rejoice together in Hashem's house, as it were. Sukkos, therefore, illustrates this longing to linger in a spiritual existence and this hesitance to leave a religious experience.

Our Sages underscore that in the times of the *Beis HaMikdash*, those who brought offerings on Sukkos were required to remain in Yerushalayim for the night. The *gemara* states: just as the *korban Pesach* requires remaining overnight in Yerushalayim, and only on the following day may one return home, so too, [the *korban* for] the festival of Sukkos requires remaining overnight in Yerushalayim before returning home.<sup>39</sup> If offering a *korban* was spiritually transformative for an individual, then he would have difficulty parting from the holy atmosphere of Yerushalayim, even after he completed the *mitzvah*.

Reluctance to depart from a spiritual encounter is not only illustrated by *mitzvos* dependent on the *Beis HaMikdash*, such as

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<sup>39</sup> *Rosh Hashanah* 5a.

*hakhel* and *korbanos*, but by guidelines that apply to us today. Rabbi Dunner notes that the *Shulchan Aruch* states that it is forbidden to run out of a synagogue.<sup>40</sup> The act of running out after *davening* reveals an underlying attitude: *I'm so glad I finished davening. Now I can get to what's really important today!* If our prayers were truly a conversation that fosters closeness to Hashem, would we leave in such a hurry?

We need to honestly assess our demeanor – our deportment – when we finish a *mitzvah*. When a holiday is over, do we feel liberated, with a sense of relief? Or do we feel disappointed, with an emotional letdown? Our post-*mitzvah* behavior reveals our true mindset toward *mitzvos*. If we run away afterwards as if to say “good riddance”, it shows that the *mitzvah* felt like a burden. But if we slow down and delay our departure, as if to say, “it’s hard to say goodbye”, it shows that we treat every *mitzvah* as a privilege.

As mentioned above, we are challenged by a modern society that values progress and efficiency. The trend to “speed up the pace” pressures us to move quickly, and discourages taking time to reflect. Even in our religious conduct, we often get caught up in society’s race, trying to complete as many *mitzvos* as possible. The problem is that when we scurry around from one *mitzvah* to the next, we sacrifice the opportunities for those *mitzvos* to genuinely affect us and reinforce our Divine connection. Not only does lingering express how much we value a *mitzvah*, it also enables us to reflect on what we’ve completed and reap the full benefit of each spiritual encounter.

The word *hakhel* refers to gathering the people together, but perhaps the term also implies that the *mitzvah* is designed to ‘gather in’ all the spiritual treasures accrued during the *shemittah*

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<sup>40</sup> *Mikdash HaLevi*, p. 650.

year. This same sentiment is emulated in the concept of *isru chag*, the day that follows each of the three pilgrimage festivals. *Isru chag* is a semi-holiday, whose festivity is observed by some adjustments to daily prayers and the prohibition of private fasts. Acknowledging the disorienting transition from a festival to mundane life, our Sages instituted this semi-festive day to give us the opportunity to pause and contemplate the recent holiday observance.

Running away after a holiday's conclusion should shock the sensitive soul; so *isru chag* delays our departure, enabling us to absorb that holiday's unique energy. The term *isru chag* literally means "bind the festival", as it originates from the *pasuk* in *Hallel*, *אסרו חג בעבותים עד קרנות המזבח* (Hashem is God, He illuminated for us, bind the festival offering with cords to the corners of the altar).<sup>41</sup> Our Sages expound on the term *אסרו* (bind up), by stating that adding to the holiday observance (with continued festive eating and drinking on *isru chag*) is comparable to bringing offerings on the altar.<sup>42</sup> *Isru chag* is the designated day to tie up the holiday, to wrap up all the joy and meaning and take it with us. In truth, every *mitzvah* needs this kind of slowed and deliberate transition. We need to utilize every post-*mitzvah* moment to gather in its spiritual fortune.

## Intentionally Influencing Infants

Thus far, we have discussed the significance of *hakbel* following *shemittah* year. One approach is viewing the sabbatical year as the preliminary conditioning period necessary to benefit fully from the *mitzvah* of *hakbel*. The second approach is the opposite side of the same coin, that *hakbel* is the culmination of the *shemittah*

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<sup>41</sup> *Tehillim* 118:27.

