

# CENTRALITY OF TORAH

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

## Rabbi Frand on Parshas Netzavim - Vayeilech

*These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape# 112, Shoteh: Mental Incompetence in Halacha. Good Shabbos!*

**Dedicated This Year Le'eluy Nishmas Chaya Bracha Bas R. Yissocher Dov - - In memory of Mrs. Adele Frand**

### 'Hakhel' Reenacts the Receiving of the Torah at Sinai

This week's parsha contains the mitzvah of 'Hakhel'. Once every seven years, following the end of the Shmita year, the King gathered all of Israel (who were already in Jerusalem to celebrate the Festival of Succos) and read to them portions from the book of Devorim.

The Sefer HaChinuch writes, concerning any person who neglects this mitzvah (for example a Jew who fails to attend or a King who fails to read the Torah) "...their punishment is very great, for this command is a fundamental pillar of the religion..."

One would probably not have assumed that Hakhel is such an important mitzvah. Hakhel is a positive command (mitzvas aseh) that is only performed once every seven years. We might have assumed that Lulav or Matzah or Tefillin or Krias Shma are more important mitzvos. Yet, regarding those mitzvos, the Sefer HaChinuch does not write "and their punishment is very great..."

What significance does the Chinuch see in this mitzvah? Rav Hutner, zt"l, in a lengthy introduction to

a reprint of a sefer of the Ram"o (Darkei Moshe HaAruch) gives us an insight into what the mitzvah of Hakhel is really all about and why it is so important. Rav Hutner bases his thesis on two separate inferences from the Rambam.

The Rambam [Hilchos Chagiga 3:3] lists the sequence of the chapters in Devorim that were read at Hakhel: Read "From the beginning of the book of Devorim until the end of the parsha of 'Shma' [Hear Oh Israel]. Then read 'V-haya im Shamo' [And it will be if you will listen], followed by 'aser t- aser' [You shall surely tithe]. Then, continue in sequence until the end of the 'Blessings and Curses' until the words 'besides the Covenant which He entered into with them at Chorev' and then stop (u'posek).

Rav Hutner asks, why does the Rambam need to write the word "u'posek"? If the Rambam writes that we must read from here to there, specifying the last words, then obviously, that is where we stop. Why does the Rambam make a point of telling us "and that is where he stops"? [Rav Hutner's answer to this question will be explained together with his explanation of the second inference from the Rambam.]

Rav Hutner's second inference from the Rambam is as follows: The Rambam in Hilchos Chagiga [3:7] refers to Hakhel as "Yom Hakhel" [The Day of Hakhel]. This is a strange expression that is not mentioned in the Talmud. What is the Rambam trying to tell us?

Rav Hutner says that the essence of the ceremony of Hakhel is supposed to be the reenactment of ma'mad Har Sinai [the standing at Mt. Sinai]. It is the reenactment of the Kabalas HaTorah [receiving the Torah]. The Accepting of the Torah is THE seminal event in Jewish History. We are to reenact Kabalas HaTorah every seven years in order to impress upon the people the importance of what Torah means to the Jewish People. We want the people to feel as though they have experienced another Kabalas HaTorah.

A few weeks ago, Baltimoreans celebrated the reenactment of the Battle of Baltimore, a seminal event in American history -- the composition of the Star Spangled Banner. For Baltimoreans, and for all Americans, that was a very important event. How does one commemorate that event? How does one make it live? How does one make future generations feel how important it was "that the flag was still there"? The answer is by reenacting it.

L'Havdil, we have something that is unbelievably important to us. That something is Kabalas HaTorah. We want everyone to relive that 'Standing At Har Sinai'. How do we do that? We gather everyone together and read the Torah.

That is why the Rambam says the word "u'posek" (the first inference). The words immediately prior to "u'posek" are "besides the Covenant He entered into with them at Horeb [Mt. Sinai]". We want those words to remain ringing in the people's ears! We want to conjure up lasting memories of Chorev, of Har Sinai. Therefore, the King must dramatically stop his reading right there. To read one more word beyond 'Chorev' would have diluted the impact, destroying the whole point of Hakhel.

That is also why the Rambam refers to Hakhel as 'Yom Hakhel' (the second inference). Rav Hutner points out that if we take away the vowels of 'Yom Hakhel' it is precisely the same letters as 'Yom HaKahal' [the Day of the Congregation] which the Torah repeatedly uses [Devorim 9:10, 10:4, 18:16] to refer to the ma'mad Har Sinai.

