

Yerushalayim: From Creation to Redemption

One section of this week's parsha that is particularly resonant this year is the commandment of Hakhel. During the Sukkot immediately following the shemita year the Jewish people are to gather in "the place that God will choose"¹ to hear the king read from the Torah. On a basic level, this ritual is a form of covenant renewal. The Torah explicates that it means that the younger generation should understand their national history and commitment to observing the Torah.

Rabbeinu Bachya adds a deeper level of explanation. In his commentary to this mitzvah, he sees echoes of the creation story and our messianic hopes and dreams. He explains that the shemita year represents the Shabbat of the world, or the messianic era when work will no longer be necessary, and sanctity will permeate all of existence. After living in this reality for some time we can approach the true purpose of creation.

The mitzvah requires the entire nation will gather to listen to the earthly king, who represents the true King of Kings. The people declare their loyalty to the ultimate King by listening to the Torah. This was God's original blueprint for creation and the actualization of the Torah's vision is the ultimate culmination of the process of creation. Thus, the mitzvah of Hakhel is a symbolic prefiguring of the ultimate messianic reality.

It is within this context that Rabbeinu Bachya understands the need for Hakhel to take place in Yerushalayim. In theory, one could have explained that the location is a function of logistics as during the holiday of Sukkot Jewish men were anyway enjoined to make a pilgrimage to Yerushalayim. Rabbeinu Bachyam, though, interweaves the location into his understanding of Hakhel as harkening back to creation and forward to the ultimate messianic era.

Yerushalayim is not merely the capital of the Jewish state, but also the original point of creation. As Rabbeinu Bachya notes: "creation began [in Yerushalayim]... from Zion the world was developed."² The ceremony that teaches of the world's origins and ultimate purpose must occur in Yerushalayim. It is from this location that God created the world. And this location will

¹ Devarim 31:11.

² Rabbeinu Bachya to Devarim chapter 31.

be the center of the redeemed world. God's presence will be palpably felt in the city and people from all over the world will travel to Yerushalayim to hear the word of God.

Rabbeinu Bachya's comments have immense importance for us during this time period. We are now situated between Rosh HaShana and Yom Kippur and we are trying to return to our roots in order to build a better future for ourselves. Hakhel reminds us that if we are to think broadly about the questions "from where do you come" and "to where are you going", the city of Yerushalayim will emerge as the answer.