<sup>42</sup> *Sukkah* 45b.

year. *Shemittah* and *hakbel* are interdependent – *mitzvos* that empower each other. Not only does a spiritual encounter like *hakbel* mandate adequate prior preparation, a spiritual experience like *shemittah* requires appropriate resolution afterwards.

The goal of both preparation and conclusion is to maximize the positive influence of all religious experiences. So crucial and beneficial was the impression made by the *mitzvah* of *hakbel*, that every man, woman, and child was obligated to come. As mentioned in the introduction, even babies and toddlers were required to attend. What benefit would very young children gain from the *hakbel* gathering?

One might think that a public reading of the Torah is hardly an age-appropriate event for babies. Their undeveloped intellects simply could not grasp the significance of the ritual. Furthermore, anyone who has witnessed boisterous children in a synagogue knows that little ones are too immature to maintain decorum. It seems that noisy infants would only disturb the atmosphere of a national gathering, so why were parents required to bring them? Why do our Sages promise that those who bring babies to *hakbel* will earn reward, when it seems that they diffuse the power of the experience with their disruptive children?

The answer to these questions is uncovered by a more thorough analysis of Rashi's interpretation. He asks: Why did young children come to *hakbel*? To give reward to those who bring them. His comment is excerpted from a longer passage:

R. Yehoshua] inquired: And on what subject was [Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's] lecture today? They said to him: [He spoke] about the passage of *hakbel*. [Rabbi Yehoshua persisted:] And what did he interpret homiletically regarding [this *mitzvah*]? "Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones."<sup>43</sup> If men

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<sup>43</sup> *Devarim* 31:12.

come to learn, and women come to hear, why do the little ones come? In order to give a reward to those who bring them. [Rabbi Yehoshua] said to them: a good pearl of wisdom was in your hands! And you tried to conceal it from me?<sup>44</sup>

In order to appreciate Rabbi Yehoshua's enthusiastic reaction, we need to clarify what was so commendable about bringing babies to *bakbel*, that those who did so were rewarded. In some sense, the parents' decision to include young children was not a voluntary one. In fact, Rabbi Yaakov of Lisa notes that parents **had no choice** but to bring babies along, since the universal obligation to travel to Yerushalayim for *bakbel* deterred anyone from staying behind to care for the children.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps their recompense was Hashem's form of acknowledgement of the challenges of traveling with very young children.

It seems implausible that children were included in *bakbel* simply because Hashem wished to compensate parents for the extra effort in bringing them. Rabbi Yissocher Frand points out that the same goal could be reached with a requirement to carry a heavy sack of potatoes to *bakbel*!<sup>46</sup> Therefore, we may deduce that the very young children **must have derived benefit** from the *bakbel* experience, despite their undeveloped minds. Although they could not fully comprehend the words of Torah being read by the king, they nevertheless absorbed the underlying messages of *bakbel*. The holiness in the atmosphere and spiritual energy of this communal *mitzvah* made a tremendous impression, even on the hearts of the most tender infants.

This premise of the positive influence on infants sheds light on Rabbi Yehoshua's passionate response. Our Sages relate that

<sup>44</sup> *Chagigah* 3a.

<sup>45</sup> *Rabbi Frand on the Parashah* 2, p. 348.

<sup>46</sup> *ibid.*

the mother of Rabbi Yehoshua would often bring him into the *beis midrash* when he was still an infant.<sup>47</sup> Surely his mind was too undeveloped to grasp the words of Torah, yet she knew that his heart could be positively influenced **just by hearing the sounds of Torah** being studied. In praise of this mother, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakai later said of Rabbi Yehoshua, “Fortunate is the one who bore him!”<sup>48</sup> Rabbi Yehoshua was aware of what his mother had done for him in his infancy. Perhaps this interpretation about *hakbel* provided textual support for the merit she had clearly earned through her intuitive child-rearing techniques.

The positive effect of *hakbel* on babies was not in the acquisition of tangible Torah knowledge, but rather in the subliminal internalization of Torah values. Exposing young children to the sounds and sights of a public Torah reading makes an imprint on their subconscious minds. Although infants are incapable of learning Torah directly, they are the most receptive to being influenced by Torah indirectly.<sup>49</sup> The younger the child, the more impressionable he is.<sup>50</sup> The pre-cognitive imprint that the *hakbel mitzvah* makes on a baby prepares him for his future formal Torah learning.

