**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

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**PARASHAT VAYELEKH**

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**The Double Message of Parashat Vayelekh**

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**Introduction**

As we have already noted in previous *shiurim*, the principal section of the book of *Devarim* concludes with the covenant of the plains of Moav*.* The end of *Parashat Ki-Tavo* closes the covenant of Moav with a clarion call to choose life:

See, I have set before you today **life** and good and death and evil, in that I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His ordinances; then **you shall live** and multiply, and the Lord your God shall bless you in the land where you go in to possess it. But if your heart turn away and you will not hear, but shall be drawn away and worship other gods and serve them; I declare unto you this day that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days upon the land, where you pass over the Jordan to go in to possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that I have set before you **life** and death, the blessing and the curse; therefore choose **life**, that **you may live,** you and your seed; to love the Lord your God, to hearken to His voice, and to cleave unto Him; for that is your **life** and the length of your days; that you may dwell in the land which the Lord swore unto your fathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, to give them. (*Devarim* 30:15-20)

After the Moav covenant, the responsibility falls upon Israel "to choose life." But something happens in *Parashat Vayelekh*, which is followed by an exceedingly harsh account in *Parashat Ha'azinu*. The conclusion of the "Torah" in *Parashat Ki-Tavo* has come to a close, but Scripture moves on to present a "song" from which a totally different approach emerges.

### Words of Encouragement Before Moshe's Departure

*Parashat Vayelekh*, which consists of only one chapter (chap. 31), is a farewell song to Moshe. Most commentators understand the chapter as an appendix to the primary focus of the book of *Devarim* –namely, the "Torah." It seems, however, that this understanding is based on an error. In this chapter, we find many verses that bring to mind other verses found already at the beginning of the book. This is clear already at the beginning of the *parasha*, where we find a parallel to the beginning of the book:

*Devarim* 1:1: **These are the words** which Moshe spoke **unto all Israel**…

*Devarim* 31:1: "And Moshe went and spoke **these words unto all Israel.**"

This parallel, along with the many others that will be noted below, bestow upon chapter 31, in addition to its actual content, a dimension of summing up the entire process of the book of *Devarim*,along with a tone of leave-taking from Moshe.

### Encouraging the People

And he said unto them: I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in; and the Lord has said unto me: You shall not go over this Jordan. (*Devarim* 31:2)

The commentators disagree about how to explain the words, "go out and come in." Some say that these words should be understood in their plain and natural sense; Moshe was limited by his advanced age and had difficulty walking like everybody else. The Ibn Ezra, in contrast, writes that "going out and coming in" refers to going out to war. This accords with what is stated about David, who "went out and came in" with the army of Shaul,[[1]](#footnote-1) and it also follows from the plain sense of the verses that follow:

**The Lord your God, He will go over before you; He will destroy these nations** from before you, and you shall dispossess them; **and Yehoshua, he shall go over before you,** as the Lord has spoken. And the Lord will do unto them as He did to Sichon and to Og, the kings of the Amorites, and unto their land, whom He destroyed. And the Lord will deliver them up before you, and you shall do unto them according unto all the commandment which I have commanded you. Be strong and of good courage, fear not, nor be affrighted at them; for the Lord your God, He it is that goes with you; He will not fail you, nor forsake you. (*Devarim* 31:3-6)

Moshe consoles Israel that even if he himself cannot accompany Israel when they enter the land, this is not so terrible, because when they enter the land, God will go before them, and Yehoshua will accompany Him as a tangible figure to whom the people can turn with their questions. In the continuation, Moshe offers examples of Israel's military conduct as reflected in the wars waged against Sichon and Og. This strongly implies that the term "going out and coming in" is used here in a military sense, as was proposed by the Ibn Ezra.

Moshe's reference to the wars fought against Sichon and Og reminds us of Moshe's first oration, in which the primary emphasis with regard to the people's wars was on the negative – the sin of the spies and the sin of the *ma'apilim* (the group who decided to proceed, alone and unauthorized, towards *Eretz Yisrael* after the episode of the spies):

