

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Shoftim
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Shoftim – Appointing a king

In this week's Parsha of Shoftim, Moshe instructs Bnei Yisrael about the laws relating to the appointment of a king (Devarim 17:14-20). The king must be a member of Bnei Yisrael and he must not have too many horses, too many wives or too much wealth. The king also needs two copies of the Torah. One copy of the Torah is to be kept in his treasury. The other copy is kept with him at all times so that he can read from it and learn to fear Hashem and not become haughty.

The commentators debate as to whether the appointment of a king over Bnei Yisrael is an ideal situation or not. Historically, after entering the Land, Bnei Yisrael's fortunes waxed and waned. The book of Shoftim (Judges) covers around 400 years during this time period. Studying the book of Shoftim reveals a pattern which illuminates an important benefit of having a king. The text tells us a number of times that there was no king in Israel and each person did what was right in their own eyes. This led to the nation stumbling. Each time that Bnei Yisrael sinned, Hashem punished them by allowing them to be defeated by the enemies that surrounded them. When the situation became unbearable, Bnei Yisrael would cry out to Hashem. Hashem would then give them a righteous leader who would help Bnei Yisrael to get back on track, do teshuva, defeat their enemies and bring about a period of peace. However, after each leader died, this cycle would repeat itself.

This pattern suggests that the leadership of a righteous king would have prevented Bnei Yisrael from stumbling. If the kingship would be passed down from generation to generation and there would be a series of righteous kings, this would seem to be a solution to Bnei Yisrael's challenges.

Yet, when Bnei Yisrael asked the prophet Shmuel to appoint a king, he accused them of rejecting Hashem.¹ Shmuel's response provides evidence supporting the argument that appointing a king is not ideal. Hashem is already our king and we should not need a human king as well.

The answer seems to be that appointing a king is useful and positive but only if it is done for the right reasons. In sefer Shoftim, Bnei Yisrael requested a king because they wanted to be like the surrounding nations. That is why Shmuel criticised them. They should have requested a king because they wanted an inspiring leader who would lead them in the service of Hashem.

What lessons can we learn from this concept of kingship?

We need guidance

Historically, Bnei Yisrael have struggled without righteous leadership. It is not good for each person to do merely what is right in their own eyes. These days, our guidance comes from the Halacha and the Rabbis that tell us how to act appropriately and how to interact with each other. We have to be humble enough to realise that we need this guidance. We can't just do what is right in our own eyes.

Being as bold as a leopard

David HaMelech epitomises kingship. He is the father of the Davidic dynasty which will ultimately give rise to the Moshiach. In the book of Tehillim, which David HaMelech compiled, he writes as follows:

¹ Shmuel Aleph 10:17-19.

“And now, kings, be wise. Be disciplined you judges of the earth”. (Tehillim 2:10)

This pasuk is talking to the gentile kings. Rashi explains that David is admonishing the gentile kings to turn away from evil and be spared punishment. Imagine the meetings between David and the other kings of his time. They would want to talk about the topics that kings find interesting – how much they have in their treasury, recent wars, lands they had conquered. David would have spent his whole time talking about Hashem, teshuva and the Torah! The other kings must have thought that David was weird! However David didn't care what the other kings thought. He was a living example of the advice taught by Yehuda Ben Tema in Pirkei Avot 5:23 – “Be bold as a leopard...to carry out the will of your Father in Heaven”. Authorities² explain this to mean that we should not be embarrassed to carry out Hashem's will, even amongst people who scorn and laugh at us. This is certainly something that we could learn from King David.

The trait of Malchut

The Kabbalah teaches us that there are ten Divine Sefirot through which Hashem created the world. The 10th Sefirah is Malchut or kingship. There are many layers of meaning to each of the Divine Sefirot, but let us explore just one aspect of Malchut. What is this trait of Malchut and how can we acquire it? On one level, Malchut means to act in a kingly or royal manner. Though a king is involved in his kingdom, he is also above it. He is not affected by what happens around him. That would be beneath the king's dignity. We learn this from the ultimate king – Hashem himself. Hashem is intimately involved in the world that he created. However, nothing that happens in the world can have any effect on Him. This juxtaposition seems to be almost impossible. It is a very hard trait to attain, but if used correctly it is a very admirable trait. We are often impacted by our surroundings – we take on other people's moods, we are personally affected by comments that other people make, and we are influenced by inappropriate things that we see and hear.

Adopting the trait of Malchut will allow us to rise above our influences. In turn this will enable us to simply focus on serving Hashem and doing what He commands. Ironically, one way for us to achieve Malchut is to focus on Hashem's kingship and on our own lowly position relative to Hashem. If we truly understand and believe that Hashem is in charge, we will be less likely to be negatively influenced or impacted by our surroundings.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the lesson from the book of Shoftim. It is not good for us to do what is right in our own eyes. We need to be humble enough to realise that we need guidance and leadership. Our guidance comes from the Shulchan Aruch – the code of Jewish Law and the Rabbis.
2. We can learn from King David to be as bold as a leopard. We shouldn't be embarrassed to do what we know is right, regardless of what other people might think or say.
3. Try to work on achieving the trait of Malchut. We should aim to tread that fine tightrope of being involved and caring about those we love and yet avoiding being distracted by negative emotions or influences to the point where it interferes with our service of Hashem.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder

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² See the Tur (Orach Chaim 1) and the Rambam's commentary on the Mishnah. It is also brought as halacha by the Rama in Orach Chaim 1:1.