



Sukkot After Shemittah - a Time of Reflection and Emunah

By Ariel Kryzman ('23)

Parashat VeYeilech includes the final two Mitzvot in the Torah: Hakheil (the Mitzvah for Bnei Yisrael to gather together in Yerushalayim and learn Torah) and writing a Sefer Torah. Both of these Mitzvot have a clear purpose of ensuring that the Torah and its values are passed down to future generations. However, while the Mitzvah of writing a Sefer Torah applies year-round, Hakheil happens very rarely: "שָׁבַע שָׁנִים בְּמַעַד שְׁנַת הַשְּׁמִטָּה בְּחָג מִקְצוֹ הַקָּהָל אֶת-הָעָם... הַסְּבֹחַ," "On the Sukkot of the first year of the Shemittah cycle... gather the nation" (Devarim 31:10-12).

Why does Hakheil occur so rarely, and why does it happen specifically on Sukkot of the year after Shemittah (a time we are approaching in about a week)?

The Abarbanel suggests that Hakheil takes place on Sukkot because that is when Israel has ideal weather, so it would be easiest for people to travel to Yerushalayim. If that is true, why does the Torah command Bnei Yisrael to do Aliyah LaRegel on Shavuot, a time of burning heat in Yerushalayim? Also, this Abarbanel only addresses why Hakheil takes place on Sukkot, not why it happens the year after Shemittah.

Ralbag uses the greater context of this Mitzvah to explain the reasoning for Hakheil being on Sukkot. Ralbag explains that the theme of Bnei Yisrael forgetting Hashem after being wealthy and prosperous is prevalent throughout Devarim. Hakheil is also part of that theme, Ralbag suggests, as often people are wealthiest during the harvest season, i.e., Sukkot. However, this answer is difficult as Bnei Yisrael were not prosperous after Shemittah because they couldn't work the land for the entire year and thereby had very few crops to harvest during Sukkot time.

Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffmann views the lack of wealth after Shemittah as the whole point for Hakheil taking place during the Sukkot after Shemittah. During Shemittah, Bnei Yisrael were left to the mercy of God as Bnei Yisrael couldn't work the land or provide food for themselves. Hakheil is Bnei Yisrael's opportunity to thank Hashem for providing for them during the Shemittah year.

While Rav Dovid Tzvi Hoffmann views Hakheil as an opportunity for Klal Yisrael to reflect positively on the previous Shemittah cycle, Rav Hirsch views Hakheil as an opportunity for Klal Yisrael to improve their prospective. Rav Hirsch explains that the Shemittah is the end of an agricultural cycle. Therefore, the year after Shemittah and the time of Hakheil is the beginning of the agricultural cycle. Hakheil's purpose, Rav Hirsch explains, is to remind people, at the start of the agricultural cycle, that all of their future agricultural successes come from Hashem.

As Sukkot approaches, let us all be Zoche to strengthen our Emunah by recognizing Hashem's assistance throughout this past year and praying for success in all our future endeavors this year.

A Frank Discussion of Yom Kippur's Torah Reading at Minchah

By Rabbi Chaim Jachter

A Shocking Torah Reading

The last pages of Masechet Megillah address the special Torah readings for each Yom Tov. On each Yom Tov, we read a selection relevant to that holiday (Inyana DeYoma). On Pesach, we read about Yetziat Mitzrayim, on Shavuot, we read about Matan Torah, and so forth.

The Torah reading for Yom Kippur morning fits with this theme, as we read about the special Avoda in

the Beit HaMikdash on Yom Kippur. However, when we return for Mincha, we find to our complete shock, that we read the Parashah of Gilui Arayot, the Torah's long list of forbidden sexual relationships (Megillah 31a).

This Torah reading is shocking since the Parasha of Gilui Arayot seems irrelevant to Yom Kippur! Let us begin with three classic explanations for why Chazal designated this Parasha for the special reading at Mincha of Yom Kippur.

Rashi

Rashi observes that the Yetzer HaRa for Gilui Arayot is powerful, and therefore, infractions in this area are not uncommon. This Torah reading serves as a sobering wake-up call to Teshuvah.

