



YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

WEEKLY PARASHA

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Parashat Netzavim-Vayelech | September 19, 2014 / 24 Elul 5774

Parashat Netzavim opens with a gathering together of all the people of Israel to enter into a covenant with God. The Torah, in fact, goes out of its way to make it clear that every single person is present and accounted for:

You stand this day all of you before the Lord your God; your captains of your tribes, your elders, and your officers, with all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in your camp, from the hewer of your wood unto the drawer of your water. That you should enter into the covenant with the Lord your God, and into his oath, which the Lord your God makes with you this day (Devarim, 29:10-12).

It is rare for the Torah to underscore with such detail the full presence of all members of the community. In fact, one of the only other times the Torah does this is found just a few chapters later. There we read that Moshe writes the Torah and gives it to the *Kohanim*. He then instructs them in the *mitzvah* of *hakhel*, that every seven years, at the end of *Shmita*, they are to gather all the people together and read the Torah to all that are present:

When all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their ears. Gather the people together, men and women, and children, and your stranger that is within your gates, that they may hear, and that they may learn, and fear the Lord your God, and observe to do all the words of this Torah (Devarim, 31:11-12).

The similarity of these two passages compels us to look at them side by side. When we do so, we note that both of them – the reading of the Torah and the entering into the covenant – parallel momentous events that occurred at Mount Sinai.

Let's first take the reading of the Torah to the entirety of the people. This can be understood as a reenactment of

the divine declaration of the Ten Commandments, which was also proclaimed to all the people. This comparison, however, is somewhat imprecise, as here the entire Torah is read and not just the Ten Commandments. What's more, the Ten Commandments were declared, not read from a scroll as is done during *hakhel*. The event that *hakhel* replicates is not the giving of the Ten Commandments, but what took place after. Moshe, having received all the detailed laws in Parashat Mishpatim, comes down to the people and writes down all these laws in a book. This book is called the *sefer ha'brit*, the book of the covenant. Here's what happens next:

And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the ears of the people: and they said, "All that the Lord has said will we do, and we will obey" (Shemot, 24:7).

Notice the direct parallels. In both cases Moshe writes the words of God in a book. He then either reads this book to the people or gives this book to the *Kohanim* that they should read it to the people. And in both cases the words are read, or are to be read, to the entire people "in their ears." What we have, then, is not a replication of God's giving of the Torah, but rather a replication of the transmission of God's word.

Now, the dominant concern in the book of Devarim is how to ensure that the next generation, which did not experience the miracles of the desert let alone the theophany at Mount Sinai, will continue to remain faithful to God and God's commandments. Sadly, there is no way that future generations can experience or replicate the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. But what the *mitzvah* of *hakhel* is signaling to us is that this is not necessary. Even for those who were present at Mount Sinai, almost all of what they received was not directly from God. The vast majority of the *mitzvot* were received through the process of transmission, God's word as communicated by Moshe. And this is

something that *can* be replicated. For just as the human Moshe could put those words in a book and read them to the people, so can we continue that process, passing down the written Torah, recopying those words, and communicating them from one generation to the next.

This, then, brings us back to the beginning of our *parasha* and the entering into the covenant, which was also done with the entirety of the people. This event also finds its parallel with a similar event at the time of the giving of the Torah. The Torah makes this point explicitly at the end of Parashat Ki Tavo: “These are the words of the covenant, which the Lord commanded Moses to make with the children of Israel in the land of Moab, beside the covenant which He made with them in Horeb” (Devarim, 29:1).

Rashi states that the covenant at Horeb (Mount Sinai) to which the verse refers is the one at the end of Vayikra (chapter 25), where the Torah lists all the tragedies that will befall the people if they violate God’s commandments. The problem with this interpretation is that those verses speak about the consequences of violating the covenant but do not constitute the covenant itself. More precisely, then – and this is probably what Rashi meant – we may say that the verses in Vayikra are “sealing” the covenant, or that they are the “penalty clause” of the covenant that was made at the foot of Mount Sinai. The covenant in the Plains of Moab likewise has a penalty clause – all of the curses in Parashat Ki Tavo. But the covenant itself, the one that the entirety of the people is entering into at the beginning of our *parasha*, is a reenactment of the original covenant at Mount Sinai.

And what was that covenant? It was nothing more than Moshe’s reading of the “book of the covenant” into the “ears of the people” and their willing acceptance of it upon themselves with their famous declaration, “We will hear and we will obey.”

What emerges, then, is both a formalized reentering of the covenant for the generation that was about to enter into the land and a once-every-seven-years reenactment of the transmission of the Torah, the substance of the covenant. What was significant is that these two events were done by the people and with all the people.

First, by the people. What made the covenant possible was the willing participation of the people. Their ability to be autonomous agents and meaningful partners in the covenant was only made possible when God’s commanding voice at Mount Sinai receded and Moshe stepped forward to represent God to the people. When

that happened, the people, who until this point had retreated and cowered from the direct word of God, were able to move close, to engage, and to enter into the covenant. God’s word had to be taken from heaven and brought to earth. For God’s Torah to be a Torah for humans, it had to be a Torah transmitted by humans.

And hence, with all the people. For in order for this transmission to continue, it cannot be the responsibility of a few individuals. It must be the responsibility of the entire people. The covenant is not just a commitment to observe the laws of the Torah. It is a covenant to preserve the Torah itself, its words, its memory, its power, its commanding force. If everyone is bound by the Torah, then everyone must become active parts of the *mesorah*, ensuring that the Torah is taught, that it is heard, and that it is passed down from one generation to the next.

We have often failed to fully live up to this responsibility. Secular Jews might delegate this responsibility to the religious. Lay people might delegate it to rabbis or Torah scholars. Parents might delegate it to their children’s teachers. When this happens, we have robbed the Torah and the *mesorah* of all the voices that are an integral part of the covenant. And we make the Torah smaller. It becomes a Torah that increasingly speaks to a smaller and smaller segment of society.

To quote another verse from this week’s *parasha*, the Torah is not in heaven (30:12). It comes from heaven but is now found here on earth, transmitted through humans, accessible to humans, and able to speak to humans. We can be equal partners in the covenant because the Torah can and must be embraced and transmitted by us as individuals and as a community. It is only in this way that the Torah will be able to continue to be passed down and continue to talk to all of us in all our wonderful diversity.

Shabbat Shalom!

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