



GEULAS YISRAEL

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RAM YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
MAGGID SHIUR ALL PARSHA AND ALL DAF, OU.ORG

Democracy in a Redeemed World

Parshat Shoftim portrays the political and judicial infrastructure of life in Eretz Yisrael. It describes a network of courts established to adjudicate legal disputes and administer justice. Alongside the conventional judicial system, the Kohanim maintained their own courts, presumably to oversee matters relating to the purity of the Mikdash and korbanot.

The Sanhedrin HaGedolah was far more than our highest court of judicial appeal. Especially before Torah sheba'al peh was committed to writing, it served as the conduit through which the masorah was transmitted. As the Rambam writes in Hilchot Mamrim 1:1:

בית דין הגדול שבירושלים הם עיקר תורה שבעל פה, והם עמודי ההוראה, ומהם חוק ומשפט יוצא לכל ישראל.



Rav Abraham
Isaac Kook zt"l

“The Great Court in Jerusalem is the foundation of the Oral Torah. They are the pillars of halachic instruction, and from them law and justice go forth to all Israel.”

Denying the authority of the Sanhedrin threatened the integrity and legitimacy of the Torah sheba'al peh. This is why a zaken mamre—a member of the Sanhedrin who openly defies its rulings—is punished so severely. His rebellion is more than a personal act of dissent. By rejecting the authority of the institution entrusted with transmitting the masorah, he undermines the foundation of Torah shebe'al peh.

APPOINTING A KING

After establishing the judicial framework of a Jewish state, the Torah turns to the institution of monarchy. The Torah appears to command the appointment of a king, and the Rambam indeed counts this as a positive mitzvah (Sefer HaMitzvot, Aseh 173; Hilchot Melachim 1:1). Yet the Torah carefully circumscribes the king's authority. He may not marry too many wives, acquire too many horses, or excessively amass silver and gold. These limitations are meant to preserve his humility despite the immense power vested in him.

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SHMUEL'S RESERVATIONS

Yet when the time actually arrives to appoint a king, Shmuel HaNavi is far less enthusiastic. He warns that a king may abuse his authority, conscript the nation's children for his own service, and seize their property for personal gain:

אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם יִקַּח, וְשָׂם לוֹ בַּמִּרְכָּבָתוֹ וּבַפָּרָשָׁיו, וְרָצוּ לִפְנֵי מִרְכָּבָתוֹ. וְלָשׁוּם לוֹ שָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים וְשָׂרֵי חֲמִשִּׁים, וְלִחְרֹשׁ חֲרִישׁוֹ וְלִקְצֹר קִצִּירוֹ, וְלַעֲשׂוֹת כְּלֵי מִלְחָמָתוֹ וְכָלֵי רֶכֶב. וְאֶת בְּנוֹתֵיכֶם יִקַּח לְרָקָחוֹת וּלְטַבָּחוֹת וּלְאִפּוֹת. וְאֶת שְׂדוֹתֵיכֶם וְאֶת כְּרָמֵיכֶם וְזֵיתֵיכֶם, הַטֹּבִים יִקַּח וְנָתַן לַעֲבָדָיו.

“He will take your sons and assign them to his chariots and cavalry... He will take your daughters... He will take your best fields, vineyards, and olive groves and give them to his servants.” (I Samuel 8:11–14)

Hashem likewise expresses disappointment with the people's request:

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל שְׁמוּאֵל, שָׁמַע בְּקוֹל הָעָם לְכָל אֲשֶׁר יֹאמְרוּ אֵלַיךְ, כִּי לֹא אֶתָּךְ מָצָאוּ, כִּי אֹתִי מָצָאוּ מִמֶּלֶךְ עֲלֵיהֶם...

“Listen to the people... for it is not you whom they have rejected, but Me they have rejected from reigning over them.” (I Samuel 8:7–8)

Shmuel's response casts a shadow over what appears in Parshat Shoftim to be a mitzvah.

Most famously, the Abarbanel disagrees with the Rambam and based largely on the account in Shmuel I argues that appointing a king is not a mitzvah but merely a concession. The Torah is simply establishing the legal framework should we choose to create a monarchy.

Either way, Shmuel's pessimistic prediction proved all too accurate. The First Mikdash period was marred by wayward kings who embraced idolatry, persecuted the prophets,

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and murdered those who challenged their authority. With only a handful of exceptions, the monarchy was marked by corruption and spiritual decline, ultimately leading to the destruction of the First Mikdash.

The monarchy during the Second Temple period fared little better. The Hasmonean dynasty, despite its heroic beginnings, eventually became consumed by political rivalries, dynastic struggles, and violence. The reign of Alexander Yannai was especially turbulent, culminating in a bloody civil war that claimed thousands of Jewish lives. The history of Jewish monarchy is therefore far from an unbroken story of noble and righteous kings.

Nor was this pattern unique to Jewish history. Across much of human history, concentrating absolute power in the hands of a single ruler repeatedly bred corruption, oppression, and violence. Monarchs curtailed personal liberties, waged wars for their own glory, and diverted national wealth for personal ambition and luxury.

