

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Themes and Ideas in the Haftara
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**This haftara series is dedicated in memory
of our beloved Chaya Leah bat Efrayim Yitzchak
(Mrs. Claire Reinitz), zichronah livracha,
by her family.**

PARASHAT KORACH

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TWO PROBLEMS

Writing about the *haftara* for *Parashat Korach* (I *Shemuel* 11:14-12:22) raises two problems:

First, the main issue discussed therein □ that of the monarchy - is not restricted to our *haftara* and it requires a much broader treatment than what the VBM series on the *haftarot* allows. This is true about the issue as a whole, which is discussed in the book of *Devarim* and its commentaries, down to the thinkers of our generation. And it is true about the

book of *Shemuel* in particular, in which the issue of the monarchy is discussed in chapters 8 to 12 and is not limited to the chapter that we read this *Shabbat*.

Second, as we shall see below, Shemuel's words to the people must be seen against the backdrop of the period of the judges, which is the subject of next *Shabbat's haftara*. Indeed, anybody who studies *Tanakh* in order approaches the book of *Shemuel* after having already studied the book of *Shofetim*. The order of the *haftarot*, however, is reversed, as is dictated by the *parashiyot*. Thus, our comments this week would be more understandable and easier to formulate were they postponed until after studying next week's *haftara*. Of course, this is not an option in a series on the *haftarot*, and so we will try to briefly summarize those elements that are essential for understanding this week's *haftara*, while pushing off to next week the main treatment of the issues raised by the book of *Shofetim*.

STABILITY

The *haftara* opens with the ceremonial coronation of Shaul, thus ending the process of Shaul's appointment to the throne, and the people of Israel move from the period of the judges to a royal regime. The *haftara's* primary interest, however, is not Shaul's coronation, but rather Shemuel's speech regarding the institution of the monarchy. Following his intensive occupation with issues regarding the monarchy in the previous chapters, Shemuel turns to the people in a reflective speech about the spiritual meaning of crowning a king. Shemuel accepted the people's desire for stable political leadership, but he is fearful about the spiritual ramifications of this change and he shares these concerns with the people.

We have intentionally emphasized the matter of stability, for it seems that this is what underlies Shemuel's words. The period of the judges was characterized by governmental instability in two respects:

First, the frequent governmental vacuum that expresses itself in the absence of a judge or leader who could be relied upon in times of crisis. Whenever a security crisis involving neighboring nations arises, it becomes clear that there is no address to turn to and nobody designated to assume responsibility. If we recall the *haftara* of *Parashat Beshalach*, which describes Devora's attempts to persuade Barak to lead the nation into battle, or the negotiations that the elders of Gil'ad conduct with Yiftach and the way they are forced to beg him to accede to their request in next week's *haftara*, we can well understand the vacuum that exists with respect to the people's most basic needs. This model repeats itself throughout the book, when time after time a person like Gid'on rises up and takes the initiative to deliver Israel, without the responsibility for so doing falling upon him.

Second, even when a leader arises and rescues Israel, there is no orderly mechanism by which his office is passed on to another leader after he is removed from the scene. His office does not pass down to his sons, and there is no agreed upon method of choosing a successor. The sole attempt to establish an orderly system of rule and create a mechanism that would guarantee continuity is totally rejected by Gid'on and never realized.

We see then that the clearest characteristic of the period of the judges is the absence of centralized authority and continuous instability. The closing verse of the book of *Shofetim* and the one with which it is most strongly identified finely expresses this point: "In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did that which was right in his eyes" (*Shofetim* 21:25).[1]

Such a situation is, of course, very problematic, and it underlies many of the difficulties that manifest themselves over the course of the book. The absence of governmental stability gives rise to social anarchy, and the absence of centralized authority causes great social and moral problems, all these being fruits of the governmental situation. All the stories at the end of the book of *Shofetim* are rooted in this situation and they well reflect the low that Israel reaches in its wake. He who said that the book of *Shofetim* reflects a shameful religious state appears to have been correct.

