



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

“Reflections on Divine Kingship”

We now enter a period of the year that demands two kinds of spiritual commitment. The first is *charatah*, regret: an honest inner search of our past year’s behavior, especially conduct that was sinful, immoral, inconsiderate, evil, or cruel.

A sobering, if frightening, experience, for sure. Besides feeling regretful, we must commit to abandon such practices from this day forward. That is *teshuvah*, repentance.

As I grow older, however, I have become aware of a different type of regret. It is not regret for missed behavior. It is regret for

missed opportunities.

Chief among them was my failure to draw closer to the great rabbinic figures of my youth, particularly Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik and Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, both of blessed memory. I was never a direct student of the former, although I did attend quite a few of his public lectures. Of the latter, I had even less exposure, even though, in the early years of my marriage, I resided within walking distance of his home and synagogue headquarters.

As readers of my weekly columns, you may have noticed that I have tried to rectify my missed opportunity by studying their works, reading their biographies, and befriending some of



Rabbi Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff

their most prominent students.

Both giants stressed another aspect of the upcoming days, beginning with Rosh Hashanah. It is the concept of *Malchut Shamayim*, the Kingship of the Almighty. This concept is aptly explained in Rabbi Dr. Aaron Rakeffet-Rothkoff’s two-volume biography of Rav Soloveitchik, entitled *The Rav: The World of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik*.

“Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, doyen of Jewish thinkers in the 20th century, used to explain this by telling the story of his first Hebrew teacher, a Chabad Chasid who made an indelible impression on him as a child by telling him that Rosh Hashanah was God’s

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coronation. ‘And who puts the crown on His head? We do.’ He spoke about his memories of praying as a child among the Chasidim on the first night of Rosh Hashanah:

“I can feel the unique atmosphere which enveloped these Chasidim as they recited the prayers by which they proclaimed Him their King. The older Chasidim termed this night the “Coronation Night”... These poor and downtrodden Jews... were able to experience the enthroning of the Almighty and the true meaning of the Kingship prayers of the Rosh Hashanah liturgy.’

“The Shofar on Rosh Hashanah is our way of participating in God’s coronation.”

As one born and bred in the United States of America, and one who was taught the values of democracy from kindergarten, I have always found it difficult to accept Kingship as a metaphor for the *Ribbono shel Olam*, the Master of the Universe. The kings that I read about in world history were rarely models of competence, let alone morality and beneficence. Similarly, the presidents of the United States, with perhaps a very few exceptions, were hardly exemplary individuals. Even the current USA President, who occasionally asserts royal powers, is met by masses who cry out, “No Kings!”

Rabbi Schneerson, henceforth referred to as the Lubavitcher Rebbe or the Rebbe, and who had a long and deep connection with Rabbi Soloveitchik, developed a conception of Kingship much more appropriate to the *Ribbono shel Olam*. For one version of his approach, I will introduce you to his profound mystical/spiritual/Chassidish definition of divine Kingship.

It is to be found in his commentary on *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers*) chapter 3, paragraph 2. It reads:

“Rabbi Chanina, the deputy High Priest, said: Pray for the welfare (*shalom*) of the government (*malchut*, or Kingship), for were it not for fear of it, people would swallow one another alive.”

The Lubavitcher Rebbe is troubled (as are numerous other commentators, including the Maharal of Prague) by the phrase “would swallow one another alive”. Why not simply, “would kill each other”?

The Rebbe is also troubled by the fact that the theme of *Ethics of the Fathers* is ethics, piety, and religious service. Why is Rabbi Chanina preaching political strategy?

He explains that “swallow one another alive” does not describe a physical act. Rather, it captures the dynamic between an arrogant, powerful person and someone he sees as inferior—someone he feels entitled to demean at will. A king need not kill his subject; he can simply reduce him to fodder.

The Rebbe chooses to adopt a completely different interpretation of Rabbi Chanina’s teaching. It is the interpretation of the medieval rabbinic sage, Ritva, as quoted in the compilation known as *Midrash Shmuel*.

Ritva explains that “pray for the welfare, or *shalom*, of the government—*malchut*, or king” means praying for the *shalom* of the heavenly

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attribute of divine Kingship. It is a call to ask the Almighty to intervene in worldly matters of war and peace.

The “inner” meaning, insists the Rebbe, is incorporated in this verse in *Kohelet* (Ecclesiastes) chapter 5, verse 7: “If you see in a province oppression of the poor and suppression of right and justice, don’t wonder at the fact; for one high official is protected by a higher one, and both of them by a still higher one.”

The “kings” whom we tend to fear are ultimately subject to a Higher Authority, to the Master of the Universe, the *Ribbono shel Olam*. Only He can thwart the schemes of those who would “swallow us alive.”

Lord Acton knew that if power corrupts, then absolute power corrupts absolutely. Ritva, the Lubavitcher Rebbe, and surely Rav Soloveitchik as well, knew that the

“absolutely” powerful are subject to the One with Absolute Power, the King whom we coronate on Rosh Hashanah.

Oseh shalom bimromav, May He who makes peace in His high places,

Hu berachamav ya’aseh shalom aleinu, in His compassion make peace for us and all Israel —

V'imru amen, and say: Amen. ■

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