

HAKHEL

an extended kavanah / short sermon, for Yom Kippur Morning, 5776 / 2015

R. Fred Scherlinder Dobb, www.adatshalom.net

(2021 NOTE)

Just as the covid-19 pandemic begins (in wealthy nations) to abate, we welcome the return of the sabbatical year – a.k.a. **shmita**, meaning “radical release.”

Across the last shmita cycle (culminating here, on Yom Kippur 2014), this series of Adat Shalom sermons sought to suffuse **shmita-consciousness** within our community (see examples elsewhere and more great resources at www.hazon.org/shmita). Today, shmita’s themes – like preparing for and being resilient through periodic disruptions to our normal ways of being! – are newly **resonant**, following the coronavirus’ death and dislocation.

Stepping into the new shmita year of **5782**, perhaps these older messages can serve as a primer -- and inspire us to make maximal modern meaning from this returning religious rite. See the full series: <https://adatshalom.net/learn/rabbi-freds-teachings/shmita/>.

Blessings, all...

Traditionally we’d have just read Leviticus 16, the ancient Yom Kippur rites, goats and all. Instead, we got Deuteronomy 29-30 – Torah’s not so tough or far away, but in you; and, that while granted free will, we should *vacharta ba’chayim*, choose life – placed there first in 1894; maintained since, in liberal liturgies.ⁱ

We’ll now emend the *maftir* reading, too – see our handout, page 3 – *not* Numbers 28, the ancient holiday sacrifices. Today, for the first time ever, we’ll scroll just one column – Deuteronomy 31 (page 3, number 8), about **Hakhel**ⁱⁱ – the end of the seventh [or sabbatical or ‘shmita’] year,ⁱⁱⁱ when the whole community is to gather, all at once, on Sukkot (that’s NEXT WEEK) – to hear the Torah; and reaffirm its place in their lives.

Much is unclear from these verses: Will we read *excerpts* of Torah, or the whole thing? (Talmud Sotah 41a says excerpts, focused on justice, community, and limiting the king’s powers). And how many, before the age of Jumbotrons, could one actually hear?!

But some things *are* clear: periodic assembly and reaffirmation (verses 10 & 11) *are* good ideas. The future, as in verses 12 & 13, emphasizing our descendants, matters, above all. And, as colleagues Nili Simhai and Jacob Fine teach [number 8 on the handout], this cycle, lots of us are taking this assembly, Hakhel, seriously.^{iv}

So as an extended introduction to our Hakhel maftir (and also as a sermon!), we’ll expand on that first idea: periodic assembly, & re-covenanting.

*

To start, reflect a moment: where were we, spiritually – or in this season of tshuvah, ethically – developmentally – in 2008? 2001? 1994? 1987? [long pause while folks consider]. Seven-year intervals.

More frequent, *annual* opportunities to take stock of our lives abound – above all, these High Holy Days, this Yom, Kippur. (It *is* a gift!). We also have January first; birthdays, anniversaries; and more. Yet some changes come slowly, hard to discern in just one year.

We do take stock of our lives as they near their end, in generational time. But best to be able to *apply* the insight, with much time to recalibrate. Mid-life birthdays – like 50, the biblical Yovel or Jubilee – beg the same questions, but we reach these singly, not collectively.

Something in between – periodic, but less than generational – and communal – is ideal. Enter: Hakhel.

There's nothing magic about seven. Ten is a contender: with that many fingers, and base 10 math, it's easy to view time by decades; ten works for the census, and for 'big birthdays'. Five is fine, like for tetanus boosters and medical screenings. Jefferson thought that at twenty year intervals, a little bloodletting is needed for a healthy republic.^v But seven is the bible's number for cycles, and if it works for counting days, why not count seven years, too?

From the secular side -- a cultural artifact, a '50s movie – the "Seven Year Itch," as if at *this* interval, one might get fidgety, and question core commitments. This "seven year itch," and the seventh-year Hakhel, share an important commonality: both are really times for **reflection, recommitment, and re-covenanting** to sacred relationships.

