

## 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?

### Parashat Shoftim – Acting like a king

In this week’s Parsha of Shoftim, Moshe discusses the laws relating to the appointment of a king. The commentators are divided as to whether appointing a king over Bnei Yisrael is a positive or negative thing. On the one hand, Hashem should be our King and His Torah should guide us. We should not need a human leader. On the other hand, the Jewish people need strong leadership to keep us focused and on track. Without a king, there is a risk that each person will do what is right in their own eyes<sup>1</sup> and the nation could descend into anarchy.

Being anointed as king was obviously a huge privilege. But the kingship was also supposed to be a position of responsibility and service. The halachot enumerated by Moshe in this Parsha remind the king of his position and ensure that he does not get carried away with excess. The king must be Jewish – he can’t be like the kings of the surrounding nations. He cannot accumulate too many horses or too much money. The gentile kings would enjoy demonstrating their greatness and power by showing off their possessions. But not the Jewish king. He must also not have too many wives, who could turn his heart astray and divert him from his important role. And he must possess two sifrei Torah, one of which he must keep with him at all times – to remind him that he is subject to the laws of the Torah.

Moshe explains that the aim of these laws, is to ensure that king’s heart not become haughty over his brothers and that he not turn away from the mitzvot<sup>2</sup>. And if he fulfils his role faithfully then he will prolong his years over his kingdom, both for himself and for his son that will reign after him.

The Jewish king had a two-pronged responsibility – he needed to ensure the spiritual and material wellbeing of his people.

**Spiritual wellbeing:** In sefer Shoftim (the book of Judges), we read about two very sad events in our history – the idol of Micah (which persisted in Eretz Yisrael for many years) and the concubine of Givah (a horrific crime which led to civil war).<sup>3</sup> The Tanach makes it clear that these tragic episodes only happened because there was no leadership.<sup>4</sup> A righteous king would not have allowed such travesties to occur.

**Material wellbeing:** The Gemara (Brachot 3b) describes how David Hamelech spent his time. After spending most of the night engrossed in Torah study and other spiritual pursuits, once dawn arrived, the sages of Israel would come to him to discuss the needs of the people. The example chosen by the Gemara relates to the physical sustenance of the people. The Sages said: “Our master, the king, your nation requires sustenance”. After discussing options, David decided that the people would need to take up arms and expand the borders to provide the

<sup>1</sup> This phrase appears numerous times in the book of Shoftim, which describes the period before a king was appointed.

<sup>2</sup> Devarim 17:20.

<sup>3</sup> See Shoftim chapters 18 and 19.

<sup>4</sup> See Shoftim 18:1 and

people with the opportunity to earn a livelihood. We thus see that David was also responsible for ensuring that the economy ran smoothly.

Azariah was one of the kings of Yehudah<sup>5</sup>. He was a righteous king who did what was proper in the eyes of Hashem.<sup>6</sup> He enjoyed a long, peaceful and uneventful reign. However his reign ended in unfortunate circumstances. He had a burning desire to offer incense to Hashem in the Bet Hamikdash. His intentions were pure and holy, but misdirected. He was not a Kohen and he was not allowed to usurp the Kohen's role. But he could not restrain himself and he entered the Heichal of the Bet Hamikdash. As a punishment, he was struck with tzora'at and he did not recover until the day of his death. He could not reign in that condition, so he was forced to retire early and his son Yotam reigned in his place. It is very interesting how the Tanach describes his retirement:

*“He lived בבית החפשיית (in a house of freedom), and Yotam the king's son who was appointed over the palace, judged the people of the land.” (Melachim Bet 15:5)*

Why does the Tanach refer to Azariah's retirement house as a house of 'freedom'? We see here again the role of the Jewish king – his role is to serve the people and ensure that they are prospering spiritually and materially. This is a great privilege but also a great responsibility. When Yotam took over Azariah's throne, Azariah was 'freed' from this responsibility.

The lesson of the Jewish king applies to us all. We are not kings. But if we are in a position of privilege or power, with this comes a big responsibility. This responsibility applies to us on a macro level and on a micro level.

On a macro level: the Jewish people have been chosen to be Hashem's representatives in this world. We are a special chosen nation. But this is not just a privilege, it is also a responsibility. We are responsible for ensuring that the world moves in the right direction and recognises Hashem. We have a duty to bring ethical monotheism to the world. And just like the responsibilities of kings as set out in this Parsha, we have to remember not to become haughty, not to turn away from the mitzvot, and to fulfil our role faithfully. (And if we forget, the nations of the world are only too happy to step in and remind us.)

On a micro level: most of us has power over others at our own level – whether it's our children, our students, our friends. We all have a sphere of influence. And we must use that influence like a king – to do what we can to ensure the wellbeing of others, both spiritually and materially. And we must not abuse this position of power.

We may not be kings, but we are all children of the King of kings. That means that we are part of the royal family. This is an enormous privilege. But it also means that we have the responsibility to act accordingly.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we are all part of Hashem's royal family and we have the responsibility to act accordingly.
2. Think about what this means – as a member of the Jewish people and where we have influence over others. Consider whether we are acting like a king, as described in this week's Parsha, or abusing our position of power.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>5</sup> He was also known as Uzziah (see Divrei Hayamim Bet, 26:16-21 and Melachim Bet 15:13).

<sup>6</sup> Melachim Bet 15:3.