

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

The Book of Shmuel Yeshivat Har Etzion

Shiur #12: CHAPTER 8 (PART I) "GIVE US A KING"

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I. THE SONS OF SHMUEL

Our chapter is the scene of one of Scripture's greatest dramas: the people of Israel petition Shmuel to change the system of government and establish a monarchy in Israel. As a backdrop to this request, Scripture briefly describes what had happened with Shmuel's sons, and therefore this lesson will open with a discussion of these verses:

And it came to pass, when Shmuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel. Now the name of his first-born was Yoel; and the name of his second, Aviya; they were judges in Be'er-Sheva. And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after unjust gain, and took bribes, and perverted justice. (8:1-3)

This description strikes a strident chord with respect to Shmuel's leadership. Direct responsibility for the sin is placed on Shmuel's sons, Yoel and Aviya, who "turned aside after unjust gain, and took bribes, and perverted justice."¹[1] But this story is

¹[1] The famous passage in *Shabbat* (55b-56a) states: "Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: Whoever maintains that Shmuel's sons sinned is merely erring. For it is said: 'And it came to pass when Shmuel was old... that his sons walked not in his ways.' They [merely] walked not in his ways, yet they did not sin either. Then how do I fulfill: 'They turned aside after unjust gain'? That means that they did not act like their father. For Shmuel the righteous used to travel to all the places of Israel and judge them in their towns, as it is said, 'And he went from year to year in circuit to Bet-El, and Gilgal, and Mitzpe; and he judged Israel.' But they did not act thus, but sat in their own towns, in order to increase the fees of their beadles and scribes." Nevertheless, most commentators understood the verse in its plain sense. For example, Radak: "They turned aside after unjust gain – that is to say, their hearts were inclined toward money and they ran after riches, and it is not good that such people be judges, but rather those who hate unjust gain... And Shmuel's sons loved unjust gain, and what is more they took bribes and perverted justice." Radak brings the aforementioned passage from *Chazal*, but concludes: "But according to the plain sense of the section, it seems that they sinned." This is also the understanding of Ralbag and Metzudot.

also critical of Shmuel, he being the one who had appointed his sons judges over Israel, and no indication is given that he did anything in reaction to their corrupt behavior. Did Shmuel's sons become corrupt only after they had been appointed judges, or perhaps, based on their character, one might have expected that they would conduct themselves in this manner? The verses do not offer an unequivocal answer to this question. Nevertheless, there is room to ask why did Shmuel appoint his sons as judges specifically in Be'er-Sheva: might this be connected to the fact that Be'er-Sheva constitutes the accepted southern border of Israel,^{2[2]} that is to say, far away from the center of the country? It is difficult to provide a clear answer to this question.

In any event, one problem clearly rises from Shmuel's last words to the nation:

And Shmuel said to all Israel, Behold, I have hearkened to your voice in all that you said to me, and have made a king over you. And now, behold, the king walks before you: and I am old and grey-headed; and, behold, **my sons are with you**: and I have walked before you from my childhood to this day. (12:1-2)

Why does Shmuel mention that "my sons are with you"? It seems that he wishes to allude thereby that even though he listened to Israel's request and appointed a king to rule over them, it would have been right for the people to have chosen his sons. He makes no reference to his sons' disgraceful conduct. On this point, what is stated about Shmuel, "And it came to pass, when Shmuel was **old**, that he made **his sons** judges **over Israel**," parallels what was stated about Eli, "Now Eli was very **old**, and heard all that **his sons** did to all of **Israel**" (2:22). Despite the great difference between Shmuel's leadership and that of Eli, on this point – their attitude to their corrupt sons – we see a certain similarity between the two fathers. Both of them failed in the education of their sons, and did not even offer an appropriate response to their deviant behavior.