**

Sefer Hachinuch (13th century) makes it plain: Why all gather together? "To hear words of Torah, which is our source, our glory, our splendor. And from this people will come to speak of its worth; and desire will enter their hearts to know God...and...goodness, and joy."^{vi}

Hakhel has us **recommit to Torah**, with a capital 'Taf'. Yet what does this mean **for us**, as Reconstructionist Jews? As folks who take tradition **lovingly, but rarely literally**? Who understand that we're **commanded to grapple** with tradition, though not necessarily **to follow it**?

For us, this is a moment to **reaffirm**, but also to **rebalance**. To **re-covenant, and reconstruct**.^{vii} To rethink 'relationship with the sacred' – and sacred relationship.

Soon we'll all rise for our Hakhel maftir, in a symbolic re-covenanting. What will we be rising *for*? *To what* are we re-covenanting? A starter list, to get us each thinking. I suggest:

We recommit to community; to study; to serious consideration of Jewish tradition, life, culture, identity.

To morality and ethics, to the pursuit of justice and peace, to repairing the world, divinely (*I'taken olam b'malkhut Shadai*).

To the life-long, ongoing process of *tshuvah* – continual introspection, repentance, and self-betterment.

To ever applying the best of Judaism toward the world around us – and the best of modernity to Judaism.

We recommit to being informed, active participants in the great, global, intergenerational Jewish conversation.

Which means we recommit to helping tradition evolve – updating it, improving it – as liberal Jewish patriots: “my tradition, right its wrongs.”

*

Back to sevens: There's a popular myth that every cell in our body regenerates every seven years – not true, but a rich image, that we're the same yet different people each seven years.

A seventh-year exclamation point, Hakhel returns us to the workaday realm with *shmita* values like sustainability, equality, and resilience in mind.

And there's Seven Up – not the uncola, but the British docu-series, in which Michael Apted interviews 14 kids at age 7, then 14, 21, and so on. Begun in 1964, the franchise continues; two years ago came “56 Up”. One reviewer noted that the seven-year interval works, “revealing the gradual development of ordinary lives in all their extraordinary complexity.”^{viii} That could be us, each Hakhel.

Hakhel, then, is *tshuvah* on steroids, a seven-year cumulative update – how far *have* we each come in one *shmita*?

How have we weathered our storms; how have circumstances shaken, or strengthened, our core? In religion, how's our observance different now?^{ix} In life, how have our priorities shifted? In community, how has our involvement waxed & waned? In society, 'are we better off now than we were 7 years ago?'

Like the *annual* High Holy list, but more intense: questioning. More sustained: evaluation: a tougher exam, a deeper steam-cleaning, at this periodic sacred interval.

Now, how tough, how deep? Beatles lyrics swirl in my head. I hear God grabbing Paul's mike, announcing Hakhel: “Come together, right now, over Me!” But what about the *pace* of change, the speed with which we *help* tradition evolve? Against Jefferson's periodic bloodletting, in Judaism or in politics, I'll echo John: “You say you want a revolution, well, you know, we all want to change the world... but if you go carrying pictures of Chairman Mao, you ain't gonna make it with anyone anyhow” ...

There's a tension between what perhaps *should* be done to change the world (radical action's needed on, say, carbon emissions, race relations, income inequality) – and patiently bringing others along with us, in a slower social change *movement*, whose gains endure.

One perennial challenge is titrating the pace of change: not too much, lest rapid **revolution** undo our accomplishments; not too little, lest evolution crawl, and the great enterprise ossify into irrelevance, even injustice. As an ideal, Hakhel is to my mind the **goldilocks of change**: annual is too often to discern big themes; generational is too long a wait, to address them. Seven is *just right*!

