



The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Devarim

Parshat Nitzavim-Vayeilech

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Blending Individual and Collective Responsibility

By Jeffrey Berger

This Shabbat is a special one for our family — we are celebrating the Bat Mitzvah of our daughter Ella (Shira Rafaella).

In this week's parsha, Vayeilech, the two final mitzvot in the Torah are recorded.

Mitzvah number 612 is Hakhel, a positive commandment to assemble the people once every seven years for a public reading of (key parts of) the Torah. Since the Torah is the essence of the Jewish people, it appears fitting that everyone (men, women, and children) should gather together at set points in time to hear its words. The Torah explains the rationale of this mitzvah.

הַקָּהֵל אֶת-הָעָם הָאֲנָשִׁים וְהַנְּשִׁים וְהַטָּף וְגֵרָךְ אֲשֶׁר בְּשַׁעְרֶיךָ לִמְעַן יִשְׁמְעוּ
וְלִמְעַן יִלְמְדוּ וְיִירְאוּ אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיכֶם וְשָׁמְרוּ לְעֹשׂוֹת
אֶת-כָּל-דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת

*Gather the people — men, women, children, and the strangers
in your communities—that they may hear and so learn to revere
your God and to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching.
(Devarim 31:12)*

Mitzvah number 613 is for everyone to write a Torah scroll for themselves. Learned from the words, *Now write for yourself this song* which are interpreted by tradition as a commandment to each of us to write, or take part in writing, our own sefer Torah. The Safer Hachinuch notes that while the main obligation is for a Torah scroll, there is no doubt that one should obtain books composed about Torah and establish a Torah library in one's house.

וַעֲתָה כְּתֹבוּ לָכֶם אֶת-הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת וְלִמְדָהּ אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל שִׁמָּה בְּפִיהֶם
לִמְעַן תִּהְיֶה-לִּי הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת לְעֵד בְּבִגְדֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

*Therefore, write for yourself this song and teach it to the people
of Israel; put it in their mouths in order that this poem may be
My witness against the people of Israel. (Devarim 31:19)*

These two commandments are set apart from all the others. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks notes, these two mitzvot are meta-mitzvot, commands about the commands. They were given after the recapitulation of the Torah in the book of Devarim, the blessings and curses, and the covenant renewal ceremony. And they are embedded in the narrative in which Moshe says farewell and hands the leadership mantle to his successor, Yehoshua.

Clearly, the connection between Mitzvot 612 and 613, and the events in our parsha is the idea of continuity. These two final mitzvot are intended to ensure that the Torah will never grow old, will be written anew in every generation, will never be forgotten by the people (young and old), and will never cease to be its active guide to our people. They are meant to ensure that our nation will never abandon its founding principles, history, identity, guardianship of the past, and responsibility to the future.

Note how complementary the last two mitzvot are. Hakhel, the national assembly for a public reading of the Torah, is directed at the people as a totality. Writing a Sefer Torah is directed to the individual. This is the essence of the Jewish people. We have individual responsibility, and we have collective responsibility. As Hillel says in Pirkei Avot,

אם אין אני לי, מי לי. וכשאני לעצמי, מה אני

*If I am not for myself, who is for me? But if I am only for myself,
what am I? (Pirkei Avot 1:14)*

As our family celebrates our daughter's Bat Mitzvah, I cannot help but discuss what this concept means for my daughter as she enters the Jewish covenant. It is essential to integrate our individual and collective responsibility and promote continuity. Blending mitzvot 612 and 613 with Hillel's words, we balance our individualism and our community collectivism.

I had the privilege to learn the five books of the Torah with Ella over the past two years in preparation for her to make a siyum for our community in celebration of her Bat Mitzvah — with the learning and the siyum she will fulfill both the individual and community aspects of the covenantal responsibility of continuity. Mazal tov!

Jeffrey and Russie moved to Scarsdale from Manhattan in 2016. Their daughters, Ella and Orly, attend WDS during the week and YIS on Shabbat and Holidays. The Berger's are thrilled to be part of this wonderful community and overjoyed to celebrate Ella's Bat Mitzvah!

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The Collective Conversation is a project of the
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