Yet you would not go up, but rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God… And the Lord heard the voice of your words, and was wroth, and swore, saying:  Surely there shall not one of these men, even this evil generation, see the good land, which I swore to give unto your fathers… But as for you, turn you, and take your journey into the wilderness by the way to the Sea of Suf. Then you answered and said unto me: We have sinned against the Lord, we will go up and fight, according to all that the Lord our God commanded us. And you girded on every man his weapons of war and deemed it a light thing to go up into the hill-country. And the Lord said unto me: Say unto them: Go not up, neither fight; for I am not among you; lest you be smitten before your enemies. So I spoke unto you, and you hearkened not; but you rebelled against the commandment of the Lord and were presumptuous and went up into the hill-country. (*Devarim* 1:26, 34-35, 40-43)

When we compare these two texts, we see that a contrast is being drawn between the generation of those who left Egypt and the generation of those raised in the wilderness. The earlier generation did not fight when it should have and it went out to war without God's approval; the later generation is a good generation who go out to war in an appropriate manner and only when God authorizes them to do so. Accordingly, it follows that the generation of the wilderness was the repair of the generation of those who left Egypt. This suggests that the goal of our chapter is to encourage the people before Moshe's passing.

Strengthening Yehoshua

This also follows from the next verses, in which Moshe encourages Yehoshua:

And Moshe called unto Yehoshua and said unto him in the sight of all Israel: Be strong and of good courage; for you shall go with this people into the land which the Lord has sworn unto their fathers to give them; and you shall cause them to inherit it. And the Lord, He it is that does go before you; He will be with you, He will not fail you, neither forsake you; fear not, neither be dismayed. (*Devarim* 31:7-8)

The words of encouragement that are directed at Yehoshua in our *parasha* also send us back to the beginning of the book of *Devarim*:

Yehoshua the son of Nun, who stands before you, he shall go in there; encourage you him, for he shall cause Israel to inherit it. (*Devarim* 1:38)

The command that Moshe receives from God at the beginning of the book, "encourage you him," is carried out in our *parasha*: "And Moshe called unto Yehoshua and said unto him in the sight of all Israel: Be strong and of good courage." There is a correspondence between the content of the encouragement given to Yehoshua and the content of the encouragement given to the people; God will accompany the camp of Israel following the death of Moshe, and Yehoshua will be their next leader.

### The Writing of the Torah and the *Hakhel* Ceremony

And Moshe wrote this law and delivered it unto the priests the sons of Levi, who bore the ark of the covenant of the Lord, and unto all the elders of Israel. And Moshe commanded them, saying: At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of Tabernacles, when all Israel is come to appear before the Lord your God in the place which He shall choose, you shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing. Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, 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 law; and that their children, who have not known, may hear, and learn to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land whither you go over the Jordan to possess it. (*Devarim* 31:9-13)

### The Identity of the Person Reading the Torah at the *Hakhel* Assembly

The Torah juxtaposes Moshe's writing of the Torah and his handing it over to the Levites to the *Hakhel* assembly. This is striking, as we know from *Chazal* thatat the *Hakhel* assembly it was not “the priests the Levites” who read from the Torah scroll, but rather the king. The juxtaposition of the writing of the Torah and its being handed over to the “priests the Levites” leaves us with the impression that it was not the king who read from the Torah scroll, but rather the priests! It would seem that Moshe gave them the Torah and then commanded them to read from it.

It must be understood that when Scripture speaks of "the Torah" in the book of *Devarim*, it is referring to the book of *Devarim* itself. In other words, when Moshe commands that "the Torah" be read at the *Hakhel* assembly, what he is essentially saying is that at this important ceremony, there must be a renewed acceptance of the covenant of Moav.

The command, "You shall read this law before all Israel in their hearing," leaves us with the impression that the words "you shall read" are associated with what was stated earlier – in other words, with the priests – but *Chazal* understood that the reference here is to the king. On the face of it, the question of who read from the Torah at the *Hakhel* assembly is left unanswered, because based on the verses themselves, the High Priest is no less of a candidate than the king.

### The Time of the *Hakhel* Assembly

"At the end of every seven years, in the set time of the year of release, in the feast of Tabernacles." This verse contains an internal contradiction that requires careful consideration:

"*Miketz* every seven years" – at the end[[2]](#footnote-2) of seven years;

"in the set time of the year of release" – apparently at **the end** of the sabbatical year;

"in the festival of Tabernacles" – which apparently is celebrated **at the beginning** of the year.

When then was the *Hakhel* assembly held? The different parts of the verse do not allow us to reach an unequivocal answer, unless we say that the agricultural year begins in Nisan and ends in the seventh month, i.e., in Tishrei, which is the last month, after which all of the people are in their houses and the rains begin to fall.