*

Our ancestors recommitted, every seven years, to a Torah they learned, grappled with, and modified through loving interpretation. Reconstructionist Judaism isn't some easy way out, with no need to learn or struggle – oh, no! Kaplan et al ask us to take the whole megillah seriously, and from that place, practice, teach, model (and yes, change) tradition. If we're not down with some measure of that, we should stay down; don't rise – we can't re-covenant. Torah pushes us: there's much more than the "Torah" you *think* you know. What else might call to us, if we keep studying, keep reading, re-read it?

Most of us -- learned or less so; Jewish or not -- can in our own way identify and commit to a strand of tradition we'll take more seriously in the cycle ahead. *Do the Hakhel*: reread Torah, revisit our sacred texts; "turn it and turn it, for all is within."

Shmita itself is now one example: something ancient and holy, awesome and flawed – which we examined afresh; reconstructed; were challenged and pushed *by* it, even as it resonated for how *it* challenges the status quo.^x Pick any aspect of tradition for re-covenanting: something you'll do different, and more intensely. Maybe it's the new 7-year shmita cycle that just started; or, Jewish learning, straight up; or communal involvement; connection with Israel; kashrut, shabbat, sustained tikkun olam effort – it's all good!

Soon we'll rise, to affirm that we'll make change from the inside; we'll seal our commitments.

*

And rise we will. With Deuteronomy 31 on our page, and in our ears, let the "Amen" at the end of this coming maftir Aliyah be resounding.

Let us say "Amen" to the "Harvesting Hope - Hakhel Declaration," out of New England, applicable to all:^{xi} [quote] "we gather...as neighbors and citizens to harvest hope: ready to begin again; to plant and sow, and be active partners in the sustainable and regenerative future for which we all hope."

Let us say "Amen" to Reb Arthur Waskow, re-popularizer of Hakhel, as a modern update of [quote] hearing "the King and the High Priest teach Torah about protecting the Earth, protecting the poor, and restraining the powerful lest they become tyrannical."^{xii}

Let us say “Amen” too to that traffic-snarler, Pope Francis – “the high Priest of a billion human beings,” in Reb Arthur’s words, who’s using “modern media to Assemble, *Hak’hey!*, all the peoples of the Earth to hear the Torah of *empowering* the poor and *healing* the planet.”^{xiii}

And “Amen” to scholar, now ground-breaking Orthodox Rabba, Meesh Hammer-Kossoy, who reminds us that Hakhel is [quote] “not merely a one time happening, but the culmination of the sabbatical cycle of ‘social training,’ geared to create deep & meaningful social solidarity, from beginning to end.”^{xiv}

*

For all this -- with our commitments fresh in our minds, and our hearts -- we will rise.

Symbolic of that generation with the most *Hakhels* ahead of them, seven of our Adat Shalom youth, led by Pam Sommers, are now coming up for the maftir Aliyah; they do so on behalf of us all. Torah blessings are in our machzor, page 476; the text of our Torah reading, in the handout, page 3.

Let us add our voices to these Torah blessings – join from our places *in* this recovenanting Aliyah – in the measure to which that “Amen” resonates with each of us – as loud, as we are ready to recovenant.

Please rise -- as we open this Hakhel Aliyah with the blessing; together:

“Barukh...”

ⁱ See Rabbi Richard Sarason, <http://blogs.rj.org/blog/2013/10/10/torah-and-haftarah-readings-for-yom-kippur/>

ⁱⁱ 8. **Deut. 31** 10 And Moses commanded them, saying: 'At the end of seven years, in the time of the year of release, during Sukkot, 11 when all Israel comes to appear before YHVH your God, in the place of God's choosing: you shall read this *Torah* before all Israel, in their hearing. 12 Assemble the people, men and women and little ones, and your stranger who is within your gates — so that they may hear, and so that they may learn, and have awe for YHVH your God; and observe, to do, all the words/things of this *Torah*; 13 and that their children, who have not known, may hear, and learn — to hold YHVH your God in awe — all the days you live in the land, which you go over the Jordan there, to possess it.'