THE DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION

With the rise of democracy in the eighteenth century, the political landscape changed dramatically. Power was no longer concentrated in the hands of a single ruler, and the rights of individuals were no longer dependent upon the caprice of an absolute monarch. Democracy promised a better world, one in which

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citizens would enjoy equal protection under the law, choose their leaders through elections, and preserve human dignity through constitutional rights and personal freedoms. Though democracy emerged from Western political thought rather than Torah, it reflected a growing appreciation that every human being possesses inherent dignity because each person is created b'tzelem Elokim.

Democracy also unleashed human creativity and initiative. Together with the rise of capitalism, it created unprecedented opportunities for people to develop their abilities, build businesses, accumulate wealth, and improve their standard of living. The resulting advances in science, technology, medicine, and industry reshaped the modern world. Although poverty has by no means disappeared, much of the developed world has been spared the chronic starvation and extreme deprivation that plagued earlier centuries.

For the Jewish people, democracy transformed Jewish life. For the first time in centuries, we were granted freedom of worship and permitted to practice our religion without systematic discrimination or legal restriction. Those freedoms enabled the remarkable flourishing of Torah study, religious observance, and Jewish communal life.

Whether the Rambam or the Abarbanel was correct, history appears to have vindicated the Abarbanel. Humanity in general, and the Jewish people in particular, have fared far better under democratic systems than under monarchy.

DEMOCRACY AND REDEMPTION

This raises the broader question of how we view democracy as we return to Jewish sovereignty and begin the process of redemption. Now that we have reestablished a Jewish state in our homeland, how should we regard

democracy? We certainly do not view it as the final stage of Jewish political history. Each day we pray for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy:

אַתָּה צֶמַח דָּוִד עֶבְדְּךָ מְהֵרָה תִּצְמַח, וְקִרְנֵנו תְּרוֹם בְּיִשׁוּעָתְךָ.

How, then, should we understand the rise of democracy within the unfolding process of Jewish redemption?

First, we should welcome the fact that, at this stage of history, we are able to build a state founded upon fairness, equality, and the rule of law. Rav Kook argued somewhat provocatively, that our return to Eretz Yisrael was delayed until humanity had developed a form of government that more closely reflected the Torah's ideals of ethical governance. Had we returned a thousand years earlier, we would almost certainly have restored a monarchy. Yet the prevailing models of monarchy were so corrupt and abusive that we would have struggled to build a Jewish state faithful to the Torah's moral vision.

Whether or not one fully accepts Rav Kook's historical thesis, his broader insight remains compelling. History itself had to mature before the process of redemption could resume. It is profoundly meaningful that we have been granted the opportunity to rebuild a Jewish state upon principles of justice, fairness, and equality.

We should cherish and value the democratic system, which has contributed so much to human welfare and has benefited the Jewish people so dramatically. We should appreciate the opportunity to rebuild Jewish sovereignty in a manner that upholds human dignity and protects basic rights and freedoms.

A JEWISH STATE AND A DEMOCRATIC STATE

At the same time, democracy is not our ultimate ideal. In recent decades we have

witnessed how political polarization can paralyze democratic institutions and fracture society. We have also seen the difficulty democracies often face in preserving a coherent national identity amid increasingly fragmented political cultures. Democracy remains the finest system of government humanity has developed thus far, but it is far from perfect. As we continue rebuilding Jewish sovereignty, we should cherish democracy and preserve it carefully, while never allowing it to displace the greater mission of building a Jewish state that reflects Torah values.

Even if democracy had no shortcomings, it would still not represent the culmination of Jewish political destiny. As we rebuild Jewish sovereignty, we should value democracy deeply without mistaking it for our ultimate political ideal.

We are often confronted with the question of whether Israel should be a Jewish state or a democratic state. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these two values can be reconciled. Yet our higher aspiration is to build a Jewish state infused with Jewish spirituality and, ultimately, religious purpose. Democracy, fairness, and the rule of law are the means through which we seek to achieve that goal, but they are not the goal itself.

THE MONARCHY OF REDEMPTION

The problem was never monarchy itself. It was entrusting unchecked political power to ordinary human beings. Democracy succeeds because it begins with a sober assessment of human nature and therefore disperses authority among multiple institutions. The monarchy of the future will succeed for the opposite reason. It will emerge in a redeemed world transformed by the unmistakable presence of Hashem.

The restored Davidic king will not resemble

the corrupt monarchs of history. His authority will be naturally restrained by his fear of Heaven and by a world in which the Divine Presence is manifest. Rather than directing attention to himself, he will serve as the earthly representative of Hashem's kingship.

Judaism has never viewed politics as an end in itself. Every political system is merely a vessel through which Hashem's presence becomes more visible in human history. Democracy protects the dignity of man because every person is created b'tzelem Elokim. The restored Davidic monarchy will reveal something even greater—that political authority itself exists only to reflect the kingship of Hashem.

וְהָיָה ה' לְמֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ; בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא יְהִיָּה ה' אֶחָד וְשֵׁמוֹ אֶחָד.

Until that day arrives, democracy remains the finest political system humanity has devised. We should cherish it, protect it, and strengthen it. Yet we also recognize that it is not the culmination of Jewish political destiny. It is the finest vessel history has yet produced for rebuilding Jewish sovereignty until the world is ready for the perfect kingship of Hashem. ■



Rabbi Moshe Taragin's latest sefer entitled: **Reclaiming Redemption, Vol. II: Faith, Identity, Peoplehood, and the Storms of War**, is available at: mtaraginbooks.com.

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