

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHOFTIM

The Image of the Jewish King According to the Torah

By Rav Elyakim Krumbein

When conceiving the function of the king, one would expect that his primary function would be to tend to issues of national concern. The Rambam presents the Jewish monarch's job description thus:

"From the outset, a king is crowned only to carry out justice and war, as it states, 'Let our king serve as judge over us and go out at our head and fight our battles' (Shemuel I 8:20)." (Hilkhos Melakhim, end of chapter 4)

Earlier in Hilkhos Melakhim (3:4), however, the Rambam offers a different illustration of the life of the king:

"It is forbidden for a king to drink in an intoxicating manner, as it states, 'Wine is not for kings to drink' (Mishlei 31:4). Rather, he should be occupied with Torah and the needs of Israel day and night, as it states, 'Let it [the Torah scroll] remain with him and let him read in it all his life' (Devarim 17:19)."

Here the Rambam introduces an additional element of the king's role – to study Torah. Although the king is appointed to deal with national concerns, diligent Torah study must accompany his work on behalf of the country. Despite the vastness of his responsibilities towards the people, the weight of the entire nation resting upon his shoulders, he must nevertheless ensure the ongoing cultivation of his inner, spiritual self, maintain the purity of his heart, and engage in serious Torah study.

Remarkably, the Torah mentions nothing of national responsibility throughout its legislation regarding the Jewish monarchy in our parasha. Instead, the Torah stresses the king's responsibility to maintain strict spiritual standards. At the conclusion of this section, the Torah presents the rationale for a series of laws regulating the king's

conduct (i.e. the prohibitions against excessive wealth and an excessive number of wives, as well as the king's obligation to read the Torah regularly): "Thus he will not act haughtily" (17:20).

The Torah seems to pay particular attention to the king's obligation to write a Torah scroll and to study it throughout his life. Are we to understand this mitzva simply as a means to avoid the moral corruption endemic to positions of authority? If this were the underlying purpose of these regulations, then it would be sufficient for the king to possess and make use of an old Torah scroll, perhaps one inherited from his predecessors. But Chazal insist that the king must write his own scroll, a requirement codified by the Rambam (Hil. Melakhim 3:1). Apparently, the Torah demands more than mere resistance to the temptation of royal corruption. The king must invest creative energy into his spiritual life.

Imagine if a high-ranking public official today would take out time from his schedule, on a regular basis, to spend hours in the Temple engrossed in religious contemplation. For several hours, he would ignore the burning issues and dire problems facing his constituency and focus on his own spirituality. Undoubtedly, such a politician would be scorned and accused of indifference and insensitivity to the public. A truly responsible leader would never bring himself to "waste time" in such a manner.

The Rambam, however, reacts differently to such a statesman:

"The Torah was insistent with regard to his heart turning away, as it states, 'Lest his heart go astray,' for his heart is the heart of the entire congregation of Israel. Therefore, the verse attached him to Torah more so than the rest of the nation, as it states, '[Let him read in it] all his life.'" (Ibid. 3:6)

Thus, the strict standards demanded of the king evolve not only out of the Torah's concern for the likelihood of arrogance on the king's part. Rather, these guidelines relate to the Torah's view of the king's soul as equivalent to that of the entire people. He is devoted to the concerns of the nation at large and focuses on his obligations in this regard. Specifically due to his stature as leader, he must serve as a shining example of a life of faith. The foundation of such a life is the recognition that the resolutions to life's crises certainly require effort and exertion on the practical level, but when all is said and done, everything depends on absolute moral rectitude. The king may not give the mistaken impression that the generation's problems can be addressed adequately without concern for ethical standards and service of God.

Not coincidentally, the ideal image of the Jewish monarch is that of King David. He was unparalleled in the number of enemies who threatened him and crises from which

he suffered; but he was also unmatched in his keen, vibrant and constant spiritual awareness. Moreover, he possessed a supreme sense of the existential relationship between the two - the link between crisis and faith.

In this sense, the parasha of the Jewish king bears a critical message for every Jew. Like the king in Parashat Shoftim, each of us must remember that even in times of distress and challenge, ethical standards remain the central problem in life. One's primary concern must be, as King David put it so poignantly (in mizmor 27, which we begin to recite this week), "One thing I ask of the Lord, only that do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life," engrossed in Torah, service of God and acts of kindness. But regarding other problems that arise, after the appropriate effort is exerted, one must sense that, "The Lord is my light and my help – whom shall I fear?"

(Translated by David Silverberg)

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