A STRONG AND FIXED CENTRAL AUTHORITY

It is no surprise then that the nation becomes fed up with this chaotic situation and demands the establishment of a monarchy, so that a strong and fixed central authority will be set in place. Their request for a "king to lead us" (1 *Shemuel* 8:6) expresses their yearning for a strong ruler and a regime with long-term stability.[2] Indeed, from the moment that Shaul rises to the throne, he assumes responsibility and takes initiative to deliver Israel and fight their wars. Similarly, Shaul's appointment guarantees continuity and a mechanism of orderly succession for future generations. In light of past experience, it is no wonder that the people demand a monarchical regime.

Shemuel, however, is not pleased, and he reprimands Israel for desiring a king, his objection being based on the advantages that he sees in the situation that had prevailed during the period of the judges. During that period, the people did not have an address to turn to or anyone to lift their eyes to. The people saw this as a great disadvantage, but not Shemuel. From his perspective, a situation in which Israel has no human address to turn to is preferable, for in the absence of such an address they will turn to their Father in heaven. A stable regime plants within the people a feeling of security that is dependent upon human action, whereas the absence of permanent leadership contributes to their recognition of Divine providence. The fact that there was no leader designated to take responsibility, but rather an unknown leader would spring up

from nowhere and seize control was because God sent him to deliver Israel. A key phrase that repeats itself again and again in Shemuel's words is "and God sent." The leader as God's agent is the model that Shemuel puts forward in his speech, and this aspect of leadership is clearer when there is no fixed monarch, but rather some agent who makes a sudden appearance.

Below the surface, however, a certain tension exists, which we see in the words of Shemuel himself. Among the other things that he says, Shemuel notes several cases in which God sent judges to deliver Israel. He says as follows: "And the Lord sent Yeruba'al, and Bedan, and Yiftach, and Shemuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies round about, and you dwelled secure" (I *Shemuel* 12:11). Regarding this verse, the Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shana* testifies (25b):

Scripture also says: "And Shemuel said to the people, Is it the Lord that made Moshe and Aharon" (II *Shemuel* 12:6). And it says: "And the Lord sent Yeruba'al and Bedan and Yiftach and Shemuel" (ibid. v. 11). Yeruba'al is Gid'on. Why is he called Yeruba'al? Because he contended with Ba'al. Bedan is Shimshon. Why is he called Bedan? Because he came from Dan. Yiftach is Yiftach. It says also: "Moshe and Aharon among His priests, and Shemuel among those that call on His name" (*Tehilim* 99:6). [We see therefore that] Scripture places three of the most questionable characters [lit., "light ones of the world"] on the same level as three of the most estimable characters [lit., "heavy ones of the world"], to show that Yeruba'al in his generation is like Moshe in his generation, Bedan in his generation is like Aharon in his generation, Yiftach in his generation is like Shemuel in his generation. [And] to teach you that the most worthless, once he has been appointed a leader of the community is to be accounted like the mightiest of the mighty.

If we try to understand the meaning of the expression "the light ones of the world" as opposed to "the heavy ones of the world," and the principle that distinguishes between Moshe, Aharon, and Shemuel, on the one hand, and Gid'on, Yiftach, and Shimshon, on the other, it

seems that the most important distinction between them relates to their respective sources of authority. The first three, "the heavy ones of the world," are spiritual figures who draw their military and political power from their spiritual authority, and attribute this power to their spiritual connection to God, whereas the latter three, "the light ones of the world," are military figures whose authority stems from their physical and military capabilities. Their leadership is based on worldly power, and not spiritual authority. The objective of the Gemara in *Rosh ha-Shana* is to equate the two sets of leaders from a halakhic perspective, but there is clearly a huge gap between the two groups from a spiritual perspective.

The truth is that these two groups represent the two poles with respect to the fundamental question that runs through the entire book of *Shofetim*, namely, the nature of leadership and the connection between power and spirit. Figures like Moshe, Aharon and Shemuel radiate leadership in which the spiritual element is clearly manifest, and in this respect their leadership is preferable to stable government, for through their leadership God's providence becomes manifest and is revealed. In contrast, the leadership of Shimshon and Yiftach is not necessarily better to stable government, for they do not radiate the spiritual inspiration of Moshe and Aharon. They too speak in the name of God and draw their strength from Him, but we are talking about the bestowal of heavenly powers without the accompanying spiritual inspiration. From this perspective, it is very problematic to argue that a heroic figure who lacks spirituality is to be preferred over a stable monarchy.