This perspective may be derived from the *hakbel* passage itself: “And their children who do not know – they shall hear and they shall learn to fear Hashem.” Seforno highlights the significance in the order of the verbs ‘hear’ and ‘learn’. Hearing is the primitive perception of sound. The ears of infants “who do not know” can only **hear Torah** without comprehension. Later, according to the Seforno, they will ask questions from those who

<sup>47</sup> *Yerushalmi Yevamos* 1:6.

<sup>48</sup> *Pirkei Avos* 2:11.

<sup>49</sup> *Lesischa Elyon*, p. 381.

<sup>50</sup> See *Torah Tapestries Vayikra, parashas Vayikra*.

do understand, and then ‘they shall learn’.<sup>51</sup> Although a baby’s auditory aptitude lacks understanding, it is nevertheless critical to his later development.

Every sound an infant hears is recorded raw and unfiltered in his auditory memory. As a child grows and his intellect matures, he begins to acquire concrete Torah knowledge. Sounds of Torah from one’s infancy make his future Torah study more organic; as his intellect matures, the advanced concepts he studies deeply resonate with the environmental influences of his youth.

Rabbi Chaim Zeitchik explains that the echoes heard in early childhood are compared to faded letters on a page. When a child matures and learns to write, these faded letters guide him exactly where to inscribe the words. Now equipped with the sophisticated intellect, these words are not only familiar, but they bear deeper meaning.<sup>52</sup> Because the child was exposed to Torah at a tender age, his spiritual awareness had already been somewhat sensitized, even before his mind was advanced enough to grasp the details. Thus, juvenile hearing – infant participation in *hakebel* – was not for naught. In fact, it is the foundation for intellectual and spiritual development.

What fundamental lesson of *hakebel* did parents need to convey to their children? The verse tells us: “Gather together the people ... so that they will hear and so that they will learn, **and they shall fear Hashem your God** ... and their children who do not know – they shall hear **and they shall learn to fear Hashem, your God**”. The Slonimer Rebbe explains that *yiras Hashem* was the primary theme of *hakebel*.<sup>53</sup> As mentioned above, *hakebel* is likened to a reenactment of the *Har Sinai* experience. *Yiras Hashem*

<sup>51</sup> Seforno on *Devarim* 31:13.

<sup>52</sup> *Ohr Chadash*, p. 331.

<sup>53</sup> *Nesivos Shalom Devarim*, p. 209.

was an essential prerequisite to accepting the Torah, as the *pasuk* notes: ויחרר כל העם אשר במחנה (and the entire people in the camp shuddered).<sup>54</sup> Just as the sensory experience at *Har Sinai* (thunder, lightning, shofar blast) aroused the people's reverence, so too did the awe-inspiring atmosphere of *bakbel* promote *yiras Hashem*.

Why is *yiras Hashem* mandatory to accepting the Torah? As discussed above, *yirah* is a fundamental component in fostering our basic *emunas Hashem*. *Yiras Hashem* is engendered by an individual's mental orientation. When one internalizes that Hashem, the King of the whole world, is standing over him and constantly watching his behavior, one naturally reacts with a sense of awe and reverence.<sup>55</sup> This same cognizance of Hashem's omnipresence and omnipotence was cultivated by the intimidating presence of the Jewish king reading from the Torah before the entire nation.

*Yiras Hashem* is the educational focus in the earliest childhood years because awe of Hashem is a principle that can be absorbed without complex cognitive skills. It supercedes wisdom, as the *pasuk* states: ראשית חכמה יראת ה' (the beginning of wisdom is fear of God).<sup>56</sup> A toddler might not internalize the abstract concept of Hashem watching his conduct; yet he still feels reverence and respect in the atmosphere. The experiential aspects of *bakbel* generated a palpable sense of *yiras Hashem* that made an impression on these infants.

As the Slonimer Rebbe explains, *yiras Hashem* is the gateway to a person's *emunah*.<sup>57</sup> Awe of Hashem is an essential tool in battling our evil inclination – the inner enemy with which we are

<sup>54</sup> *Shemos* 19:16.

<sup>55</sup> *Nesivos Shalom Devarim*, p. 209.

