

ONEG SHABBAS

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Celebrating *Hakhel*

In this week's parashah, we read the following (Deut 31:10-13):

And Moses instructed them as follows: Every seventh year, the year set for remission, at the Feast of Booths, (11) when all Israel comes to appear before The LORD, your God, in the place that [God] will choose, you shall read this Teaching aloud in the presence of all Israel. (12) Gather the people—men, women, children, and the strangers in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere The LORD, your God, and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching. (13) Their children, too, who have not had the experience, shall hear and learn to revere The LORD, your God, as long as they live in the land that you are about to cross the Jordan to possess.

(ו) וַיֹּצֵא מֹשֶׁה אוֹתָם לֵאמֹר
מִקֵּץ | שְׁבַע שָׁנִים בְּמַעַד
שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה בַּחֹג
הַסֻּכּוֹת: (יא) בְּבוֹא
כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל לִפְנֵי
ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר
יִבְחַר תִּקְרָא אֶת־הַתּוֹרָה
הַזֹּאת נֶגֶד כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל
בְּאֲזִנֵּיהֶם: (יב) הַקְהֵל
אֶת־הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים
וְהַטָּף וְגֵר אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ
לִמְעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ:
וְרָאוּ אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיכם
וְשָׁמְרוּ לַעֲשׂוֹת
אֶת־כָּל־דְּבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה
הַזֹּאת: (יג) וּבְנֵיהֶם אֲשֶׁר
לֹא־יָדְעוּ יִשְׁמְעוּ וְלִמְדוּ:
לִירְאוֹת אֶת־ה' אֱלֹהֶיכם
כָּל־הַיָּמִים אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם חַיִּים
עַל־הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אַתֶּם
עֹבְרִים אֶת־הַיַּרְדֵּן שָׁמָּה
לְרִשְׁתָּהּ

This ceremony, which is often simply called *Hakhel*, as described Prof. Aaron Demsky in his "Historical *Hakhel* Ceremonies and the Origin of Public Torah Reading" essay:

The opening word of this verse, *Hakhel* "gather," from the root *h.l.h.* meaning "congregation" or "gathering," gives the commandment its name and reflects its outlook nicely. This reading was not meant for priests, scribes or other initiated literati alone, as we would have expected in antiquity, but rather for the widest possible audience, without regard to status, gender or age.

While there is no aspect of this septennial occurrence that directly mentions drinking (or eating, for that matter), how can there be no such celebration? Perhaps one way we can think about *Hakhel* is to consider a Biblical event that seems to be like *Hakhel*. Prof. Demsky continues in that essay to share the following:

The most elaborate *Hakhel*-like reading appears in the book of Nehemiah, and is significant not just as a possible example of this mitzvah, but because of its place in the history of public Torah reading, to this day, a key feature of the Jewish prayer service.

On the first of the seventh month, which, according to my chronology, came out in September 443 B.C.E at the end of a sabbatical year, throngs of people had congregated at the wide plaza at the eastern gate of the Temple compound for the traditional sacrificial service of the New Year that would be conducted by the priests and Levites. They requested that Ezra bring out the Torah and read it to them.

The public reading here resonates with the description of *hakhel* with its emphasis on Torah being read to the entire nation, even using the same root *h.l.h.*, albeit in noun form, as that of the verb *hakhel* (הקהל). And yet, the text does not explicitly say that it was being done in accordance with Deut 31. In addition, the description of the audience is slightly different.

Indeed, when we read of Ezra's *hakhel*-like ceremony, he instructed them to enjoyably eat and drink (Neh. 8:10):

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Yom Kippur Through the Rabbinic Drinking Glass

Abstaining from Drinking as an Affliction

Amongst all the days of the year, the only one that the Torah outright forbids drinking on is that of Yom Kippur. While the language used does not specify withholding drinking - עֲנִיתֶם אֶת־נַפְשֵׁיכֶם - "shall afflict yourselves" (Lev. 23:27, Lev. 23:32, & Num. 29:7), our sages make it clear that one of the key ways with which we afflict our bodies is through not drinking (Mishnah *Yoma* 8:1):

Yom Kippur is forbidden in eating, **drinking**, in bathing, and in smearing [oil], in wearing shoes, and in conjugal relations.

יום הכפורים אסור באכילה ובשתיה וברחיצה ובסיכה ובנגיעת הסנדל ובתשמיש המטה.

In considering whence these derive, we read of the following third-century rabbis considering these (*Yoma* 76a):

To what do these five afflictions correspond? Rav Hisda said: "They are based on the five times [that the] afflictions [of Yom Kippur are mentioned] in the Torah:

'And on the tenth' (Num. 29:7),
'But on the tenth' (Lev. 23:27),
'a Shabbat of solemn rest' (Lev. 23:32),
'It is a Shabbat of solemn rest' (Lev. 16:31),
and 'And it shall be for you' (Lev. 16:29)."

Are these only five? There are six that were taught in the Mishnah!

Drinking is included with eating, as Resh Lakish said: "Whence do we derive that **drinking** is included in the concept of eating? As it is stated: 'And you shall eat before the Lord your God...the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil' (Deut. 14:23) - *tiros* is wine, but it calls [the action of consuming it as] 'and you shall eat'."

While the number five is an easier number of afflictions to remember than six, Resh Lakish (200-275 CE), teaches here that drinking is subsumed under eating, highlighting how rabbinic interpretation can treat distinct physical acts as one legal prohibition when the Torah frames them under a single linguistic umbrella.

Rabbinic Minimum Measurement for Culpability

Instead of saying that drinking anything is outright forbidden, the rabbis provide a minimum measurement for which one is culpable of consumption (Mishnah *Yoma* 8:2):

One who eats a large date-bulk and its pit, or one who **drinks** enough to fill one's cheeks is liable.
All foods join together to make a date-bulk, and all liquids join together to make the volume of filling one's cheeks.
One who eats and **drinks**, these quantities do not combine.

האוכל ככותבת הגסה, כמותה וכגרעיניה, והשותה מלא לגמיו, חיב. כל האכלין מצטרפין לככותבת. כל המשקין מצטרפין למלא לגמיו. האוכל ושותה, אין מצטרפין.

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