On this point, Shmuel deviates from the path taken by Moshe. In the previous chapters, we dealt in various contexts with the many parallels between these two personalities. Here, however, the difference between them is striking: nowhere do we find that Moshe sought any kind of office for his sons, or that he even intimated that they should succeed him. His sole desire was summed up in his general statement: "Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them, and who may go in before them, and who may lead them out, and may bring them in" (*Bamidbar* 27:16-17).^{3[3]} It is difficult for a person to see the faults of his own children. This

^{2[2]} As is implied by the expression, "From Dan to Be'er-Sheva," which repeats itself many times in Scripture (*Shoftim* 20:1; I *Shmuel* 3:20; and elsewhere). See Radak who also points out the problem with this location, but from a different direction.

^{3[3]} Surprisingly, the Midrash criticizes Moshe and sees his request as motivated by the desire that his sons should take over the reins of leadership: "After the daughters of Tzelofchad inherited their father's property, Moshe said: This is the hour that I should request my needs. If daughters inherit, all the more so my sons should inherit my honor. The Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moshe: 'He who guards the fig tree shall eat its fruit' (*Mishlei* 27:18) – your sons sat around and did not occupy themselves in the Torah; Yehoshua who ministered to you should minister to Israel, so as not to forfeit his reward" (*Tanchuma Pinchas*, *parasha* 11, and similarly in other *midrashim* and in Rashi). Why did *Chazal*

comparison teaches us that despite the strong similarity between Shmuel and Moshe, Shmuel did not always succeed in reaching the high level that Moshe had attained. Indeed, "And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like Moshe, whom the Lord knew face to face" (*Devarim* 34:10).

II. SCRIPTURE'S ATTITUDE TOWARD MONARCHY

This introduction regarding Shmuel's sons is meant to serve as a backdrop to the people's request directed at Shmuel:

Behold, you are old, and your sons walk not in your ways; now make us a king to judge us like all the nations. (5)

Shmuel, however, sharply rejects their request:

But the thing displeased Shmuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. (6)

Not only did Shmuel express his reservations about the people's request, but even God related to it with strong disfavor:

And the Lord said unto Shmuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not be king over them. According to all the works which they have done since the day that I brought them up out of Egypt even unto this day, in that they have forsaken Me, and served other gods, so do they also unto you. (7-8)

These words, of course, raise a problem which occupied the Sages of Israel throughout the generations: Why does God react with such severity to this request? Surely the Torah deals explicitly with the appointment of a king!⁴⁴

attribute such a thought to Moshe, one to which there is not the slightest hint in Scripture? Nechama Leibowitz (*Iyyunim be-Sefer Bamidbar*, Jerusalem 5757, p. 328) wisely observed: "This is not the way the verses were interpreted by *Chazal*, the sages of the Midrash, who saw the biblical stories not as one-time passing events, but as archetypes for all human conduct that constantly repeats itself; not as what happened then, but as what happens over and over again before our eyes. Even in the greatest of the great, they saw man with all his weaknesses and foibles, the crooked heart and the human passions...."

⁴⁴ It cannot be argued that the problem is with the words, "Now make us a king to judge us **like all the nations**," for it is precisely this point that is not mentioned in Shmuel's reaction to the request: "But the thing displeased Shmuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us." And furthermore, the people

In order to clarify this matter, let us try to understand the deeper significance of the law of the king. The section opens as follows:

When you have come to the land which the Lord your God gives you, and shall possess it, and shall dwell in it, and shall say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations, that are about me; then you may appoint a king over you, whom the Lord your God shall choose. One from among your brethren shall you set as king over you; you may not set a stranger over you, who is not your brother (*Devarim* 17:14-15)

Is this an **obligation**, or merely an **allowance**. *Chazal* disagree on this point:

And thus Rabbi Yehuda said: Three commandments were given to Israel when they entered the land: to appoint a king, to cut off the seed of Amalek, and to build themselves the chosen house. Rabbi Nehorai said: This section was spoken only in anticipation of their future murmurings, as it is written: "And shall say, I will set a king over me etc." (*Sanhedrin* 20b)5[5]

