

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

The Sefer ha-Chinukh

THE MITZVAH OF HAKHEL: A Historic Assembly in Jerusalem

INTRODUCTION

At the close of the current Sabbatical year (Shemita), during the coming festival of Sukkot, Jews from all parts of the Holy Land will gather in Jerusalem. They will come in response to a call by the Chief Rabbinate of Israel to join in a solemn convocation in remembrance of the ancient assembly of Hakhel.

Elsewhere in this issue, in an article entitled "A Revival of the Ancient Assembly of Hakhel," we discuss Hakhel as a historical institution in Jewish life and the considerations for its revival in Israel today. Herewith, we present the mitzvah of Hakhel itself, defining its original character and the nature of its observance. This mitzvah is included as one of the six hundred and thirteen commandments in the codes of Jewish law which enumerate the Tar yag Mitzvot of the Torah.

The mitzvah of Hakhel, translated below, is commandment 612 in the Sefer ha-Chinukh, "The Book of Training," a classic treatise dealing with Jewish law, religion, and ethics. Though the work is anonymous, a tradition of long standing ascribes it to Rabbi Aaron ha-Levi of Barcelona, noted Spanish talmudist who lived at the end of the thirteenth century.

The Sefer ha-Chinukh is of the class of halakhic treatises and codes which groups the laws under the divine commandments of the Torah. In general, both with regard to the reckoning of the mitzvot and in the halakhic evaluation of each mitzvah, the Chinukh follows the Sefer ha-Mitzvot of Maimonides, which has served as a prototype for all of the later codes. Unlike the Sefer ha-Mitzvot, however, the Sefer ha-Chinukh treats not only of the halakhic aspects of the commandments, but more particularly it seeks an understanding of the mitzvot in terms of their religious, philosophical, and ethical roots.

GERSION APPEL

The Mitzvah of Hakhel

COMMANDMENT 612

We have been commanded that all the people of Israel, men, women, and children, shall assemble on the second day of the festival of Sukkot at the close of the Sabbatical year, and that portions of the Book of Deuteronomy shall be read to them.

Of this assembly the Torah states: "At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of Shemitah, in the festival of Tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord thy God in the place which He shall choose, Thou shalt read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and thy stranger that is within thy 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 law; and that their children, who have not known, may hear and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as ye live in the land whither ye go over the Jordan to possess it." (Deuteronomy 31:10-13)

This is the commandment of Hakhel which is mentioned in the Talmud, as in tractate Kidclushin wherein it is stated that, although Halchel is a mandatory commandment dependent upon a prescribed time, its fulfillment is nonetheless incumbent also upon women, this being one exception to the general rule that women are exempt from mandatory commandments that are limited as to time.

The reason for this commandment is as follows: Since the whole essence of the people of Israel is the Torah, whereby they are distinguished from all other peoples meriting therewith life eternal and an everlasting delight which is unsurpassed by anything of this world, it is fitting that they should all assemble at an appointed time to hear its words, so that everyone, men, women and children, may enquire, "For what purpose have we all gathered together in this great assembly?", whereupon the answer will be, "To hear the words of the Torah, which is our whole being, our splendor and our glory." Thus, they will come to tell of the greatness of its glory and the excellence of its worth, and fill their hearts with a desire for it. By this means they will learn to know God and merit His goodness, causing God to rejoice in His works; thus it is explicitly stated in Scripture regarding this commandment, "And that they may learn and fear the Lord." (Deuteronomy 31:12).

The specific laws pertaining to this commandment, as expounded

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by our Sages, of blessed memory, are the following: It is the duty of the King to read before the people, the reading to take place in the Women's Court of the Temple. He can read while sitting, but it is deemed praiseworthy if he reads while standing. He reads from the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy until the end of the section "Hear O Israel," (Deuteronomy 1-6;9) and, skipping to "And it shall come to pass if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments," (Deuteronomy 11:13-21) he concludes that section. He then skips to "Thou shalt surely tithe," reading from there consecutively until the end of the section on the Blessings and the Curses, concluding with the verse, "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" (Deuteronomy 14:22-28:69).

In what manner is the reading done? They blow the trumpets throughout Jerusalem and erect a large, wooden platform in the center of the Women's Court. The King seats himself upon it so that his reading could be heard, and all Israelites who have made the pilgrimage for the festival gather about him. The minister of the Synagogue takes a scroll of the Torah and gives it to the chief of the Synagogue, and the chief of the Synagogue gives it to the Prefect, and the Prefect gives it to the High Priest, and the High Priest gives it to the King. This procedure is followed in order to honor the Torah in the presence of the multitude of people. The King receives the scroll while standing and, if he wishes, seats himself, and opens the scroll and pronounces the benediction customarily recited by all who read from the Torah in the Synagogue. He then reads the chapters indicated above and pronounces the closing benediction as it is customarily recited in the Synagogue. Following that he adds seven benedictions, namely: "Accept, O Lord our G-d, Thy people Israel ...," "We give thanks unto Thee ...," "Thou hast chosen us from all peoples ... " until "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who hallowest Israel and the seasons," These three benedictions are pronounced in their prescribed form as they are recited in prayer. In the fourth benediction he prays for the Temple, ending with "Blessed art Thou, O Lord, who doth abide in Zion." In the fifth he prays for Israel, that their kingdom might endure, concluding with "Who doth choose Israel." In the sixth he prays for the priests, that God favor them, concluding with "Who sanctifies the priests."

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In the seventh he offers supplication and prays as best he can, concluding with "Save, O Lord, Thy people Israel, for Thy people Israel are in need of deliverance. Blessed art Thou, who hearkens to prayer."

This commandment is to be observed at the time that Israel is upon its Land. Whoever transgresses this commandment, be it a man or a woman, who does not come at this appointed season to hear the words of the Torah, or be it the King who refuses to read it, has violated a mandatory commandment and his punishment is exceedingly great, for this commandment is a Strong pillar in our faith and a demonstration of great honor toward it.

GIANTS OF TRADITION

Asher Siev

The second subject of our series on the "Giants of Tradition" is presented by Rabbi Asher Siev, whose thesis on the Rama earned him his doctorate from Yeshiva University. Rabbi Siev is spiritual leader of Cong. Kehllath Israel in the Bronx, and is assistant professor of Bible and instructor in Hebrew grammar and literature at Yeshiva College. His book, *The Rama*, was published by Mosad Harav Kook in 1957.

THE RAMA

According to popular legend, Rabbi Mosheh Isserles lived thirty three years, during which time he composed thirty three important works, died on the thirty third day of the Omer (Lag B'Omer) in the year five thousand three hundred thirty three, and in eulogizing him thirty three outstanding praises were emphasized.

Of these only the day of his passing is historically correct. The legend points nevertheless to the fact that Rabbi Isserles captured the imagination of his people, and that many legends were woven around his life as they usually are around the lives and activities of all beloved and revered personalities.

We are indebted to Rabbi Mosheh Isserles for having standardized the German-Polish decisions and Minhagim (customs) in matters of Jewish law and stamping them with the impress of authority. Moreover, by supplementing his Mapah ("Table Cloth") to the Shulchan Arukh ("Prepared Table," the standard code of Jewish law) of Rabbi Joseph Karo, he helped unite Sephardic and Ashkenazic Jewry in the use of a single Code of Law, which was gradually accepted as the final authority in rendering legal decisions.

YOUTH AND EARLY MANHOOD

Rabbi Moses Isserles, known throughout Jewry as the Rama,¹ profoundly influenced the spiritual life of our people in the last four

1. Derived from the initials of his Hebrew name 2 151DIN *umi*.