



DIVREI MENACHEM

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A King or Not? – That is the Question!

Parshat Shoftim introduces the concept of kingship in Israeli society – likely not a very good idea. After all, in the Book of Shmuel, the prophet Shmuel rants at the people for thinking about a king, perhaps on several accounts.

First, Hakadosh Baruch Hu is the ultimate King to whom we owe allegiance. Any “replacement” diminishes faith in Hashem as we turn to the mortal king for guidance and assistance. We shall likely find ourselves increasingly in that monarch’s service, obliged to accede to his every whim, to the point that we forget to do Hashem’s bidding!

Shmuel appears to have taken the people’s wish for a king personally as if the rank and file were dissatisfied with his leadership. However, the most cogent argument against the establishment of the monarchy, from a Torah perspective, was that the people wanted a king to mimic other nations (Shmuel I, 8:5).

Strange, because in those days, kings introduced forced labor, grabbed lands and vineyards, forced their subjects to pay high taxes, and even recruited sons to their

armies – reasons enough for the people to think twice. But they insisted: “*We shall be like all the nations; our king will judge us, go forth before us and wage our wars.*”

Now, in our Parsha, however, it states categorically that “*you will [at some future time] say, I will set a king over myself like all the nations around me*” (Devarim 17:14). Moreover, the passuk continues with the command, “*You shall surely set over yourself a king whom Hashem, your God, shall choose from among your brothers*” (ibid 17:15). Furthermore, requesting a king was one of three commandments imposed on Israel as a nation, once the people were established in its Land (cf. Sanhedrin 20b).

So, is kingship in Israel desirable or not? In answer to that question, we observe the many strictures placed on the king’s head. He is to keep away from material excesses and write a Sefer Torah, keep it close, and observe its decrees so that he will learn to fear Hashem, his God, and so that his heart does not become haughty.

Clearly, from a halachic perspective, a king (who is upright and God-fearing) is not only a desirable “commodity” but also kingship is a command to be fulfilled. Notably, the people demanded a king when the judges were in decline. Thus, their comment to Shmuel that he was advanced in days and a new leader was appropriate appears legitimate.

We leave the answer to our question

in suspense. First, consider that even the wisest King Shlomo laid a heavy tax on the people and that later internecine power struggles in the royal family led to the nation's division. On the other hand, Sefer Shoftim intimates that had there been a righteous king at the time of the judges, two major tragedies of that period – Micha's graven image (Shoftim chaps. 17-18) and the "Concubine at Giv'a" (ibid. chaps. 19-21) – could have been avoided (cf. ibid 18:1; 19:1).

Shabbat Shalom ■
Menachem Persoff



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