A similar disagreement is found among the biblical commentators. Ramban in *Devarim* understands that we are dealing here with a mitzva,6[6] whereas Abarbanel explains that this is merely an option, in the sense of "The Torah merely spoke in response to the evil inclination," and in accordance with the view of Rabbi Nehorai ("in anticipation of their future murmurings"). The plain sense of the biblical text supports the position of Abarbanel, which is based on the Torah's formulation. For if we are dealing with an obligation, why does the Torah describe the circumstances, saying, "And you shall say, I will set a king over me, like all the nations, that are about me"?7[7] This wording implies that

were just using the wording found in the Torah in the section dealing with the appointment of a king: "And you shall say, I will set a king over me, **like all the nations** that are about me" (*Devarim* 17:14). 5[5] In *Midrash Lekach Tov (Pesikta Zutrati, Devarim Parashat Shoftim)*, Rabbi Nehorai's position is worded even more sharply: "Rabbi Nehorai said: This is a disgrace to Israel, as it is stated: 'For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me' (I *Shmuel* 8:7)." And in the continuation: "Rabbi Nehorai said: They only asked for a king so that he would bring them to serve idols, as it is stated: 'That we also may be like all the nations' (ibid. v. 20). And this is what the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Shmuel: 'For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me.'"

6[6] This is also the position of the Rambam, *Hilkhos Melakhim* 1:1.

7[7] Ramban answers this question, saying that the Torah is alluding here to what will take place in the future, that the people will ask for a king "like all the nations" – for if this is not so, it is truly difficult to understand why the Torah should present the request in this manner: "For why should the Torah say in its commandment 'like all the nations that are about me,' when it is unbecoming for Israel to learn from them or to be envious of those who practice iniquity." This understanding, however, seems to be difficult.

while the Torah does not reject the appointment of a king, it also does not see it as necessary.^{8[8]}

We can now move on to a more general question: Is the appointment of a king, even if not obligatory, a positive phenomenon or a negative one? Both alternatives find support in Scripture. A positive attitude is already expressed in the blessings received by the patriarchs. Avraham was told: "And I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you" (*Bereishit* 17:6); and so too Yaakov: "A nation and a company of nations shall be of you, and kings shall come out of your loins" (ibid. 35:11). Scripture's positive attitude toward monarchy is particularly striking in the closing chapters of the book of *Shoftim*, which describe the low level to which the people of Israel had sunk, including the transgressions of idol worship (*Shoftim* 17, Mikha's idol), illicit sexual relations (ibid. 19, the concubine in Giva), and bloodshed (ibid. 20-21, the war against Binyamin) – a difficult situation that is explained by a verse that repeats itself: "In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (ibid. 17:6; 21:25; and see also 18:1; 19:1). It may be said that the book of *Shoftim* concludes with a cry for a king, and with a description of the severity of the situation in the absence of a king. Another positive expression of the idea of monarchy in Israel may be found in I *Divrei Ha-yamim* 29:23: "Then Shlomo sat on the throne **of the Lord** as king instead of David his father."

Elsewhere, however, Scripture notes the dangers inherent in a monarchy. The main idea is summed up by Gidon after the people propose a monarchy-like regime, in which he and his descendants would rule over Israel: "I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you" (*Shoftim* 8:23). It should be noted that until the book of *Devarim*, the highest office in Israel is that of the *Nasi* (*Shemot* 22:27; *Vayikra* 4:22). The danger inherent in the appointment of a king – namely, the concentration of power in the hands of a single person – is very clear: should the king act out of unworthy motives, he is liable to cause a general collapse of the entire nation's worship of God.

Generally speaking, then, Scripture relates to the issue of monarchy with caution. On the one hand, it has positive potential, for a king can exploit his authority in a positive manner, and lead the entire nation in the path of serving God. On the other hand, it poses the danger that, for personal reasons, the king will cause the entire nation to sin, as in the case of Yeravam ben Nevat. It all depends on the king and his attitude: does he view himself as God's agent, or, Heaven forefend, as His replacement. The Torah, therefore, restricts the king's authority, admonishes him to carry around a Torah scroll and read it all the days of his life, and prevents him from amassing excessive power.

