

Chag Sameach.

While monitoring the door last week during Yom Kippur, I picked up a book in our ever-growing Judaica library across the hall, called Down-to-Earth Judaism by Arthur Waskow. Arthur Waskow is a founder of the Jewish Renewal movement, about which I do not know much. But I was reading the section about food (since it was Yom Kippur), and he digressed to talk about time. He said, throughout human history, time has been perceived largely as cyclical: things repeated themselves endlessly. Nothing happened that had not happened already, and nothing was expected to change much in the future. It wasn't until the advent of modernity that time began to be perceived, in the modern world, as linear: that is, that we are in a new age (every age for the past couple hundred years has thought this), and time is marching exclusively forward toward progress. The future holds new things, things that will improve our world. This is the linear perception of time, which stands in stark contrast to the traditional and ancient perception of time as cyclical.

Arthur Waskow proposed that Judaism actually embodies a third concept of time: a "spiral" concept of time. He explains that we have always (at least for the past 1,000 years or so) looked behind us for traditions, beliefs and practices that have been left to us by our ancestors. We then interpret and reinterpret those ideas and practices, and then not only do we adapt them to better suit us into the future, but we retroactively reach backward to reinterpret the meaning and symbolism of these practices and ideas: that is, we take from the past, reinterpret it for the future, and then reinterpret the past as well! This is what he means

when he refers to the Jewish version of time as “spiral”, not cyclical and certainly not linear.

I would like to try to apply this interesting idea to an ancient and little-known tradition of sukkot, that of Hakhel. I say little-known because it is only practiced in Israel, and only every seven years. In fact, since it was re-instated in Israel in 1945, it has been observed 10 times (an estimated 100,000 people participated in 1987). Here is the short version: In the Bible and up through temple times, every sukkot that follows a shmita year in Israel, the King (or the Kohen gadol or prophet or judge, when there was no king) would gather all the Israelite people, specifically, all men, women and children as well as the stranger within our gates, and read 6 selections from sefer Dvarim to all the people. Here is the quote from Dvarim where Moshe instructs us in this commandment:

(read Dvarim 31:10-13, in Hebrew and English)

The reasons given for the timing of this Hakhel or public reading of Dvarim vary. They include that at the end of a shmita year, the people are more likely to feel vulnerable and dependent upon God for sustenance. Their dependence is foremost on their minds with empty granaries back home. The Kli Yakar takes it in a different direction, of social equality: he says the shmita year fosters harmony and a leveling out of the economic strata of society, which enables the people to more easily achieve a communal teshuva. And of course, the p’shat or literal version of the purpose of the Hakhel ceremony is right in the text: “that they may hear, and they may learn, and fear God, and observe all the words of his law.”

The Rambam notes that even sages or Torah scholars are not exempt from this mitzvah: it is obligatory for everyone to gather together to hear the words of Dvarim read out loud. Rambam points out that this universal obligation is also a feature of the Pesach seder: no one is exempt from participating. Deena Rabinovich of Stern College points out that perhaps this is the reason for this similar universal obligation of the Pesach seder and the Hakhel ceremony: she says, "We cannot fulfill our role in history without acknowledging that which sets us apart from other nations, and on the other hand, we cannot keep our tradition fresh and vital without recalling the fear and hope, the light and the clouds and the voice of haShem on that unique moment at Har Sinai."

So how would Arthur Waskow's spiral version of Jewish time address this tradition of Hakhel?

The Hakhel tradition was passed down to us from Biblical times, of the king or the highest leader of the people to read from sefer Devarim on Sukkot every 7 years. For the past 2,000 years, we couldn't observe this law, but kept it alive along with many other laws specific to eretz Yisrael. Finally, in 1945 and every 7 years since, it has been reinstated and reinterpreted to fit our modern political situation: Chief Rabbis have participated, the President of Israel and other dignitaries. And here's where the reinterpretation comes in: The Lubavitcher Rebbe urged Jews everywhere to conduct large and small Hakhel gatherings in synagogues and in private homes, even in diaspora, to foster greater unity and increase Torah learning, observance of mitzvot, and the giving of tzedaka.

This is an example of redirecting the original purpose of the tradition handed down to us from the past; redefined for our present and future, and then reimagined in the past as a call to unity, to reaffirm our sense of community, and inspire community action. It shows how alive and flexible our tradition can be: if we will it, even a tradition as apparently archaic and bound in ancient time and place can be reborn as a meaningful and inspiring part of our ritual lives today. So I say, come sukkot 2015, let's do it!

Chag sameach.