

Fixing Things

By Rabbi Joshua (repaingly known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

Parshas Vayelech is read in Shul each year on one of two Shabbosos - either on the Shabbos before Rosh Hashanah, as it is this year, in which case it is read together with parshas Nitzavim, or on the Shabbos between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, known as Shabbos Shuvah, in which case it is read alone. In either case, we would expect to find some allusion to the process of repentance, so central to this period of the calendar, in the parsha. There is one fairly obvious reference, in the section of the parsha that describes the nation undergoing the pain of exile, and coming to the realization that all the distress they are suffering is a result of their estrangement from God. The Torah tells us that the people will say, at that time, "Is it not because God is not in my midst that these evils have encountered me?" (Devarim 31 : 17). This statement, as the Ramban points out, constitutes the beginning of the process of repentance, the recognition that it is one's own errant behavior that has generated his current situation. I believe, however, that there is another, less obvious teaching about repentance in this parsha, that may initially elude one's eye.

The Torah tells us that at the end of the shemittah year, during Sukkos, the entire nation - men, women and children - should gather to hear the Torah read to them. The root of the word used to command this gathering - 'hakheil' - is the same root as the word used earlier in the book of Devarim to describe the gathering of the nation at Mt. Sinai on the day that the Torah was revealed to them - 'Yom Hakahal' - the day of gathering. The Rambam, in his description of this mitzvah in the Mishneh Torah (Laws of Chagigah), seems to understand it as a recreation of the revelation at Mt. Sinai. The major purpose of this gathering the people for this recreation is, as the Torah itself says, "so that they will hear and so that they will learn, and they shall fear the Lord your God, and be careful to perform all the words of this Torah" (Devarim 32 : 12). There was, however, another aspect of the gathering at Mt. Sinai, which, I believe, has relevance to the process of repentance, and which the mitzvah of hakheil is geared to, as well.

The rabbis have noted that when the nation reached Mt. Sinai, they became united - as one man with one heart - although they had been in a constant state of quarreling and strife until then. The gathering at Mt. Sinai thus constituted a reconciliation of the people among themselves, a mending of relationships. Ultimately, this included a reconciliation in the relationship which the people had with God. Until then they were constantly complaining about their travel conditions, and lamenting over the seeming superiority of their lives in Egypt compared to their current situation. When they reached Mt. Sinai and prepared to receive the Torah, they understood that they were at the threshold of their national destiny, and so they united to accept God's sovereignty and His directives to them. It is this experience of reconciliation that the mitzvah of hakheil is designed to recreate. The Torah is read to the people by the king, who, according to the Rambam in his Laws of Kings, is the "heart of Yisroel." By reading the Torah to this gathering of the entire nation, the king unites them all, as one man with one heart, around the Torah, as they were united at Mt. Sinai.

A number of weeks ago I attended a morning of lectures on the topic of building strong relationships. One of the speakers pointed out that we have a wrong notion of the mitzvah of repentance. We generally think that repentance is a process of introspection and perfection of the self. While this is certainly part of the process, there is much more involved. Repentance is really an examination of the relationships we have in our lives, including our relationships with people as well as our relationship with God. We need to reconsider all of these relationships and repair them where necessary. Each of us

has a unique task to accomplish within the context of the overall mission of the Jewish nation, as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, as defined at Mt. Sinai. The test of our relationships is the extent to which they enable us to realize our mission, as part of the wider nation. As we approach Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, then, we read parshas Vayelech, which reminds us of the mitzvah of hakheil, and serves as a call to repair and reorder our relationships through the process of repentance.

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