

Parshat Shoftim

Appointing Kings

This week's parsha expresses the directive that Israel appoint a king. Ironically though, when Israel asked for a king, G-d was disappointed with their request. The present Sicha answers this perplexing question and explains the true intent for a king in Israel.

This week's Parsha, *Shoftim*, expresses the commandment that Israel appoint a king. The verse states:

Text 1

When you come to the land the Lord, your G-d, is giving you, and you possess it and live therein, and you say, "I will set a king over myself, like all the nations around me," you shall set a king over you, one whom the Lord, your G-d, chooses; from among your brothers, you shall set a king over yourself; you shall not appoint a foreigner over yourself, one who is not your brother.

Devarim 17:14-15

While it would seem that appointing a king is a clear directive from the Almighty, we see that when Israel finally asked for a king, Shmuel was enraged at their behavior and G-d himself expressed that it articulated a forsaking of G-d.

When Israel came to Shmuel to request a king, they seemed to have paraphrased the above verse saying:

Text 2

And all the elders of Israel gathered, and came to Samuel, to Ramah. And they said to him, "Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now, set up for us a king to judge us like all the nations."

I Shmuel 8:4-5

Unsure of how to respond, Shmuel prays to G-d and is given the following response:

Text 3

And the Lord said to Shmuel, "Listen to the voice of the people, according to all that they will say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from reigning over them.

Ibid, 8:7

This striking contradiction is asked by the various commentators,¹ who are all bothered that it seems that G-d is becoming enraged at His people for desiring to fulfill a commandment that *He* Himself, had instructed them to do.

Indeed, the commandment to appoint a king is expressed in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 20b) as one of the "three commandments (that) were given

¹ See Abarbanel, Klei Yakar *ad loc.*

to Israel when they entered the land.” Clearly then, the commandment is prominent and central commandment—that being the case why did G-d seem furious when they finally requested one?!

What exacerbates this question is that paradoxically, although G-d is disappointed in Israel’s wish for a king, He nevertheless instructs Shmuel that he appoint one and instructs Shmuel to teach them the various laws of a king.

If having a king is an expression that “they have rejected Me,” why does G-d acquiesce to their request?

The purpose of a king

In order to appreciate this curious reaction it is important to begin with a preface of the general intent of appointing a king.²

- A) The initial reason for appointing a king is that government is directed to react against the negative character traits of people. This is expressed in the statement of in Avot:

Text 4

Rabbi Chanina, deputy to the *kohanim*, would say: Pray for the integrity of the government; for were it not for the fear of its authority, a man would swallow his neighbor alive.

Mishna, Avot 3:2

Accordingly it is understood that the purpose of a king is to reign in the antisocial tendencies that mankind is prone to. The king is to create a rule of law that ensures that individuals live in a civilized manner. Essentially the purpose of a

² See Sefer HaMitzvot, Tzemach Tzedek, Mitzvat Minuy Melech.

king is to instill in his subjects the fear and repercussions of not acting as one should.

This need—to be fearful of repercussion—is necessitous even amongst individuals who, from an intellectual standpoint, appreciate and understand that they must act morally. For, often times, the mere rationality that one *ought* to be moral, does not actually translate in *being* moral. This is because, as is expressed in the idiom (Rashi, Vayikra 15:39) “the eye sees, the heart covets and the body commits the transgression.”

Often, without the fear of repercussion, a person is prone to act impulsively in an adverse manner. The consequence that he will receive by the government is often times necessary to ensure that people act morally.

- B) The above reasoning for a king described its need for individuals that are prone to anti-social behavior unless there is fear of repercussion. However, even an individual who lives in constant expression of the saying “the brain rules over the heart,³” also benefits from a king.

This is because as expressed regarding the first King, Shaul, a true king is of a greater nature than his subjects:

Text 5

Now there was a man of Benyamin, and his name was Kish, the son of Aviel, the son of Zeror, the son of Becorat, the son of Aphiah, the son of a Benyamite man, a mighty man of power. And he had a son whose name was Shaul. He was young and handsome, there being no one of the children of Israel handsomer than he; from his

³ Tanya. Ch. 12.

shoulders and upwards he was taller than any of the people.

I Shmuel 9:1-2

What is expressed in the above verse is not merely the literal height of King Shaul, but more importantly that figuratively he was and shoulders above the people.

When a subject submits his own will to follow the directives of his king it is because he understands that the king's understanding is clearer and deeper than his own. He appreciates that through following the king's directive he will lead his subjects to a more prosperous situation than had they been left to their own accord— notwithstanding that even without the rule of government they would have acted in an upstanding and moral fashion.

A king for Israel

For Israel, their true and ultimate king is G-d Himself. The spiritual significance of appointing a king is so to serve as a representation to reveal the kingship of G-d.

