

The Juxtaposition of Parashot in Vayelekh and their Significance

- Rav Nathaniel Helfgot

The gemara, in masekhet Berakhot 21b, teaches: "Even though we do not seek explanations for the juxtaposition (semikhut) of themes throughout the Torah, we do so in the Mishneh Torah (Sefer Devarim)." While the gemara is referring to the sphere of halakha, it would seem that the same principle applies to the narrative portions of the Sefer. Therefore, we need to pay close attention to the order of the parashot in Sefer Devarim in general, and the order of the parashot and juxtaposition of verses in each separate parasha. The aim of this article will be to examine the order of the parashot in Parashat Vayelekh and to understand their significance.

The constituent parashot of this sidra are:

1. Chapter 31:1-6. Moshe's speech before Israel - "I can no longer go out and enter...."

2. Verses 7-13.

a. Moshe's command to Yehoshua, "Be strong..." (7-8)

b. The writing of "this Torah" and its transmission to the tribe of Levi (9)

c. The mitzva of 'hakhel' (10-13).

3. Verses 14-30.

a. God's words to Moshe, informing him of what will take place after his death (14-18)

b. The writing of the 'song,' its purpose, and Moshe's commands to Yehoshua and the Levi'im (19-27).

c. Moshe warns the elders against corruption, and the recitation of the 'song' before Bnei Yisrael (28-30).

Several questions arise from this structural breakdown: What is the significance of this mixture of subjects? Why does the parasha of 'hakhel' suddenly appear in the middle of our sidra, and not together with other commandments which are listed in other sidrot in Sefer Devarim? What is the function of the tribe of Levi and its significance?

In order to properly answer these questions it would seem appropriate to examine in depth the significance of the seemingly peculiar mitzva of hakhel. The peculiarity of this mitzva becomes apparent in light of several questions which it poses:

1. Why are the chosen texts read specifically once in seven years?
2. What is the reason for the king himself being the one who reads them?
3. What is so unique about the parashot to be read, as indicated in masekhet Sota?
4. Why does the issue of hakhel appear for the very first time only at the end of Sefer Devarim, with no mention of it in previous Books? This question assumes particularly critical importance in light of the fact that Bible critics use this as 'proof' that Sefer Devarim was written, as it were, by a different author and at a different time.
5. Why must even small children, who are not able to understand what is happening, nevertheless be brought to participate in this occasion?

These are just some of the many questions which have bothered early and later commentators alike.

The answer to these questions lies in an idea suggested by many commentators, according to which the mitzva of hakhel is not so much a matter of public Torah study as it is an attempt to recreate and relive the experience of Har Sinai. From time to time, Am Yisrael is required to 'return' to this historical experience in order to understand and remember that the Torah and the mitzvot are "our whole essence and our crowning glory" (Sefer Ha-chinukh). This involves not a cognitive understanding of the parashot but rather an experience of hearing God's word, of reliving the full power of that experience.

This idea is borne out by the parallel which exists between parashat hakhel and the Sinaitic experience:

<p>Parashat Hakhel</p> <p>"GATHER THE PEOPLE... in order that they may hear and in order that they MAY LEARN, and they WILL FEAR the Lord your God all the days you live on the land...."</p>	<p>Har Sinai (parashat Va-etchanan)</p> <p>"The day on which you stood... at Chorev, when God told me, 'GATHER THE PEOPLE and I shall make them hear My words, that THEY SHALL LEARN TO FEAR Me all their days which they live on the land, AND THEY SHALL TEACH THEIR CHILDREN.'"</p>
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In addition, the Sinaitic experience is also referred to as "the day of hakhel" (see, for example, Devarim 9:10 and *ibid.* 8:14).