^{8[8]} See there the important words of Netziv in his *Ha'amek Davar* which are relevant to our time as well. According to him, the Torah does not issue absolute commands on issues relating to forms of government, for such matters are influenced by circumstances, and it is impossible to establish absolute norms that will remain appropriate for all generations.

III. "WHEN YOU SAW THAT NACHASH THE KING OF THE CHILDREN OF AMON CAME AGAINST YOU"

Let us now return to our chapter. All that was stated above does not answer the question raised earlier regarding God's attitude and that of Shmuel to Israel's request. Even if the Torah does not obligate the appointment of a king, surely it allows it – why then is the very idea of a king so sharply rejected?

It seems that in the present context asking for a king is regarded as problematic. Why do the people ask for a king precisely at this juncture in time? This question is strengthened when we read the people's request more carefully: "Behold, you are old, and your sons walk not in your ways; now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." This request conceals a paradox. The people are concerned about the fact that Shmuel's sons did not follow in his ways. It would seem then that the people should have asked Shmuel to appoint a different judge. The people, however, ask that the system of government be changed to one in which a son automatically succeeds his father, whether or not he is appropriate for the position! Precisely in light of the fact that the people see the sons of Shmuel before their very eyes, they should have concluded that the monarchal system of government is problematic for this very reason!

It seems, then, that what drives them to ask for a king at this time is not necessarily connected to the sons of Shmuel. At a later point, Shmuel himself will expose Israel's motive:

And when you saw **that Nachash the king of the children of Amon came against you**, you said to me, No; but a king shall reign over us:9[9] when the Lord your God was your king. (12:12)

This statement reveals the problem that Shmuel saw in the people's request. Throughout his life, Shmuel worked on reaching one main goal in his education of the people: rather than seek external means, the people must recognize that their fate is solely dependent upon God and their commitment to follow in His way. Thus we saw how the people succeeded in overcoming the Pelishtim when they turned to Shmuel, saying: "Cease not to cry unto the Lord our God for us, that He save us out of the hand of the Pelishtim" (7:8), in contrast to the way that they conducted themselves before the destruction of Shilo, when they saw the ark of God as the cure-all: "Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shilo to us, that when it comes among us, it may save us out of the hand of our

9[9] This expression – "No; but a king shall reign over us" – refers back to the words of the people earlier in the chapter: "No; but we will have a king over us" (v. 19). This indicates that Shmuel is relating back to the request made by the people in our chapter.

enemies" (4:3). Now, however, it becomes clear that the people did not really internalize the message. Now it becomes clear that the people's faith in the independent power of the ark was not replaced by their faith in God, but by their faith in Shmuel himself. When he grows old, they think that their future success demands not a continuation of belief in God, but turning to another external factor, e.g. a king: "That we also may be like all the nations; and that our king may judge us, and go out before us, and fight our battles" (v. 20).

It should not come as a surprise then that Shmuel reacted the way he did. His life-long project was about to collapse before his very eyes. The entire spiritual struggle had been fought almost in vain. The people of Israel still don't understand that the key to overcoming their enemies lies in their spiritual conduct, and not in external means. This was also the assessment of God: "For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not be king over them."

All this notwithstanding, God does not negate the people's request:

Now you must hearken to their voice; nevertheless you should solemnly forewarn them, and relate to them the customary practice of the king that shall reign over them. (9)

This answer is surprising in light of the extent to which God and Shmuel negated the idea of monarchy in the previous verses. But it is very understandable in light of what was stated above. There is nothing essentially wrong with monarchy; fundamentally the appointment of a king can lead to positive results. Indeed, the people had asked for a king for the wrong reasons, and Shmuel has a lot of work to do – to explain to the people what was wrong with their approach, and train them in a different attitude. Proper work, however, might eventually lead to a positive process. For this reason, God does not refuse their request, and at this stage He merely asks Shmuel to clarify for the people the law of the king that will rule over them. In the next lesson, we will see how Shmuel executes God's command.

(Translated by David Strauss)