<sup>56</sup> *Tehillim* 111:10.

<sup>57</sup> *Nesivos Shalom Devarim*, p. 209.

born, as the *pasuk* states: **כִּי יֵצֵר לֵב הָאָדָם רָע מִנְעוּרָיו** (because the inclination of man's heart is evil from his youth).<sup>58</sup> Only by fearing Hashem can one overcome the unrelenting primitive urges that hinder spiritual development. By nurturing our children's *yiras Hashem* from the youngest age, we empower them to stand by their beliefs and grow in their *avodas Hashem*.

In light of this discussion, we can appreciate why parents were obligated to bring infants to *hakbel*. The *hakbel* experience was early spiritual training that would fortify their future Torah learning. Participation in this *mitzvah* laid the foundation of their *yiras Hashem* and empowered the child's future spiritual advancement. Furthermore, by encouraging their participation in *hakbel*, parents effectively expressed to their children the importance and centrality of Torah. However, bringing babies along did not only convey a message to the children. The obligation to bring babies provided the parents themselves with an important perspective related to childrearing. As discussed, traveling to Yerushalayim with infants was strenuous; therefore, the requirement of *hakbel* afforded parents the unique opportunity to demonstrate their fervent desire to guide their children on the path of Torah.

Including infants in *hakbel* was a venue through which parents could exert themselves for the sake of educating their children. According to the *Minchas Michael*, it is this extra exertion in bringing babies for which parents are promised reward.<sup>59</sup> In addition to the laborious aspects of traveling with children to Yerushalayim, parents also endured physical strain during the *hakbel* ceremony itself. There would not be sufficient room to accommodate all the children, necessitating that a parent hold the

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<sup>58</sup> *Bereishis* 8:21.

<sup>59</sup> *Minchas Michael*, p. 379.

squirming infant for several hours. The parent's tolerance for uncomfortable, crowded conditions exhibits a willingness to be inconvenienced purely for the sake of the child's spiritual development.

This does not mean that *bakbel* was designed so that Hashem would reimburse parents for the hassle of bringing babies. Rather, *bakbel* enabled parents to demonstrate a degree of self-sacrifice in their attempt to bring their children close to Torah. There are methods of educating children that do not utilize a direct cause-and-effect mechanism. Some educational experiences, like *bakbel*, do not necessarily create an instant and recognizable result. However, despite the lack of immediate effect, there is an advantage to these kinds of indirect educational tools. The *Sefas Emes* explains that the effort expended by parents to guide their children **arouses a heavenly influence**, through which the children merit to acquire Torah. Thus, the self-sacrifice shown by those struggling with an infant at *bakbel*, generates the natural consequence of a child's growth in Torah. The effort of the *mitzvah* is its own just reward.<sup>60</sup>

The *mitzvah* of *bakbel* presents us with many powerful lessons. Our *avodas Hashem* is founded on the premise that *mitzvos* are intended to affect us. In order for our religious endeavors to influence our hearts and minds, they cannot be pursued in haste or in isolation. Just as *shemittah* was the preparation for *bakbel*, every *mitzvah* requires proper mental and emotional preparation. We need to slow down the pace, and stop to focus on what we are doing and before Whom we are doing it.

Likewise, we cannot simply run out of our religious experiences. In the same way as every holiday has an *isru chag*, we need

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<sup>60</sup> As quoted by Rabbi Moshe Price, *MiZekeinim Esbonan*, p. 107.

to take time to “wrap up” our *mitzvos* – reflecting on their impact and taking the spiritual gains along with us.

Infants were among the required participants at *hakbel* because education starts at birth. While formal *chinuch* begins at the age of understanding, it is never too early to expose our youngest children to the power of religious experiences. Although their immature intellects don’t grasp the concrete concepts, their receptive hearts absorb the underlying message. The sounds of Torah are recorded in their subconscious minds, only to be rekindled later as they mature and grow in Torah study.

We must structure an environment that exudes the messages we want our children to hear. By orchestrating meaningful experiences, we can indirectly influence our children with the holiness that permeates every *mitzvah* they witness. Most importantly, the effort we expend for the sake of our children’s education will generate its own reward. In return for our self-sacrifice, Hashem will shine the light of Torah on all future generations, guiding them on the path of truth.