This is Hakhel -- the living and the reenactment of Kabalas HaTorah. Why? Because as Rav Sadyah Gaon tells us, "Our Nation is not a Nation except through Torah". For some, the idea that 'We Are A Nation Because of Torah' is a great novelty (chiddush gadol). There have been thousands and millions of Jews who have not always believed that. There have been Jews who have believed that we are a Nation by virtue of a land -- that without a land we are not a Nation. Says Rav Sadyah Gaon, "No; We are a Nation only through Torah."

There are some people who believe that we are a nation through our language. There were some people that believed that the key to the Jewish people was Yiddish -- Yiddish plays and Yiddish songs and Yiddish events. They are no longer around. The only people who still, in fact, read or speak Yiddish are the people that they thought would never make it.

There are a people who have thought that we are a Nation through our culture. No! Our Nation is not a nation except through Torah. That is what makes us a people. That is what binds us together. The Standing Together at Sinai; Accepting Torah; Learning Torah. The Torah, the mitzvos, nothing else. Not culture, not language, not history, nothing -- except Torah. This is what Hakhel tries to accomplish.

## **The Centrality of Torah**

Now we must wonder... If the point of this mitzvah is to emphasize the centrality of Torah to the Jews, when would we expect to schedule this event which occurs once in seven years?

I'll tell you the year in which I would not schedule Hakhel. I would not schedule Hakhel immediately following the Shmita year. That is seemingly when we need Hakhel the least.

What did Jews do during the Shmita year? What happened to an agrarian society in a year when one could not plant or sow or harvest? Jews spent the entire year learning. That is what the Shmita year was all about. The Jews recharged their spiritual batteries, learning most of the day. There was nothing else to do.

So, after Jews have just finished an entire year of learning and they now recall the importance of learning -- is this the time when they need a Hakhel? Is this the time when we need to read the Torah to them? Is it not enough that they have been learning Torah for this entire year? Is now the time when they need to learn more?

There is a lesson in this. The lesson is that a person, who really loves something, can never get enough of it. One may have learned the entire year, but this -- G-d says -- is when I want you to learn more Torah; it is precisely now that you can learn the lesson that there is never such a thing as

getting enough of Torah, or getting tired of Torah.

I hate to give this example, but come and see. "We toil and they toil..."

We know what happens in America on December 31 and January 1. People sit down and watch the first football game. They go to sleep, having just finished one game. Then they get up the next morning and they watch the first Bowl game of the day. Then by 12 o'clock they watch another game and by 4 o'clock another game. And then that night of January 1 -- there is another game! One has seen the Cotton Bowl, one has seen the Sugar Bowl, and one has seen the Rose Bowl. Who really needs the Fiesta Bowl?

And yet millions and millions of people, after having watched football for an entire day, want one more game. And people pay millions of dollars to advertise on that last game because they know that people will watch it! Why? The reason is because if one loves football, one can never get enough of football. If one really loves something, he can never get enough of it.

That is what Hakhel is all about. Hakhel says "Yidden! Torah is central to being a Jew. Our Nation is not a Nation without Torah. And we need to love it, to almost be addicted to it. Even if we have had a solid year of Torah, still we want another vort [Torah thought], another shiur, another kashe [question] and teretz [answer], we want more -- because Torah is so central to our lives."

At the time of the year when we think, "How can we make next year better?" there is always one area that is open to everybody: One can always find more time for learning. That is what the message of Hakhel is -- there can never be enough of Torah Learning; because it is so central, so vital, because Our Nation is not a Nation except through Torah.

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## Sources and Personalities

**Shmita** -- Sabbatical year of the 7 year "shmita cycle" in which virtually all agricultural activity in the land of Israel stops.

**L'Havdil** -- To distinguish (usually between a secular or mundane matter and something with a degree of sanctity)

**Yidden** -- (Yiddish term) Jews

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Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.

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This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter

Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion (#341). The corresponding halachic portion for this tape is: The Brachos on the T'kios. The full listing of halachic portions for Parshas Nitzavim and/or VaYeLech from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are as follows:

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- Tape # 205 - Kiddush Before T'kiyas Shofar
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- Tape # 295 - Burying the Dead on Yom Tov Sheni
- Tape # 341 - The Brachos on the T'kios
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