Part of the Teshuvah for Gilui Arayot violations is to respect the power of the drive for this type of Aveirot. Hashem sets the Yetzer HaRa for Arayot at a "very high volume," for if it were not, the world would not be populated (as expressed in the gripping account recorded on Yoma 69b). Once we grasp its immense power, we recognize the need to exert enormous effort to control this powerful part of our personalities.

Tosafot's First Explanation

Tosafot's first explanation is that since women "dress up" in honor of Yom Kippur, all are warned by this Torah reading to exercise control.

One may ask, though, why of all days, we need a warning on Yom Kippur. After all, who would sin on Yom Kippur, especially at Mincha when we are already quite fatigued from the fast and the intensity of Yom Kippur.

Apparently, the lesson is that no matter the circumstances, we must never be complacent and always be on guard regarding the Yetzer Hara for Arayot.

Tosafot's Second Explanation

Tosafot's second explanation is even more intriguing.

Tosafot cites a Midrash that plays on the two meanings of the term "LeGalot Ervah," to reveal nakedness. It has a sexual connotation, meaning to reveal nakedness that one should never reveal. It also means to discover weakness, as we find Yosef accusing his brothers (Bereishit 42:9) of being spies who are trying to discover the "Ervat HaAretz," the weakness of the land.

According to the Midrash, the Torah reading of Mincha is a plea to Hashem - just as you told us not to "LeGalot Ervah" in a sexual sense, so too you should, in return, not reveal our spiritual weaknesses.

I understand this Midrash in light of Rav Yosef Shalom Elyashiv's ruling (cited in Ashrei Ha'Ish 3:31:11) that it suffices to hold an Etrog around 30 centimeters away from one's eyes to examine it. I have heard that Rav Moshe Feinstein rules similarly. If one examines the tiniest flaws, it will be difficult to find an acceptable Etrog.

Similarly, as David HaMelech states in Tehillim Mizmor 130, "Im Avonot Tishmor Kah Hashem Mi Ya'amod," "If Hashem examines anyone too closely, they will never pass muster." Thus, we ask Hashem not to examine us too closely, as we few would withstand such intense scrutiny.

This sort of bold plea is a Rav Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev style of confronting Hashem. The following is a classic example of Rav Levi Yitzchak's bold "demands: of Hashem (from Chabad.org):

Several days before Yom Kippur, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak summoned his Gabbai (secretary). Much to the Gabbai's amazement, the Rebbe had business on his mind.

"Lately, the number of people coming to request that I pray for them on the Holy Day has been steadily increasing," said the Rebbe. "It's time we set a fixed price for the Kvitlach. I think we should ask for two Groschen for each name written in a Kvitel."

When a Chassid gives his Rebbe the piece of paper (Kvitel) on which his name and the names of his loved ones are inscribed for the rebbe to mention in his prayers, he always includes a sum of money, known as the Pidyon Nefesh (redemption of the soul), as a gift to the Rebbe. As a rule, the sum is left to the petitioner's discretion, which was why Rabbi Levi Yitzchak's gabbai was quite surprised by what the Rebbe was proposing. So notices were put up in the synagogue and the marketplace, and soon the entire town had heard of the new rules: the Rebbe was demanding two Groschen for each name.

Immediately after the morning prayers on the day preceding Yom Kippur, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak began receiving the Kvitlach-bearers. A sense of urgency was felt throughout the town---the Rebbe's strange stipulation, coupled with his ominous behavior of the last few weeks, fed the feeling that it was of utmost importance to be included in the Rebbe's list. Two Groschen was not such a great sum, but it was no small

expense for an impoverished peddler or tailor with a dozen children to register. Still, not a soul stayed behind. This year, no one was taking any chances. All day the Rebbe sat his faithful gabbai at his door and received Kvitlach. Soon his desk was covered with folded pieces of paper and copper coins. There were those who tried to bargain with the gabbai, but the Rebbe's instructions had been clear: no exceptions. Around midday, a woman approached the gabbai and begged for an exemption. "I am a poor widow with an only child, without a single groschen in my purse. How can I pay four Groschen so that my child and I may be inscribed in the book of life? Please, have mercy on my fatherless child and me, and allow me to add our names to the Rebbe's list. I promise to pay the entire sum as soon as I have the money."