In light of this perspective, the period of the festival of Sukkot, in many respects, is very similar to that of the wilderness. There is no more grain that must be brought into the house; there are no more tasks that must be carried out in the field, apart from irrigation. The new year will begin when the produce ripens in the month of Nisan. The people of Israel leave their houses and sit in *sukkot* (as they did the entire length of the period of the wilderness), and once every seven years they renew the covenant.

The text can be understood as being directed to the leader (Moshe, Yehoshua, or anybody else) as the one who reads the Torah at the *Hakhel* assembly. Josephus, however, informs us that in his day, it was the High Priest who read the Torah, as we argued above may indeed be understood from the plain sense of the text. There is no way to decide the matter other than to say that the Torah sees both possibilities as legitimate interpretations of the text, though the simpler reading is that of Josephus, and not *Chazal.*

### The Assembling of the People

Scripture mentions the commandment of *Hakhel*, but its wording brings us back to *Parashat Nitzavim*. "Assemble the people, the men and the women and the little ones, and your stranger that is within your gates" is very similar to the wording at the beginning of *Parashat Nitzvavim*:

You are standing today all of you before the Lord your God: your heads, your tribes, your elders, and your officers, even all the men of Israel, your little ones, your wives, and your stranger that is in the midst of your camp,[[3]](#footnote-3) from the hewer of your wood unto the drawer of your water. (*Devarim* 29:9-10)

In this context, it should be noted that the Rambam rules that the *Hakhel* assembly should be attended even by young children who do not understand and even by wise sages who know all of the Torah – two sets of people whom we might have thought should be exempt from coming. The purpose of assembling the people is not to impart knowledge to them, but rather to create a ceremony that will stir their hearts and bring Israel to return to God and desire His covenant.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Although there is no definite answer to the question of which covenant (that of Sinai or of Moav) the *mitzva* of *Hakhel* comes to renew, in light of the comparison to *Parashat Nitzavim*, we are inclined to say that the *mitzva* is intended to renew the covenant of Moav and not the covenant of Sinai.

### The Duplications in *Parashat Vayelekh*

*Parashat Vayelekh* is full of duplications:

1) **Two orations**: Verse 1 introduces an oration marking Moshe's impending death:

And Moshe went and spoke these words unto all Israel. And he said unto them: I am a hundred and twenty years old this day; I can no more go out and come in.

Verse 14 as well introduces an oration connected to **Moshe's death:**

And the Lord said unto Moshe: Behold, your days approach that you must die; call Yehoshua, and present yourselves in the tent of meeting, that I may give him a charge…

The difference between the two orations is the speaker. In the first oration, Moshe speaks to all of Israel, whereas in the second oration, God speaks to Moshe alone.

2. **Encouraging Yehoshua:** As we saw above, in verse 7, Moshe strengthens Yehoshua and tells him: "Be strong and of good courage." But in verse 23, God Himself turns to Yehoshua in order to strengthen him:

And he gave Yehoshua the son of Nun a charge, and said: Be strong and of good courage; for you shall bring the children of Israel into the land which I swore unto them; and I will be with you.

3. **The writing and handing over of the Torah:** The writing of the Torah and its being handed over to the Levites is mentioned twice, first in verse 9 and then again in verse 24.

4. **The assembly:** Moshe's command to assemble the people repeats itself at the end of the chapter, when he asks that the elders of the tribes and their officers be assembled so that he may speak to them. As we will see, there is a difference between the two commands, but the similarity is clear and tangible.

All of these duplications effectively divide the chapter into two parts with a similar structure, as is evident from the following table:

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| **I** | **II** |
| 1. Moshe speaks to the people (1-6) | 1a. God speaks to Moshe (14-22) |
| 2. Moshe and Yehoshua (7-8) | 2a. Moshe and Yehoshua (23) |
| 3. The writing of the Torah and handing it over to the priests, the sons of Levi, and the elders (9) | The writing of the Torah and handing it over to the Levites (24-26) |
| 4. The *mitzva* of *Hakhel* (10-13) | Moshe assembles the elders and the officers (27-29) |

The Ramban points out the many duplications in the chapter and notes that there are repetitions between the two halves, but he adds that in the second half there is a unique addition – the song of *Ha'azinu*. The Ramban notes that in the first half Moshe gives the Torah, but he does not yet put it into the ark, because it is still open to change and expansion. Only after we come to *Parashat Ha'azinu* is the Torah enclosed within the ark.

