

The Last Two Mitzvos

Category: Devarim, Vayelech

Queen Elizabeth, a Torah Celebration and Hakhel

Torah Celebrations

A Hachnasat Sefer Torah is always a joyous celebration, quite similar to a wedding. The final letters are written in the home of the donors, and then the new scroll is paraded under a chuppah to the synagogue, accompanied by music, dancing, and torches.

When the procession approaches the synagogue, the existing Torah scrolls of the synagogue are brought out to welcome the new scroll. Then, seven hakafot are held in the synagogue just like on Simchat Torah. In short, it's a day of celebration for the entire community.

One such celebration was scheduled to take place in a Jewish community in London, right after the death of Queen Elizabeth. The entire country was in a state of mourning, and the wisdom of holding such a celebration went into question.

The community sent the query to Rabbi Weiss of Antwerp, and he responded that the event should be postponed. In explaining his decision, he cited several stories from the Talmud.

Jewish Destruction

In Tractate Gittin, the Talmud describes the events which led to the destruction of the Temple and other tragedies for the Jewish people.

One story is about an area in the mountains called "Har Hamelech—King's Mountain." In that locale, it was customary to accompany a bride and groom with a rooster and hen, symbolizing the wish that the bride and groom be fruitful and multiply like hens.

During one such procession, Roman soldiers brazenly stole the birds. Angered,

the locals attacked the soldiers, who then returned to the Caesar and alleged that the Jews were rebelling against him.

The king came with an army to wage war. One soldier on the Jewish side, named Bar Daroma, was a fierce fighter, and the Romans couldn't manage to vanquish him.

Seeing the situation, the king placed his crown on the floor, looked up at the heavens, and said, "Master of the universe, please, do not give my entire kingdom into the hands of one person." It would be unbecoming for Rome, in other words, if the entire army would be defeated by one single individual.

Meanwhile, this Bar Daroma made a mistake. He spoke out against G-d, intimating that G-d had forsaken the Jewish people. As a result, he was bitten and killed by a snake. The king, witnessing these events, recognized that they were a supernatural miracle. "Since a miracle has come about, not through my efforts, I will leave them alone just this time." He picked up and left.

When the Jews of Har Hamelech heard that the King had abandoned the battle, they danced, celebrated, and lit fires that illuminated the entire region. The king heard about their joy and was incensed. "I gave them a reprieve and they are celebrating my downfall?" He decided to come back.

He returned with a massive army and massacred thousands of Jews. The area of the massacre was so large that some of the Jews were still oblivious to the massacre and were still singing and dancing. (Gitin 57a).

The entire massacre happened only because the Jews celebrated at the wrong moment. The king thought they were celebrating his downfall, and that was what brought about the massacre.

The Midrash tells a similar story about Trajan, the Roman emperor from the year 98 until 117.

His wife gave birth to a baby boy on the eve of Tisha Bav, when we mourn the destruction of the Holy Temple. That year as every year, the Jews sat on the floor in the dark, next to small lamps, bemoaning the destruction of the Temple with the reading of lamentations.

Several months later, the baby died, and the entire empire was thrown into

mourning. It just so happened that it was Chanukah. The Jews faced the quandary; should they or shouldn't they light the chanukah menorah?

In the end, they decided to light the menorah. "Whatever will happen, will happen."

Someone informed the queen that the Jews had mourned on the day of the baby's birth and celebrated on the day of his death. Incensed, she wrote to the king, "before you go to conquer other countries, come conquer the Jews who have rebelled against you." He came and massacred countless Jewish lives (Eicha Rabbi 1, 45, 4, 22).

Again, the story tells us not to make celebrations when the non Jewish neighbors are in mourning. Especially in this modern-day case, when the queen herself was very good to her Jewish subjects.

Rabbi Weiss brings another incident from a very interesting Halacha. In the temple era, Kohens and Levites were divided into 24 shifts, each of which served for one week of a 24 week cycle in the Temple. This meant that every Kohen and Levite had the opportunity to serve in the Temple for 2 weeks each year. Corresponding to these 24 shifts were 24 groups of Israelites; on each group's specific week, its members would gather in their local city to pray and fast that the service of the Kohens and Levites should be accepted favorably by G-d.

Now, the Talmud says that they wouldn't fast on Friday or on Sunday. Why not?

They didn't fast on Friday to honor Shabbos; it would be inappropriate to welcome Shabbos while fasting. But why didn't they fast on Sunday? Rabbi Yochanan says, "Because of the Christians." Among Christians, Sunday is a day of celebration, so the image of Jews fasting on Sunday could offend their sensitivities.

Once again, we see how careful the Jewish people always were to avoid any behavior that might be interpreted as an affront to the gentiles around them.

Therefore, Rabbi Weiss came to the conclusion that it would be appropriate to delay the event.

The Last Mitzvos

The source for the commandment to write a Torah scroll comes from this week's Torah portion, Vayelech. It is the final commandment of the Torah: "And now, write for yourself this song" (31:19).

The Talmud says based on this verse that even if one inherited a Torah scroll from his ancestors, he should endeavor to write a new one himself; indeed, Jewish law rules that every person has this obligation.

Today, this commandment can be fulfilled by purchasing printed books of the Torah, but there is, no doubt, great merit in writing a real Torah scroll as well. However, it's quite an expensive endeavor; the scroll itself costs some \$60,000, plus the expenses of the celebration and the Torah's ornaments. Most people don't have the opportunity to fulfill this commandment on their own.

Now, there's another commandment in this week's portion, one which is not very well known — the mitzvah of Hakhel.

Every 7th year, at the close of the sabbatical year, a special gathering would be held in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. Every single Jew was expected to participate — man, woman, and child. The entire Jewish people would gather into the Temple courtyard, and the king would read special selections from the book of Deuteronomy.

The goal of the gathering, the Torah says, is "In order that they hear and study and fear the L-rd your G-d, and observe all the words of this Torah."

It was a moment to re-experience the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai. At the giving of the Torah, the entire Jewish people stood in unison to receive G-d's gift. Similarly, every 7 years, the entire Jewish people would gather once more to relive that experience.

It may not have been exactly like the giving of the Torah, but a moment when the entire Jewish people gathered with the king in Jerusalem was, no doubt, a very momentous occasion.

This is also reflected in the fact that the event was held at the end of the Sabbatical year. Throughout the entire previous year, all the farmers, i.e.,

everyone, abstained from working their lands. What did they do instead? They studied Torah and strengthened their observance. By the time they reached Jerusalem for the Hakhel gathering, they were emotionally and intellectually ready to once again re-accept the torah.

This past year was a Sabbatical year in the land of Israel, which means that this year marks the time for Hakhel. The Rebbe explained that although we do not have a Holy Temple or a king, the mitzvah can still be fulfilled in a spiritual sense. By gathering here in shul, studying Torah together and inspiring each other, we become Hakhel participants as well.