"What can I do?" said the Gabbai. "The Rebbe has told me that there are to be no exceptions."

"Let me ask the Rebbe," said the widow. "Certainly, he will not turn me down."

The Gabbai relented, but the Rebbe was unyielding. "I'm sorry," he said to the woman, "but these are the rules. Two groschen per name."

The widow left, heartbroken, but resolved to attain a year of life for herself and her child. One way or another, she would get the money. Hours passed. The last of the petitioners had already left, and the hour of Kol Nidrei, the solemn prayer which opens the Yom Kippur service, was fast approaching. The Gabbai had cleared the table, counting the coins and locking them away, and packing the Kvitlach in the special parcels that the Rebbe would keep with him during his prayers. Everyone was already in the synagogue, garbed in their snow-white Kittelen and wrapped in their Tallitot, awaiting the Rebbe. Still, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak lingered, his eyes casting expectant glances at the window. Then, a small, shawled figure was seen hurrying along the deserted street. It was the widow, with a folded piece of paper and a few coins in her hand. "Thank G-d the Rebbe is still home," she cried. "Here is my Kvitel, Rebbe. Please pray for me and for my only child that we may be inscribed in the book of life."

"But you only have two Groschen here," protested Rabbi Levi Yitzchak, peering at the coppers she had placed on the table. "So you can only write one name in your kvitel."

"Holy Rebbe," cried the woman, "I have been running about all day, borrowing from everyone that I know. This is all I was able to come up with. Please pray for us both! I promise to pay the rest within a week."

"I'm sorry," insisted the Rebbe, "the price is two Groschen per name. Which name do you want in your Kvitel?"

With trembling fingers, the woman took her Kvitel and crossed out her own name. "Pray for my Shloimehleh, Rebbe," she said, her eyes brimming with tears, "that he should have a year of life, health, and happiness."

Upon hearing these words, the Rebbe's eyes came alive with a fiery light. Grasping the widow's two Groschen in one fist, and her Kvitel in the other, he raised them triumphantly to heaven and cried: "Father in Heaven! Look! Look what a mortal mother is prepared to do for her child! And You---shall it be said, G-d forbid, that You are less a parent to Your children?! Can You look this woman in the eye and refuse to grant Your own children a year of life, health, and happiness?!"

"Come," said Rabbi Levi Yitzchak to his Gabbai and to the widow, "let us go to Kol Nidrei."

This is just one of many stories of Rav Levi Yitzchak along these lines. We see from Tosafot's second explanation that such bold talk to Hashem, under very limited circumstances, is not always inappropriate. Hashem is not satisfied with our merely being obedient. He wants a relationship with us. However, only a great Tzaddik such as Rav Levi Yitzchak, or if we speak as a collective for the entire Keneset Yisrael (as in the case of our Midrash), might we speak in such a manner to Hashem. Otherwise, the more humble stance of "Tefillah Le'Ani Ki Ya'atof VeLifnei Hashem Yishpoch Sicho," (Tehillim Mizmor 102) is the more appropriate approach.

A New Suggestion

I submit that Mincha of Yom Kippur is the perfect time to address the Torah's restrictions regarding sexuality. The Yetzer HaRa for relations is subdued at this time, rendering us ready to address this important issue in a sober and objective manner.

The Yetzer Hara for Arayot is exceedingly powerful. When harnessed and disciplined, it has the potential to facilitate a beautiful life with a spouse. On the other hand, if not controlled properly, it can destroy one's life. The severe penalties for Gilui Arayot reflect the terrible damage caused by these infractions.

Minchah time at Yom Kippur is the perfect time for people to be receptive to this message and, hopefully, deeply internalize this vitally important message. Normally, the Yetzer HaRa is so powerful it can overwhelm rational thinking. When faced with challenges, we can hearken back to and reawaken our emotions during the Yom Kippur afternoon Torah reading, to guide us to proper behavior.

Conclusion

While at first glance, the Torah reading for Yom Kippur afternoon seems bizarre, upon reflection, we find it makes perfect sense. It also fits wonderfully with the theme we articulate at length in another essay, that a recurring theme of Yom is that Mitzvot are exquisitely precious and Aveirot are dreadfully detrimental.

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