### The Difference Between the Two Halves and the Purpose of the Song

Although structurally the two halves appear to be similar, upon closer examination we see that that two halves play completely different melodies. Compare the way the *mitzva* of *Hakhel* is presented in the first half to the way that Moshe assembles the people in the second half. In the first half, Scripture presents the *mitzva* of *Hakhel* in a rather positive fashion:

Assemble the people, the men and the women, and the little ones, 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 law; and that **their children, who have not known, may hear, and learn** to fear the Lord your God, as long as you live in the land where you go over the Jordan to possess it. (vv. 12-13)

The overall goal of the *Hakhel* assembly is to strengthen and sharpen the service of the Israelites when they are already in *Eretz Yisrael* and to educate the children "who have not known."

When we examine the second half, we are left with an altogether different sense:

For I know **your rebellion** and **your stiff neck;** behold, while I am yet alive with you today, you have been rebellious against the Lord; and how much more after my death? Assemble unto me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their ears and call heaven and earth to witness against them. **For I know that after my death you will in any wise deal corruptly** and turn aside from the way which I have commanded you; **and evil will befall you in the end of days;** because you will do that which is evil in the sight of the Lord, to provoke Him through the work of your hands. (vv. 27-29)

In the *mitzva* of *Hakhel*, the outlook for the future is a very optimistic one; in the wake of the covenant ceremony, the future generation will learn to fear God and serve Him well. In the parallel passage, if this can even be said, we find an exceedingly negative description of what is to come. In the second account, Israel is described as a people who will corrupt their ways. The purpose of the writing and the assembly is not to restore Israel to the right path, but rather to justify the punishment that will be meted out against Israel in the wake of their sins.

It would seem, therefore, that it would be right to call the first half "an optimistic vision of the future," whereas the second half could rightly be called "a pessimistic view of the future."

This split between optimistic and pessimistic visions of the future extends to other matters as well. In the optimistic half of Moshe's oration, Moshe tells the people that he can no longer go out and come in, but the situation will be fine because God is with Israel and Yehoshua will remain to lead the people. In the second half, when God speaks to Moshe, he says:

Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers; **and this people will rise up and go astray after the foreign gods of the land,** where they go to be among them, **and will forsake Me and break My covenant** which I have made with them. Then My anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, **and I will hide My face from them,** and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall come upon them, so that they will say in that day: **Are not these evils come upon us because our God is not among us?"** (vv. 16-17).

In the first half, it says that following Israel's entry into the land, God will accompany Israel and not release His grip, but what is described here is a situation in which God hides His eyes from His people and removes Himself from among them – the exact opposite!

It may be suggested that Scripture offers us two versions of "the future," the one positive and the other negative. The necessary continuation of the second half, as was already noted by the Ramban, is the song of *Ha'azinu*:

Now therefore write you this song for you and teach you it the children of Israel; put it in their mouths, that this song may be a witness for Me against the children of Israel. For when I shall have brought them into the land which I swore unto their fathers, flowing with milk and honey; and they shall have eaten their fill, and waxen fat; and turned unto other gods, and served them, and despised Me, and broken My covenant; then it shall come to pass, when many evils and troubles are come upon them, that this song shall testify before them as a witness; for it shall not be forgotten out of the mouths of their seed; for I know their imagination how they do even now, before I have brought them into the land which I swore. (*Devarim* 31:19-21)

The goal of the song that follows the pessimistic description of the situation is to remind the people that God does not disappear from Israel, but merely hides His face from them. The good news, based on which the people of Israel should be taught the song of *Ha'azinu*, is that when these awful calamities befall them, they should not conclude that God has abandoned them, but rather should understand that this is a situation in which God has temporarily hidden His face from His people.

(Translated by David Strauss)

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1. Compare I *Shemuel* 18:13, 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Some indeed explain this word differently owing to the difficulties it raises. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In *Parashat Nitzavim*,Scripture describes the stranger as standing in the midst of the camp, whereas in our *parasha* he is described as being "within your gates." This discrepancy apparently stems from the difference between the wilderness reality that is portrayed in *Parashat Nitzavim*, leading to the use of classical wilderness terms such as "camp" and the like, and the urban reality that is described in *Parashat Vayelekh*, in which the people of Israel are no longer wandering, such that the term "camp" is replaced with "gate." [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. We find a similar phenomenon in the Pesach Haggada, which does not come to impart information, but rather a consciousness of redemption. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)