ⁱⁱⁱ Colleague David Krantz nicely explains the timing of Hakhel, on the Sukkot *following* the completion of the shmita – and in so doing mentions my own next big adventure, next month: “Just as Shabbat has havdalah and Yom Kippur has the shofar’s blast, so too the shmita year has a grand-farewell tradition: Hakhel, the Assembly. And just as havdalah takes place after Shabbat ends, and the shofar is blown after Yom Kippur ends, so too does Hakhel take place after the shmita year ends.... But what exactly is this hakhel? It’s a time when Jews from all over gather in Jerusalem to learn and discuss the law. And next month, thanks to all who voted for [Aytzim’s Green Israel slate](#) in the World Zionist Congress elections, we will be sending a three-person delegation of Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb, Evonne Marzouk and myself to Jerusalem to participate in the hakhel. Indeed, just after Sukkot, the World Zionist Congress will be gathering Jews from all around the world to discuss and vote upon laws. And [Aytzim’s Green Israel slate is proposing 11 of them....](#)” (David Krantz, 9/4/15, at <http://aytzipm.org/resources/articles/411>).

^{iv} **On Hakhel:** This Sukkot, closing the sabbatical year, has traditionally been marked by a gathering called *hakhel* — an injunction to assemble all Jewish men, women, and children, as well as all non-Jews in the community, to hear a public reading of the Torah by the king. The practice was meant to ready and inspire the people to return to working the land, with justice in mind, for the next six years. Most of the passages that were read involved right relationship to land and the people who live on it; one of the passages involved limiting the powers of the king. In modern Israel, the President of Israel does a ceremonial reading at the Western Wall. Also in modern times, the Lubavitch Rabbi urged Jews everywhere to conduct large and small *hakhel* gatherings in homes and synagogues to foster greater unity. This year, with the tremendous growth in *shmita*-inspired initiatives, there will be several other communities who will be doing modern interpretations of *hakhel* as well. (Nili Simhai and Rabbi Jacob Fine, adapted — Abundance Farm, Northampton MA, Fall 2015)