This helps us to answer the questions we posed above. The mitzva is to read these specific parashot, because they are parashot of awakening and remembrance of hearing God's words at Sinai. It is equally understandable that this mitzva was given only when the nation was about to enter the land, and not earlier, in the wilderness of Sinai, when the experience of receiving the Torah was still fresh in their memory. Likewise, the person commanded to read the selected portions is the king, who is filling in for Moshe Rabbeinu - who was a king (see Rambam, *Hilkhot Beit Ha-Bechira* 6:11). And since the purpose of the ceremony is to awaken and strengthen the people, it is not necessary that it be held often. It is more effective as a special ceremony held once every seven years. As the Rambam writes, "And converts who are not familiar (with the portions read at hakhel) must prepare their hearts and listen with awe and fear and trepidation LIKE THE DAY THE TORAH WAS GIVEN AT SINAI. Even great Sages, who know the entire Torah, are obligated to listen with exceedingly great concentration. And someone who is not able to hear must concentrate in his heart on the intention of the reading, for the Torah commanded this only in order to strengthen our religious

consciousness, and each should see himself as though he is being commanded at that moment, hearing the words from God Himself, for the king is the agent to make God's words heard." (Hilkhot Chagiga 3:6).

Once we perceive this parallel between parashat hakhel and Har Sinai, we realize that the entire sidra is built around the model of the events that took place at Har Sinai and their consequences. In other words: the sidra of Vayelekh is parallel and similar to that of Ki Tisa from the point of view of both content and language.

Parashat Vayelekh opens with a description of Moshe, who is about to die, and God informing him that after his death the nation will turn aside and worship idols, with parashat hakhel appearing in between. The parallel to the Sinai experience is clear: there, too, the nation believed that Moshe had died - "This man Moshe, we do not know what has become of him" (Shemot 33:1), and as emphasized by the Midrash (Yalkut Shim'oni), "'And the nation saw that Moshe was tarrying' - At the end of 40 days Satan came and turned the world upside down. He said to them, 'Moshe your teacher has died,' and he showed them an image of his deathbed in a cloud. It was in response to this that they said, 'for this man Moshe, we do not know what has become of him.'"

The nation, convinced that Moshe was dead, turned and made an idol in the image of a calf, "a god which will WALK BEFORE THEM." Correspondingly, Moshe warns in parashat Vayelekh, "For the Lord your God - He is the One who WALKS BEFORE YOU..." (31:6).

The linguistic parallel between the parashot is clear from a comparison of the pesukim:

Ki Tisa	Vayelekh
<p>"And they GOT UP to jest...Go, descend, for your nation has become CORRUPT. They have TURNED quickly from the path which I commanded them... Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land, and turn after their gods</p>	<p>"And this nation will GET UP and turn away. I know that after my death you will surely BECOME CORRUPT and WILL TURN from the path. After the foreign gods of the land.</p>

Likewise we find Yehoshua serving as a link and parallel between the two sidrot. In Vayelekh we read of the transferal of authority from Moshe to Yehoshua and the latter's transformation into a leader, while in Ki Tisa we see the special connection between Moshe and Yehoshua. Until Ki Tisa, Yehoshua is presented as the military leader of the war against Amalek; at this point he appears as the disciple of the leader. Yehoshua is the first to greet Moshe as he descends from the mountain, and it appears that he, in fact, waited for Moshe throughout the forty days at the very limits of the border which marked the extent to which he was permitted to approach. Then, after Moshe isolates himself outside of the camp, we are told: "Yehoshua ben-Nun - the lad did not move from inside the tent." The Torah is actually showing us, then, in parashat Ki Tisa, why Yehoshua is chosen later on, in Vayelekh, to replace Moshe. Yehoshua, the loyal and committed disciple, represents the natural extension of his great teacher. Rashi points out that although Moshe tells the nation "After my death you shall surely become corrupt...", we know that throughout Yehoshua's period of leadership this did not take place - "indicating that a person considers his close disciple as part of his very own self;" as long as Yehoshua lived, Moshe considered it as an extension of his own lifetime. In parashat Vayelekh, Yehoshua reaps the produce of the seeds that were sown in Ki Tisa.

