

"A KING IN ISRAEL"
The Theology of Jewish Politics

The Torah's concept of a limited monarchy, with a king subservient to the law and to God, is first outlined in this morning's Sidra: **כי תבא אל הארץ ... ואמרת אשימה עלי מלך ככל הגויים אשר סביבותי שום תשים עליך מלך אשר יבחר ה' אלקיך בו** . When you reach the Promised Land, and you will say, I wish to set over myself a king like all the other nations that are about me, then thou shalt set over thyself a king whom the Lord thy God will choose.

Now the Rabbis faced a basic question in approaching this Biblical passage. Is this declaration of the Torah to be considered **מצוה** , an obligation, namely, that upon arriving in the Promised Land the people of Israel must establish a strong central leadership? Or is it to be understood as **רשות** , as a grant of permission, i.e. that in the event that the leaders of the people will decide upon a monarchy and request it, that the Torah does not object to such a strong government?

This question was in issue between R. Judah and R. Nehorai (Sanhedrin 20b). R. Judah considered this a positive commandment, an obligation, while R. Nehorai regarded the statement as **רשות** ,

as permission, but not an absolute obligation. Most of our medieval commentators, the "Rishonim," are of divided opinion as to the verdict of the Halakhah; but the majority seem to favor the opinion of R. Judah who considers the passage concerning the king as מצוה , an obligation.

Now, if indeed we consider the statement of the Torah obligatory, this raises a serious and perplexing historical problem. For we read in the Prophets (I Samuel, Chapter 8) that when the Children of Israel finally did request a monarchy, the Prophet Samuel was infuriated, and God Himself was highly displeased. The elders approached Samuel, and said to him, now that you are old and we can find no worthy successor to you from amongst your children, therefore

עתה שימה לנו מלך לשפטנו , set for us a king to judge us, like all the other nations. The Prophet was incensed and he prayed to God, Who answered him, saying: you are right, the people have committed a wrong in requesting a king. Nevertheless, let them have their king, כי לא אותך מאסו כי אותי מאסו ממלוך עליהם , for they have rejected not you, but Me.

Is there not a bold contradiction between the passage in today's Sidra, indicating that it is an obligation to appoint a king, and the chapter in Samuel which clearly implies that it was wrong for the Children of Israel to request a king?

A number of answers have been offered in an attempt to resolve this problem. Permit me to comment to your attention some of them, which are both significant in their own right and also shed light upon contemporary life.

The first of these solutions, chronologically, was offered already in the days of the Mishnah. It seeks to differentiate between the request itself, which is considered legitimate, and the reason for the request, which is not. Thus the Talmud (*ibid.*) relates: תניא רבי אליעזר אומר זקנים שבדרך לזכור כבודו של אלוהים

אנשי חכמה. R. Eliezer says, the wise elders of that generation presented a most proper request: they said, give us a king to judge us. Certainly there was nothing wrong with this.

אנשי חכמה, but the ordinary people, the ignoramuses amongst them, were the ones who erred when they gave as the reason for their request the wish to be like all other nations about them.

There is nothing wrong with the desire for a strong centralized leadership. The mistake lies in the motivation for the request: the urge towards assimilation and imitation. When a nation assimilates, as when an individual abandons his own individuality in order to conform to social pressure, moral principle is violated. In both cases we have an abdication of selfhood, a sudden and irreparable damage to self-respect.

Our Sidra anticipated this moral weakness. The Torah

divides the problem into two parts: if you will say *אלימה עמי*, I desire a king, and explain it by *כבוד העמים*, the desire to imitate other peoples, then the answer is: *אלהינו יתן לנו מלך* -- your request for a king is granted. It is a proper request. However, I reject the reason for your demand: assimilation and imitation; instead, you must choose a king not because other people have one, but *אלהינו יתן לנו מלך*, a king whom the Lord your God will choose. Not assimilation to the mores and manners of other people, but obedience to the Will of God, must dictate the choice of a Jewish leader.

The second answer is one offered by the great medieval scholar, R. Nissim. He maintains that Samuel's contemporaries erred in seeking to merge two incompatible functions. They asked for one individual who would combine within himself the features of *שופט* and *מלך*, of king -- secular-executive government, and judge -- the spiritual-legislative office:

תנו לנו מלך שישפוט אותנו -- give us a king to judge us, one person who will be both king and judge.

This was the crux of their error. Our Sidra keeps these functions strictly apart. First it tells us the laws that relate to the *שופט*, the judge, and then a separate chapter is assigned to the qualifications of the *מלך*, the king. When we confuse the two roles, we leave the way open to royal and judicial corruption. The two offices must have a relationship, but they are not interchangeable.

Such indeed is the case with religion and state. There is a clear and positive relation between them. To speak of an "absolute wall of separation" between Church and State is to ignore the evidence of history. Nevertheless, they must never be identified. Politicians ought not pass on religious questions; and rabbis ought not become politicians and run for political office. When Prime Ministers of Israel try to pronounce on matters of Halakhah, they are both dangerously adventurous and downright silly. And when Rabbis in the United States venture into city politics they jeopardize their vocation and appear hopelessly naive, babes in the woods, and thus constitute a source of embarrassment to the faith and the people they represent. The two functions, that of מלך and of גביר , are two separate דברים ! Never ought they be mistaken one for the other! God Himself is incensed when they overlap.

