

Rabbis' Corner

Hakhel: Gather and Inspire

BY RABBI AVROHOM DYCE

The new year we have entered is special – one that can have a truly positive, long-reaching effect on years to come.

In the year following the *Shemittah* (sabbatical) year in ancient Israel, the entire Jewish people were commanded to come together for a gathering meant to resemble the divine revelation at Mount Sinai.

Called *Hakhel* (assembling), this gathering of all Jewish men, women and children would take place during the joyous festival of Sukkot in the holy space of the *Beit Hamikdash* (Temple) in Jerusalem.

As the time came closer, one could hear the *Cohanim* (members of the priestly tribe) stationed throughout the holy city blaring golden trumpets with the sounds traditionally used for the shofar – *Tekia! Terua! Tekia!* – signaling for all to gather in the *Beit Hamikdash*.

After the people gathered, the king of Israel, flanked by the members of the *Sanhedrin* (tribunal of elders) and sages, would read out inspiring passages from the Torah scroll, including the *Shema Yisrael* prayer, encouraging the people to be in awe of Hashem and recommit themselves to the fulfillment of the mitzvahs.

The feeling of true unity of every Jew, of all types and sizes, assembled together and the excitement of gathering for this sacred purpose filled the people with a sense of meaning and inspiration that was felt throughout the next seven years until they would gather again for the next *Hakhel* year.

Though we await *Moshiach* (messiah) to celebrate *Hakhel* again in all of its grandeur, its energy is accessible to us this year – just like all biblical ideas continue to be spiritually and personally relevant. The Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, z"l, called for the year of *Hakhel* to be used as a time for people to come together to be inspired to higher purpose.

Every individual – man, woman and small child – has a sphere of influence, whether in regard to family members, friends, work associates or community members. People are affected by the things we do and say. We can use this capacity to be a positive

influence and share the inspiration of the Torah and its wisdom.

Hakhel isn't complicated; we can use occasions when people are gathered in any case. Family dinners, parties, outings or even a walk are perfect times to spark a discussion about an upcoming Jewish festival, discuss the *parsha* (Torah portion) of the week or our favorite personality from the Torah.

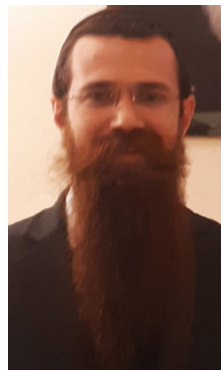
Regarding the mitzvah of *tzedakah* (justice/charity), the Torah says that the pauper is also obligated to give, for even the most impoverished person can find a way to help his fellow pauper. The same applies to spiritual charity. There isn't anyone who can't, in some way, influence their fellow Jews and bring them closer to Hashem.

On this note, the Rebbe would often quote the lovely Chasidic saying: "If only you know *aleph* – teach *aleph!*"

As to the absence of the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, we are told that G-d abodes in the heart of every Jew, and when we elevate our homes and business spaces through study and prayer, they become like a mini-beit hamikdash radiating light to its surroundings.

Let's not forget to involve the young children. Share with them about their birthright heritage. The obligation of the *Hakhel* celebration was incumbent on the children just as on the adults. Children can be a source of inspiration to other children and even to adults with their pure genuine nature.

At a time of so much divisiveness and loneliness, after years of isolation, *Hakhel* couldn't have come at a better time.



Rabbi Avrohom Dyce serves as rabbi and co-director of the Gresham Chabad Jewish Center. Together with his wife, Cheina, and three children, they are excited to celebrate our beautiful heritage with their growing local Jewish community.

Did you know?

Jewish Free Loan began "in the neighborhood"

This marks Jewish Family & Child Service's 75th year. In the run-up to JFCS' celebratory event on May 18, 2023, this space offers looks back at agency history our community may – or may not – remember.

Jewish Free Loan once was a program of Jewish Family & Child Service. Before that, it was the word-of-mouth effort of a few Jewish immigrant women in Old South Portland to assist neighbors in need – a few coins at a time.

According to Stuart Director, his maternal grandparents, Dinah and Nathan Rosen, owned a small grocery store across the street from the original Shaarie Torah location on SW 1st Street. Originally from Ukraine, Dinah – known by family as "Baba Rosen" – and a few fellow countrywomen who had relocated to Portland in the early 1910s and 1920s, spearheaded a very grassroots effort to help support folks in their tight-knit Jewish immigrant community.

Dinah and Nathan owned the neighborhood's only telephone and had some extra space in their apartment, which was located above their store. The couple sometimes provided short-term lodging to freshly arrived friends and relatives from the Old Country, and they likely overheard neighbors' *tsuris* (woes) via the phone.

Dinah and her lady friends would hear of someone down on their luck and collect some money to give them. The interest rate was 0%, and the expectation was full reimbursement by some future date. The ladies ran their Hebrew Free Loan program, as they dubbed it, through the Depression of the 1930s and beyond, Stuart said – "with zero loan defaults," he added.

Growing older, Dinah passed along the expanding Hebrew Free Loan program to her youngest daughter, Nettie (née Rosen) Director, who kept it operational for decades until demand outpaced her ability to operate solo. In the 1970s, Nettie – with thousands of free-loan dollars in hand – approached Jewish Family & Child Service. JFCS then ran what had morphed into the Jewish Free Loan program through the late-1990s.

Stuart recalled people approached the free-loan program with requests to help defray costs associated with Jewish Community Center membership, medical and moving expenses, books and tuition, bus fare, housing and more.

Six years ago, Jewish Federation of Greater Portland relaunched the [Jewish Free Loan](#) program, combining available funds with those remaining from JFCS' initial program.

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The Jewish Review offers space for the community's rabbis to share their thoughts on the week's parsha or current events. Rabbis are invited to schedule a date to submit a 500- to 600-word piece: email editor@jewishportland.org.