



DR. MENI KOSLOWSKY

VICE PRESIDENT, OU ISRAEL

GUEST DVAR TORAH

# Leaders of the Jewish People

Parashat Shoftim presents judges and kings as the decision-making authorities for the Jewish nation. Judges were chosen by G-d, while Kings were supreme, hereditary rulers emanating from the tribe of Yehuda. A judge's authority was focused on judicial tasks and certain military issues, whereas the king's position defined a more centralized, permanent authority over the entire country. The transition from judges to kings, initiated by the people's request for a king like other nations, marked a shift from G-d as the direct ruler to a man-centered system.

As kings assumed their positions in a hereditary manner, many followed their wants and their needs rather than the laws and commandments as set down in the Torah. Rabbi Yaakov Meidan writes that the Jews were given three Mitzvot when they entered the land, namely, to destroy Amalek, to build a Temple for sacrifice and prayer, and to appoint a king. Rav Meidan argues that the kings were often deficient in their G-d fearing behavior, but their influence on the people was astounding. Accordingly, when the country of Israel was split into two kingdoms, Judah and Israel, the unity of "Am Yisrael" was split into two, accompanied by many battles with thousands being killed.

In Shmuel 1, G-d was reluctant to give Israel a king because their request to be like other nations was a rejection of Him as their true king and an expression of misplaced trust in worldly power. G-d warned Shmuel that a king would be oppressive and that the people would

eventually regret their choice, but He ultimately granted their demand, allowing them free will, albeit with serious consequences.

Yet, the Ramban also lists a positive side for a country led by a king. Several times throughout the Torah, the need for Israel to be ruled by kings is expressed. This is particularly seen in 6 : 17 (בראשית 6 : 17) (where Abraham, Issac, and Jacob are told that their descendants will serve as kings of Israel. The perceived advantages for ancient Israel in having a human king included a person to provide guidance and protection, a way to establish national unity and identity like other nations, a more efficient system for warfare and leadership, and a leader who could serve as both a ruler and, when needed, as a judge for the people of Israel (1 Samuel 8).

Moreover, according to the Ramban, the institution of a king is not merely a practical or political choice but a mitzvah (commandment) to act per God's will and covenant. According to him, the king serves as the head of the nation, responsible for implementing Jewish law and ensuring the welfare of the people within the land of Israel proper. And, finally, unlike other opinions that see the command to establish royalty in Israel as conditional and temporary, the Ramban argues that the mandate for a king is a universal command for all generations, not limited to the original conquest or specific individuals. ■

**Dr. Meni Koslowsky** is a Professor in the department of Psychology at Ariel University and Bar-Ilan University (emeritus).