The third and last answer I wish to comment to you is offered by the famous commentator, the author of " דברי יקר ", who bases his remarks upon a subtle but forceful distinction between two Hebrew prepositions. It is a solution which yields valuable lessons on the philosophy of leadership and especially spiritual leadership.

This commentator tells us that the Torah, in articulating the obligation to form a kingdom, utilizes the preposition על which literally means "on" or "upon"; whereas Samuel's elders utilized

the preposition ל , in its contracted form לְ , which means "to" or "for." Thus the Torah says $\text{אֶתְּנֶה לְעַמִּי מֶלֶךְ}$, I want to set upon myself, or over myself, a king; and the commandment is $\text{וְנָתַתְּ מֵעַל יְדֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ}$, you shall set over yourself, or upon yourself a king. However, the elders of Samuel's day said to the Prophet $\text{וְנָתַתְּ לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ כַּמֶּלֶךְ הַיָּבֵינִי$, now set for us a king, and $\text{וְנָתַתְּ לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ כַּמֶּלֶךְ הַיָּבֵינִי}$, give for us or to us a king to judge us.

What is the difference? -- the very nature of leadership!

לְ , when applied to leadership, means that the leader has certain **inherent** and **intrinsic** qualities which mark him as a man of unusual foresight, strength, and courage. He must be able to inspire his followers, who must be willing to follow him. Once they have indicated their confidence in him as their leader, they should be willing to submit to his direction. The Torah does not believe in an absolute monarchy or in blind obedience by the king's subjects; that is why the Torah in today's Sidra severely^e limits the king's rights. But he must not be a Milquetoast. A leader, especially in a spiritual sense, must not be merely a broker of popular opinion. He must lead -- he must be לְ , one who is beyond the people and can take them along with him to new horizons.

However, Samuel's contemporaries wanted a king לְ , for

us, they wanted someone who will carry out our wishes, and do our bidding. They wanted a royal messenger-boy, not a leader whom they could trust and follow.

There is no doubt that a \int leader is more popular than the \int leader. But in the long run the truth must come out. Rule by concensus alone, leading merely where the public opinion polls indicates the public wants to go, is not an exercise of leadership or commitment or orientation. It is merely a specialized craft, a talent, a technique. A community is not enlightened, and humanity does not make strides, when its leaders merely pamper its latent prejudices.

This is true of the leadership of government, and is also true of mass movements. Zionism, for instance, was blessed with great leaders who achieved great successes. But, especially in its later years, its leadership experienced failures as well. They emphasized only the political dimensions and goals of Zionism: the founding of a viable, independent State. But they were not able to bring their people along to the awareness that Zionism had, and should have had, cultural and educational and religious goals as well. It turned into a \int rather than an \int kind of leadership.

The leaders of the contemporary civil rights movements would do well to keep that in mind. The organization of protests and demonstrations was initially an act of leadership. It revealed the strength that was latent in the suppressed and downtrodden masses. But now the protests have become self-generating and deflected. Leadership now means not to anticipate where the blind impulses of the inarticulate masses are going to stumble next.

Leadership requires educating the people to their own social and civic responsibilities as well as to continued attacks against unacceptable conditions. It may be true that the recent Californian uprisings were, in an ultimate sense, the fault of the white majority of this country. Nevertheless, it does indicate a failure of civil rights leadership which was not able to channel the feelings or resentment into something more constructive.

There must be a reciprocity and an interplay between leader and followers. The leader must not be too far ahead of his people; but never must he abdicate his pedagogic and educative function.

And what we have said of human leadership as a mortal king or מלך, is equally and even more so true of divine leadership, the immortal מלך אלהים. We fulfill a great mitzvah if we accept God as a king "upon" us. We commit a major spiritual crime if we expect Him to be a little God "for" us who does our bidding.

Let it be clear: for Judaism God is not an Executive Vice President of the Cosmos in charge of Human Happiness. A truly religious person does not wake up in the morning and say to God, "what have You done for me recently?" God is not looking for our votes in an election or popularity contest. He is not interested in our approval.

An authentic religion does not cater to what people want and think they need. It teaches them to want what they really need. It leads them to aspire to higher deeds and more sublime ideals.

If Judaism may, as indeed its "modernist" versions have averred, be cut and truncated and transformed and reformed to conform to the latest ephemeral intellectual currents and fads of fashions and tastes, then it reveals that at the bottom there is an immature conception of God as a kind of divine Servant or at best a divine Insurance Agent who will provide for our happiness and convenience. God is not a King for us; He is a King over us: אלהינו מלך. That is the essence of Torah and the meaning of Halakhah.

Indeed, this is what God told Samuel when Samuel complained to Him about the people's request. Samuel, God said, the failing of the people is not political but fundamentally religious. כי לא דחתם

אתי, they have not rejected you, they have rejected Me. Their political immaturity reflects a fundamental religious bankruptcy. The real Jew, the authentic God-fearing person, does not regard God as Servant of man but man as the ambassador of God.

This, indeed, is the proper way to prepare for Rosh Hashanah, that Holiday on which we emphasize the מלכות theme, the sovereignty and Kingship of God. It is an illustration and expression of fundamental Jewishness to declare then, as we declare

every day in our prayers,

וַיְהִי ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ עַל כָּל הָאָרֶץ,

and the Lord shall be King over all the earth.

בְּיָמֵינוּ יִשְׁמַע ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ וְיִשְׁמַע ה' אֱלֹהֵינוּ, on that day, when

He is accepted as King over all the earth, shall the Lord be

One and His Name be One.