-
- ^v Thomas Jefferson to William Smith, 13 November 1787 – reprinted widely, e.g. at <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/96oct/obrien/blood.htm>. "God forbid we should ever be twenty years without such a rebellion... The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time, with the blood of patriots & tyrants. It is its natural manure."
- ^{vi} Translation by Rabbi Ari Hart, among many rabbinic sources interpreting Hakhel -- gathered for Hazon; accessed at <http://www.shmitainseattle.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Hakhel-shiur-notes.pdf>.
- ^{vii} This is not only a Reconstructionist notion – Conservative scholar Rabbi Elliot Dorff wrote eloquently along the same lines in his commentary on Parashat Vayelekh, September 2015, at <http://ziegler.aju.edu/default.aspx?id=3888>: "The practice of reading and then interpreting the Torah to the community made it clear that each and every Jew inherits the tradition. **All Jews** -- not just the learned, rich, or socially favored, and not just men -- share in the privilege of being part of God's Covenant with Israel. Each one of us has the **right to learn** the tradition, **and argue** for a new interpretation or application of it. We each also get to **add** to the tradition the insights of our own age, just as our ancestors have done in every generation." (emphases added, as shared on Adat Shalom's shabbat sheet, 9/18/15).
- ^{viii} Rebecca Mead, "What '56 Up' Reveals", in *The New Yorker*, January 9, 2013 – at <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/what-56-up-reveals>.
- ^{ix} Dr. Marc Brettler (my Brandeis professor ;-)) makes the same observation about this time interval, in the context of hearing Torah afresh: "Every seven years would have allowed people not only to recall the biblical text, but to reflect upon it and reinterpret it in line with different stages of their lives."
- ^x On Shmita: this is the last of four High Holy Day sermons in a three-year series leading up to, and focusing on, shmita. It's become a bit of a joke, how Rabbi Fred always talks about shmita – which is fine by me, since it's also become something of an English word, a natural concept, in our community. See previous entries <https://www.adatshalom.net/13-cms-pages-2/327-be-prepared-shmita>, <https://www.adatshalom.net/13-cms-pages-2/326-food-for-thought-erev-rosh-hashanah-5775>, and <https://www.adatshalom.net/13-cms-pages-2/264-shmita>.
- ^{xi} Harvesting Hope – Hakhel Declaration, written by Maggid David Arfa and the Harvesting Hope Proclamation Committee -- full text at <http://www.abundancefarm.org/abundancefarmorg/hakhel-proclamation/> -- additional context from R. Arthur Waskow, in 8/31/15 ShalomCtr.org email, "Harvesting Hope, Oct 4 in Connecticut: Assemble & Celebrate!". The excerpts I wished there was time to read aloud from the bimah: "We gather with the purpose of harvesting hope, to come together in community and envision a sustainable future... We gather to bring [shmita] values into the next six years; to deepen Sabbath Mindfulness in our society... We assemble to harvest the power from our diverse spiritual and cultural traditions to remind our governments, our corporations and ourselves that all life is important... we gather so we will not forget and fall asleep in comfortable living rooms, feigning ignorance of the violence our wealth is perpetrating... We gather together and commit to feel so that we may act, we may dream and we may hope... On this autumn day we gather and go forward as neighbors and citizens to harvest hope. We are ready to begin again; to plant and sow; and to be active partners helping bring the sustainable and regenerative future for which we all hope."
- ^{xii} Rabbi Arthur Waskow, 9/18/15 ShalomCtr.org email entitled "Oct. 4: A Day when the Breath of Life Breathes Life into Us All" -- updating his 8/25/15 posting at <https://theshalomcenter.org/content/sukkat-shalom-vs-climate-chaos-sunday-october-4>, which in turn references the letter signed by over 400 rabbis that also mentions Hakhel, at <https://theshalomcenter.org/torah-pope-crisis-inspire-400-rabbis-call-vigorous-climate-action>. I am among the signatories, and also among those profoundly touched and shaped by Rabbi Waskow's insightful leadership in the Jewish-environmental arena for decades now. The final lines of Reb Arthur's post are worth quoting in full: "So let us see this Sukkot as the time for us to begin shaping a Seven-Year Plan to heal the Earth. Let us commit ourselves to take these next seven years, from now through the Shmita Year that ends in the Fall of 2022, as the time to carry out our Seven-Year Plan so that our Mother Earth can catch her breath and actually rest from our relentlessly choking her by burning global carbon. **Let us take this time to bring Jewish wisdom and activism to join with the wisdom and activism of others in that Great Healing, Great Turning, Great Transformation.**"
- ^{xiii} Rabbi Arthur Waskow, 9/18/15, op cit. On a tangential note, in celebration of how far Catholic-Jewish relations have come, I was quite taken with the report that immediately prior to the Pope's visit to Philadelphia, Saint Joseph's University "will unveil a new sculpture, *Synagoga and Ecclesia in Our Time*. The title is a reference to a sculpture that adorned many medieval churches. It depicted the victory of Ecclesia, the church, over Synagoga, a blindfolded woman who, looking down, represented Judaism. In the new sculpture, both women are equal, sitting together and looking at each other's text. Abraham Skorka, Francis's close rabbinic friend, will unveil the statue." (Nathan Guttman in *The Forward*, 9/18/15 -- <http://forward.com/news/321101/why-pope-francis-has-an-unlikely-jewish-fan-club/#ixzz3m6doKMbA>). And for a bevy of encyclical-related Jewish-environmental resources, see www.coejl.org/climatechange, which includes "a [briefer four-page](#) and [fuller eight-page version](#) of "Judaism, Climate Change, and *Laudato Si*" (edited by Rabbi Fred Scherlinder Dobb)" – the same four-pages which comprise the middle (pp. 4-7) of the 2015/5776 Adat Shalom High Holy Day Handout.
- ^{xiv} Dr. [and old friend, and now Rabba!] Meesh Hammer-Kossoy, 3/26/14, at <http://elmad.pardes.org/2014/03/holy-solidarity-lesson-of-the-sabbatical-year/>.