A third parallel issue in these two sidrot concerns the function and status of the Levi'im. In Vayelekh, Moshe gives the Torah to the tribe of Levi. The Sefer Torah is laid down in front of the ark of God's covenant, which is carried by the Levi'im, and just as the Levi'im are in charge of carrying the ark, they are now given responsibility for bearing the Book which includes the covenant as well as the warnings as to the consequences of its violation. This function is an extension of their function in Ki Tisa. Following the sin of the golden calf, the tribe of Levi rally to Moshe's call to preserve the covenant and to punish the sinners. Moshe sees this as a valuable learning experience in their training as

servants of God: "And Moshe said, Lift your hands today to God..." (Shemot 32:29). It was at this point that the tribe of Levi assumed the task of preserving and reinforcing God's covenant and leadership of the nation.

An additional parallel arises from the description of the punishment in Vayelekh as compared to the events which transpire in Ki Tisa. In Ki Tisa, God's anger burns against the nation: "...And now leave Me, that My anger burn against them and they will be consumed." As the punishment progresses, God withdraws from the ohel mo'ed to outside of the camp, and He says, "For I shall not go up among you." Correspondingly, we find in our parasha, "And My anger will burn against him on that day, and I shall desert them and I shall hide My face from them, and they shall be open to consumption... And I shall surely hide... for they have turned to other gods." (31:17-18)

We may also see the writing of the 'song' as a parallel to the events of parashat Ki Tisa. Following the sin of the golden calf, God commands Moshe, "Carve yourself two stone tablets," and subsequently there is a sort of second giving of the Torah, including the immanence of the Shekhina and the making of a new covenant. "Behold, I am making a covenant; before the entire nation I shall perform wonders." Correspondingly, in our parasha Moshe is commanded to write the 'song' - a Sefer Torah written by human hand, which is to serve in the future as a witness, warning Bnei Yisrael, in order that they will fulfill the covenant after their entry into the land.

The above leads us to conclude that the Torah is presenting the future trials and tribulations of Am Yisrael, in light of the lessons learned from the past. Am Yisrael is commanded to relive the great experience of matan Torah in order to preserve the national character and to remain loyal to its principles. However, past experience has proven that awesome experiences - even that of Har Sinai - are not sufficient to guarantee that the covenant will be kept, and therefore the Torah ensures this in another fashion - through a second receiving of the Torah, in a personal and private way: the writing of the song and its study. Alongside the magnificent experiences which come along from time to time, there is modest, private, daily activity.

Another Example: Eliyahu at Har Carmel

A parallel sequence of events is to be found in another place in Tanakh: In Melakhim I 18 we read of the conflict between Eliyahu and the priests of Ba'al at Har Carmel. The Pesikta Rabbati, quoted in the Yalkut Shim'oni (Melakhim 209), points out the parallels between Eliyahu and Moshe as follows:

"When the verse states, 'By means of a prophet God brought Israel out of Egypt, and by means of a prophet He watched over them,' the 'prophet who brought them out' refers to Moshe and the 'prophet who watched over them' refers to Eliyahu, of blessed memory. There were two prophets of Israel who came from the tribe of Levi; Moshe was the first and Eliyahu is the last, and both served as messengers of the Divine in order to bring about Israel's redemption - Moshe redeemed them from Egypt while Eliyahu is destined to redeem them in the future... Moshe and Eliyahu are similar in every respect; Moshe was a prophet and so was Eliyahu, Moshe is called a 'man of God' and so was Eliyahu, Moshe went up to heaven... In reference to Moshe, the Torah says, 'and God passed over his face,' while in reference to Eliyahu we read, 'Behold God is passing over;' in reference to Moshe it says 'and he heard the voice,' and in reference to Eliyahu it says 'Behold the voice came to him;' Moshe gathered the nation of Israel in front of Har Sinai and Eliyahu gathered them at Har Carmel; Moshe destroyed idolatry... and Eliyahu destroyed idolatry. Moshe was zealous... and Eliyahu was zealous; Moshe was buried in a cave... and Eliyahu was buried in a cave... concerning Moshe it is written, 'And he came to the mountain of God' and concerning Eliyahu ... Moshe spent forty days and forty nights, and similarly Eliyahu...."