Text 6

The root and intent of appointing a king is that through him Israel will be submissive to G-d. For, Israel must be subservient to the king...and the king himself is submissive to G-d. This is expressed regarding King David who said (Tehillim 139:2): "I calmed and quieted (*domamtiy*) my soul." His nullification to G-d affected to him to the extent that he was physically unable to raise his eyes and heart with ego, literally like an inanimate object (*domem*)...As the king is nullified to G-d, and Israel nullified to the king, by extension of the king, Israel is nullified to G-d.

Derech Mitzvotecha, Mitzvat Minui Melech 108a

Correlating to the abovementioned two objectives of the monarchy in effectuating certain characteristics in the subjects, are the two roles that a king in Israel is to serve.

- A) When Israel is lacking in their obedience to G-d and instead are drawn to a proclivity to sin, they need a king to engrain in them a basic fear of heaven. Through the fear of a king, they eventually come to fear G-d.
- B) However, when Israel act properly and already attain fear of heaven through their own efforts, then, the need for a king is on a different stratum. The king—who is of a greater spiritual level than the rest of Israel—helps Israel attain spiritual heights that are beyond their capability. The King is able to draw down to Israel a fear of G-d that transcends the comprehensible level that Israel can attain on their own.

Essentially then, on a spiritual level, the purpose of a king in Israel is to attain fear of heaven. Either a basic submission to G-d, or, when Israel is on a higher spiritual level, a fear of heaven that transcends Israel's own abilities.

Shmuel's disappointment

Accordingly, can be appreciated the reason why Shmuel was disappointed when Israel requested a king.

Although having a king is indeed a mitzvah, Shmuel desired that Israel not desire a king for the first reason enumerated above—of ensuring that they refrain from negative behavior and sin—but rather, the higher objective of a king.

He desired that king be an individual who can lead Israel to higher heights than could be attained on their own. Not that the king ensure a simple fear of punishment, but that he should elicit in Israel a deep awe of G-d.

However, when Israel beseeched Shmuel that he appoint a king, they said “set up for us a king to judge us like all the nations.” In their statement, it was clear to Shaul that they wished to ensure the situation of “a man would swallow(ing) his neighbor alive.”

This—that without a king there is a fear that Israel would act in a morally reprehensible manner—is essentially expressive that at that time Israel did not have a most basic fear of Heaven.

It is for this reason that G-d stated that their need for a king to ensure improper conduct articulates that “they have rejected Me from reigning over them.” For if they feared G-d they would not need a king to negate anti-social behavior.⁴

Notwithstanding the negative manner in which Israel desired a king, it is nevertheless understood why G-d acquiesced to their request and gave them a king.

For, although He was disappointed that Israel on their own did not fear G-d, and a basic fear is something that Israel should attain on their own accord, He nevertheless wished that Israel should have this basic fear—until they manage on their own to fear G-d.

The Lesson

As with everything, there is an important lesson that learned in our own lives:

Although in exile Israel does not have a king, the Talmud (Gittin 62a) expresses that “the rabbis are kings.”

⁴ While the verse in our Parsha too states that Israel will say "I will set a king over myself, like all the nations around me," see Ramban, *ad loc* who says

The manner in which we are to fulfill the directive to appoint a king is expressed in the Mishnah:

Text 7

Yehoshua the son of Perachia and Nitai the Arbelite received from them. Yehoshua the son of Perachia would say: Assume for yourself a Rav-master, acquire for yourself a friend, and judge every man to the side of merit.

Mishna, Avot 1:6

Just as with a king there are two types of kings, so too with a Rav and mentor, there are two types. There is the master that helps a person decide simple matters and there is a Rav that helps his student reach a higher potential than he could of on his own.

Being that a person can likely think that he can decide simple matters on his own, and he does not need a rav, the Mishna states unequivocally “make for yourself a master.”

The individual who is hesitant to find a rav to follow justifies his decision saying, “I only need a mentor for great things, but simple decisions of basic fear of heaven I can trust myself with.”

Although the person is aware that he is in a lowly spiritual situation, he still hesitates to seek advice, saying “I will wait until I am spiritually awakened,” but he thinks that he can ensure his fear of G-d without any outside help.

In this is the lesson of appointing a king. Although truthfully basic fear of heaven is something that everyone should have, G-d states that to negate a situation of “they have rejected

that this is only a hint to what *will* happen but is not G-d’s true intent of kingship.

Me,” G-d instructs Shmuel—and by extension each one of us—that we appoint a king to ensure fear of G-d.

Still people claim that they cannot find a proper mentor. This though is untrue—Israel is not an orphan. Definitely if he would only try he will find a proper guide to lead him on the path of fear and love of the Almighty.

Initially the mentor will teach him basic fear of heaven but eventually he will grow until he is capable of being taught true awe of G-d.

This ultimate king will be expressed in Moshiach who is called both a rav and a king—may he speedily be revealed now.

(Based on Likutei Sichot 24, Shoftim 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)