

From Netvort@aol.com Mon Sep 24 12:07:28 2001  
Date: Fri, 21 Sep 2001 14:33:08 EDT  
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Subject: Netvort : parshas Veyeilech 5762

Renewal

By Rabbi Joshua (septennially known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

In this week's parsha, we are told that after the end of the shemittah year, the nation should gather together and listen to portions of the torah read to them by the king. This is known as the mitzvoh of 'hakheil,' or gathering. Rabbi Shmuel Borenstein, in his Shem MiShmuel, asks why this mitzvoh is performed after the end of the shemittah year, rather than in its beginning? Wouldn't it be better to read the Torah to the people at the beginning of that year, since they would have the entire coming year free from work and available for study? He answers that the purpose of this reading of the Torah was not the learning in and of itself. After all, the reading was merely from the scroll of the written Torah, which was well known to all. Rather, the king, who, as the Rambam writes, in his Laws of Kings, constitutes the heart of the nation, read the Torah to them so that it would penetrate their hearts. In order for this to happen, they had to study the Torah over the course of the shemittah year, to prepare their hearts for the culminating experience of hakheil. I would like to suggest a different answer, based on the Rambam's own description of the mitzvoh of hakheil and the purpose it serves.

The Rambam, in his Laws of Chagigah, describes hakheil as being, in essence, a re-enactment of the experience of Mt. Sinai, when the Jewish people first received the Torah. The acceptance of the Torah by the people was actually the culmination of the exodus from Egypt. This, in essence, is what God told Moshe at the vision of the burning bush, "And this is the sign that I have sent you : When you take the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain." (Shemos 3 : 12). On Pesach night, when we recall the experience of the exodus, we read the Haggadah, whose text is guided by the principle of 'beginning with the people's lowly state and ending with their praise - worthy state.' One opinion in the Talmud is that these two states refer to the physical disgrace of the people, their slavery, and their physical redemption from it. While the Maharal of Prague says that this principle is employed because we can appreciate the light more when we see it from the background of the darkness, Rav Avrohom Yitzchok HaKohein Kook gives a deeper explanation. He says that the disgraceful state of the nation actually helped generate the exalted state. The state of slavery that the people were in accustomed them to the experience of servitude. This sense of serving another was elevated through the giving of the Torah to becoming servants of God. The status of servant of God constitutes the highest praise a Jew can achieve, and is the term used to describe Moshe at the very end of the Torah. It consists of submitting one's will to the will of God, and carrying out whatever He asks one to do.

We can now understand why hakheil was read after the end of the shemittah year. Since hakheil was a re-enactment of the experience of Mt. Sinai, when the nation as a whole received the Torah and became servants of God, there had to be a period of preparation for this state of servitude. During the

year of shemittah, the people, following God's command, left the land fallow, not showing concern for a source of livelihood. They submitted their will to the will of God, and relied on Him during that year to provide them with the sustenance they needed in order to survive. The experience of that year created the proper mind set needed for the re-enactment of the Sinai experience and a rededication to the mission of being servants of God, just as the experience of the people in Egypt prepared them for that status at the original revelation.

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