This midrash sheds light on the parallel between the experience of Har Sinai and that of Har Carmel. In addition to those corresponding aspects mentioned in the midrash, there are still more: Eliyahu builds an altar out of twelve stones, corresponding to the number of the tribes, and correspondingly we read of Moshe that he "built an altar beneath the mountain with twelve stones for the twelve tribes of Israel" (Shemot 24:4). Moreover, we read "And Eliyahu approached and he said...," as well as (concerning Moshe) "and who approaches the cloud" (Shemot 20:18). Eliyahu announces that the purpose of the gathering at Har Carmel is that "it will be known today that You are God in Israel ... and the nation will know that you are the Lord" (Melakhim I 18:36-7), while concerning Har Sinai we learn, "You were shown that you may know that God is the Lord" (Devarim 4:35). Likewise, just as Moshe commands the tribe of Levi to slay the worshippers of the golden calf by the sword, Eliyahu commands Bnei Yisrael to slay the priests of Ba'al.

One would expect that after such a lofty experience as the climactic encounter at Har Carmel, the spiritual state of the nation would be on an up-swing, but reading the events of the next chapter, which take place soon after, as we read: "And Achav told Izevel of all that Eliyahu had done and how he had slain all the priests by the sword," we find that Eliyahu continues to suffer persecution and that

the position of Achav and Izevel has not changed at all. Moreover, Eliyahu says, "I have been zealous for God, Lord of Hosts, for they have left Your covenant... and I have remained alone." Just a few days previously the entire nation declared, "God is the Lord," and now Eliyahu finds himself alone; the nation has returned to its ways and has abandoned the covenant. The seemingly awesome experience has been forgotten and has disappeared. It would seem that this phenomenon is emphasized even more strongly with the seeming exhibition of the prophet's death. Izevel seeks to murder Eliyahu, and he himself asks to die - "and he wished of his soul to die."

In the midst of this degeneration God is revealed to Eliyahu at Har Sinai, and He tells him, "Not by God's spirit... and not by God's thunder... and not by God's fire...." What is the meaning of this message? The Malbim explains, "God told him.... Let them not raise a great storm or make a great noise or ignite a great fire, as Eliyahu did when he was zealous for the Lord of Hosts and he stopped up the heavens and slew the priests of Ba'al. For God will send his prophets to come to them with a small voice, to draw the nation towards them in ways of love... and soft words."

Not by Divine fire and not by awesome, lofty events but rather by the daily toil of encouraging preservation of the covenant. God's revelation in the world cannot rely only on outstanding and unique phenomena; it is revealed through the still, small voice.

At the conclusion of God's words, which come as a response to Eliyahu's contention, "I was zealous for God...", we read: "And Yehu ben Nimshi shall you anoint as king over Israel, and Elisha ben Shefat from Evel Mechola shall you anoint as prophet in your place." Eliyahu is commanded to effect a changeover in leadership. Just like Moshe, earlier on, Eliyahu is commanded to appoint the prophet who will take his place. And at the conclusion of the chapter, after he transfers his cloak to Elisha, we read: "And he (Elisha) got up and went after Eliyahu and he served him." Just as Yehoshua served Moshe, Elisha is likewise chosen because of his service to Eliyahu.

The appointment of new leadership turns out to be a continuation of the principle of "not by God's thunder." Reliance on the charisma of the leader is no better than relying on one-time impressive events. What will happen when the charismatic leader dies - will everyone then be left to do as he sees fit? The day-to-day reality shows that the great leader is not the point; that "Yiftach in his generation was like Shmuel in his generation." The permanent work continues and is not dependent on special, outstanding leadership. Continuity relies on continuing conscientiousness, regardless of the situation.

Great and impressive events are nevertheless important from time to time for the sake of preserving the visionary aspect and infusing new energy; as a sort of injection of support, reinforcing the national consciousness of being a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation." Therefore, we are given the mitzva of hakhel, to take place once every seven years. This, however, is not sufficient, as we learn from both Har Sinai and Har Carmel. Therefore, there must be daily encouragement to preserve the covenant; there must be permanent spiritual leadership which bridges the generations and maintains stability in order that the nation of Israel will always be the flock of their Shepherd.

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