

Shoftim

In Parshas Shoftim, the Torah tells us many mitzvos that will apply when we enter the Land of Israel. The Torah commands us to set up three cities of refuge, and it warns us to not practice magic and sorcery like the inhabitants of the Land. The Torah also tells us the mitzvah of appointing a Jewish king over the nation upon settling in Israel.

But there is a fundamental difference between the way the Torah presents the mitzvah of appointing a king and the other mitzvos. With regards to the cities of refuge, the Torah (Deuteronomy 19:2) simply says that after you settle in the Land, “You should separate three cities.” Similarly, with regards to the practices of the Canaanites, the Torah (ibid. 18:10) says you should not learn from them and “There should not be found among you a sorcerer or magician.” However, when presenting the mitzvah to appoint a king, the Torah (17:14) prefaces that after you have settled in the Land, “You will say ‘I will place upon me a king like all the nations around me.’” After putting these words into our mouths, the Torah (17:15) directs us “You shall surely place upon you a king, one that Hashem your G-d chooses.” Why does the Torah not cut straight to the point with the directive?

The Talmud (Sanhedrin 20b) presents an early dispute regarding the nature of the mitzvah of appointing a king. R’ Yehuda argues that we must appoint a king, and we are not supposed to even build the Temple until first we have a king. But R’ Nehorai says ideally we should never need a king like all other nations do. He says the Torah gave us directions regarding a king and his conduct only because He knew that later we would complain about not having a king, hence the introduction of “You will say ‘I will place upon me a king like all the nations around me’”. Once Hashem allows us a king, He tells us that the king must not have too many horses, wives, or gold and silver, and that the king must carry a special Torah scroll with him at all times. The dispute between R’ Yehuda and R’ Nehorai hinges on whether the mitzvah of making a king is a commandment like any other, or if the mitzvah was given due to our own weakness.

What is wrong with wanting a king? It would make sense to appoint a leader to oversee our country’s political, social, religious, and economic needs? The Talmud (ibid.) explains the real issue is not

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whether we ask for a king, but rather why we ask for a king. The Talmud proves this from the passage in Samuel (Chapter 8) that describes how different segments of the population stressed different aspects when requesting their first king. It says the elders asked the prophet Samuel for a king to judge them. Rashi explains they wanted a king who would discipline the nation and keep everyone in line, an entirely appropriate request. But the masses inappropriately said “We will be like all the nations and our king will judge us and go out in front of us.” Rashi explains they implied they would rely on the king to lead them in fighting their battles and winning their wars. While other nations may rely totally on their king’s to help them win wars, we must recognize that victory in war or success in any other area ultimately depends on the will of Hashem. The Jewish king is a messenger sent by Hashem, and he helps us strategize in our battles, but we can only rely on G-d to actually succeed in our endeavors.

We see the same underlying idea in the Torah’s instructions to the king himself about his horses and cavalry. The Torah commands (ibid. 17:16) “Only he must not have many horses for himself.” Rashi there, quoting the Talmud, says from the superfluous words “for himself” we learn that although he may have as many horses as he needs for his chariot and cavalry, he may not have more than that. Why? Rashi (Sanhedrin 20b) says he may not arrogantly have an excess of horses to show off his wealth and make himself appear greater. Rather, he should supply his chariots and cavalry only with the amount of horses needed to serve the nation’s needs.

Nachmonides (Ramban) approaches the text from a different angle (Devarim 17:16). In explaining why the king should not have many horses, he suggests, “So that he should not rely on his great chariot and powerful cavalry, but rather his reliance should be on G-d.” Yes, the king must have the amount of horses that befit a king’s chariot and he must have the requisite troops for going to war. But Ramban sees a subtle message in the Torah’s directive to the king to not have his own extra horses. The king must know that he needs to rely on G-d to help him win the war. Just as we must not rely on the king to beat the enemy, but must know that Hashem ultimately decides the winner, so too the king himself must be keenly aware that his horses don’t win the wars.

King David sums it up in Psalms 33, where he proclaims, “The king is not saved by a great army, nor is a hero rescued by great strength.” As we approach Rosh Hashanah, it behooves us to ponder these words of David and the Torah’s message of what ought to be the mentality of a Jewish leader.

Shabbat Shalom

The JSN Team