In light of this dilemma, it is possible to trace the diverse approaches of the commentators to Shemuel's position. According to one approach, Shemuel absolutely negates the idea of monarchy and prefers the previous situation of God's direct governance, whether through spiritual leaders such as Moshe and Aharon, or through leaders whom God sends even though they are not men of spirit. For the people put their trust not in those leaders, but in God, and He sends them and their leadership expresses God's providence.

According to the alternative approach, Shemuel does not object to monarchy in itself, but rather he believes that the people's request for a king was inappropriate in the given circumstances. In this context, let us bring the words of the Rambam on the issue:

The request for royalty at that time was distasteful to the Holy One, blessed be He. The reason for all this was that at this time Shemuel was judge and prophet who was fighting their battles according to the word of God, saving them in times of trouble, and it was improper for them to request a king during his lifetime, even as Shemuel said to them: "And the Lord your God is your king" (I *Shemuel* 12:12). And the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him: "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me" (ibid. 8:7). It was for this reason that He did not grant them permanent royalty. (Ramban, Commentary to *Bereishit* 49:10)

What this means is that a distinction must be made between two types of judges. If the judge is one of "the light ones of the world," then monarchy and a stable regime is preferable to the vacuum created by a system of government based on ad hoc heroes. Figures like Gid'on and Shimshon radiate not sanctity and spirituality, but brute force, and a stable and more human system is better than such leaders. However, in periods of fitting leadership, when "the heavy ones of the world" stand over the people, guiding them in the path of Torah and in the fear of God, and representing God to them, then without a doubt the system of the "judge-prophet" is preferable to a worldly figure. The transience and the constant dependence that follow from such leadership can be a blessing, provided that a fitting leader stands at the helm. Shemuel's emphasis on the superiority and spiritual advantage of an unstable political situation is based on the assumption that a leader with spiritual inspiration will guide the people.

In this context, it should be noted that the *haftara* is composed of two parts. Shemuel opens with an examination of his own leadership vis-a-vis the people. In light of what has been said here, we are not dealing with a separate story dictated by Shemuel's retirement in the wake

of the appointment of a king; rather, it comes to emphasize the way that Shemuel led the people and its superiority. His rebuke concerning the people's request for a king was sounded precisely because he was a fitting leader. He would not have criticized that request, had it been presented during the days of Yiftach, for example. It is, therefore, important for Scripture to lay the foundations for Shemuel's rebuke before he actually reprimands the people.

Following the Ramban, then, it might be argued that Shemuel preferred political instability only in the circumstances that prevailed during his day, and that he was not arguing in favor of the system of judges in all situations and conditions.

As is well known, an extensive literature exists concerning the *mitzva* of appointing a king and the desirability of a monarchical regime for the people of Israel, in which the passages in the books of *Devarim* and *Shemuel* stand at the heart of the discussion. To a great degree, the discussion revolves around fundamental questions of political philosophy and Halakha's position in their regard; it is not our intention to relate to these questions in this framework. There is, however, an exegetical element that we will introduce into the discussion, for surely we are dealing with biblical passages found in specific contexts in the framework of Scripture and with the reciprocal relationships between them. This is especially true with regard to the book of *Shemuel*, in which the moral assessment of the institution of monarchy is woven into a clearly narrative framework.

There is an approach that negates the monarchy as a matter of principle and prefers a different form of government, be that a theocracy or a democracy. Proponents of such a view rely on the words of Shmuel as expressing a fundamental position that is valid at all times and in all places, and therefore they see no need to examine the specific circumstances and historical context of our *parasha*. In light of what we have said, however, their reliance on the words of Shemuel must be moderated, for it ignores the historical reality in which and against which they were uttered. Weighty arguments can be raised against the monarchical system and good reasons

provided for opting for one of the alternatives (see Abravanel in his commentary to the book of *Devarim*). The sages of Israel disagree about which system of government is most desirable. But it must be emphasized that the words of Shemuel do not show preference to a different stable system or an established republic over a strong monarchy, but rather they praise a fluid situation and transient rule. Shemuel sees the spiritual advantage of the instability of the period of the judges, and therefore we cannot infer from his words the superiority of other systems in a stable situation.[3]

Regarding this point, we must examine the other side of the coin, namely, the attitude toward monarchy. The advantage of the instability of the judges over the monarchy depends also on the spiritual leadership that the monarchy will radiate to the people. While, according to Shemuel, the system that was operative during the period of the judges had a built in advantage, provided that the judge was a "philosopher-king," it also exacted a significant price, namely, instability. We see then that the costs and benefits must be evaluated in each system, and that the assessment of the issue is not only a function of the quality of the judge, but also that of the king and the spiritual inspiration and recognition of the kingdom of heaven that he will bring to the nation. On the contrary, if the king sees himself as the anointed of God and as God's agent to act on earth for the glory of heaven, this has a certain advantage to the existing situation, for there will be stability and an established regime that recognizes the kingdom of heaven. Shemuel emphasizes the advantage of a judge in order to teach the people what they will now be lacking, but the compensation for what will be lost depends on the governance of the king:

Now therefore behold the king whom you have chosen, and whom you have desired! For behold, the Lord has set a king over you. If you will fear the Lord, and serve Him, and obey His voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, and if both you and also the king that reigns over you will follow the Lord your God □. (I *Shemuel* 12:13-14)

In such a situation, Israel will remain faithful to God, and Shemuel's concerns will be resolved. Even if we assume that the direct governance of the period of the judges was

preferable, the governance during the period of the monarchy was critical for Israel's spiritual development. The creation of the monarchy and the illusion of a human arrangement that does not require the grace of providence posed a great danger, but open before them was the path of following God and establishing the system as working for God and in light of His providence.

The sign of the summer rain appearing at the end of the *haftara* should be understood in light of all that has been said thus far regarding the connection between Divine providence and man's feeling of stability in an orderly world. Shemuel's concern was that the governmental order and stability that the monarchy would bring would come at the cost of recognition of the heavenly kingdom, for a stable world tends to conceal the Creator from human eyes. Thus, Shemuel chooses to overturn the most stable system in the world □ the natural order and its seasonal periodicity □ in order to show the people what an illusion it is to think that these systems stand on their own and are not subject to the king of the universe. Disturbing the natural order by causing it to rain when least expected is not merely a sign of the mighty hand of God. Rather, it is intimately connected to the issue that Shemuel deals with the entire length of the *haftara*, namely, the spiritual danger of a stable world and the ways to confront it.

(Translated by David Strauss)

[1] We have briefly reviewed the situation depicted by the book of *Shofetim*, touching only on those points that provide the necessary background for the words of Shemuel. Next week, in the context of the *haftara* for *Parashat Chukat*, we shall deal with the period of the judges at greater length, and discuss the processes that occur over the course of the book.

[2] The verb "*leshofteinu*" in this verse should be understood in the sense of leadership, the sense that it bears throughout the book of *Shofetim*, rather than in the sense of judgment. It should, however, be noted that many *Rishonim* understand the term in the judgmental sense.

[3] There are also other schools that argue that Shemuel did not object to the request for a monarchy in itself, but to details of the request or elements that accompanied it. There is a view that emphasizes their motive and focuses on the grating expression "like all the nations." And there is another opinion that sees the problem in the separation of powers between the king and other forces. Common to these understandings of those who fundamentally see the monarchy in a positive light □ as is indicated by the plain sense of the verses in *Devarim* and the great majority of those who count the *mitzvot* and the plain sense of the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* □ is that they seek a flaw in the specific historical event of asking for a king, and not in opposition to the very system. They, however, focus on the formulation of the request and what stems from it, whereas we, in the wake of the Ramban, have focused on the general state of the leadership of the period.