

# COVENANT & Conversation

A STUDY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE PARSHA WITH RABBI SACKS

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## Learning and Leadership

**Shoftim - 30 August 2014 / 4 Elul 5774**

The parsha of *Shoftim* is the classic source of the three types of leadership in Judaism, called by the sages the “three crowns”: of priesthood, kingship and Torah.<sup>1</sup> This is the first statement in history of the principle, set out in the eighteenth century by Montesquieu in *L’Esprit des Lois*, and later made fundamental to the American constitution, of “the separation of powers.”<sup>2</sup>

Power, in the human arena, is to be divided and distributed, not concentrated in a single person or office. So, in biblical Israel, there were kings, priests and prophets. Kings had secular or governmental power. Priests were the leaders in the religious domain, presiding over the service in the Temple and other rites, and giving rulings on matters to do with holiness and purity. Prophets were mandated by God to be critical of the corruptions of power and to recall the people to their religious vocation whenever they drifted from it.

**“Power, in the human arena, is to be divided and distributed, not concentrated in a single person or office. So, in biblical Israel, there were kings, priests and prophets.”**

Our parsha deals with all three roles. Undoubtedly, though, the most attention-catching is the section on kings, for many reasons. First, this is the only command in the Torah to carry with it the explanation that this is what other people do: “When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, ‘Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us ...’” (Deut. 17: 14). Normally,

<sup>1</sup> Mishnah Avot 4: 13. Maimonides, Talmud Torah, 3: 1.

<sup>2</sup> Montesquieu’s division, followed in most Western democracies, is between legislature, executive and judiciary. In Judaism, primary legislation comes from God. Kings and the sages had the power to introduce only secondary legislation, to secure order and “make a fence around the law.” Hence in Judaism the king was the executive; the priesthood in biblical times was the judiciary. The “crown of Torah” worn by the prophets was a unique institution: a Divinely sanctioned form of social criticism – a task assumed in the modern age, not always successfully, by public intellectuals. There is today a shortage of prophets. Perhaps there always was.

in the Torah, the Israelites are commanded to be different. The fact that this command is an exception was enough to signal to commentators throughout the ages that there is a certain ambivalence about the idea of monarchy altogether.

Second, the passage is strikingly negative. It tells us what a king must not do, rather than what he should do. He should not “acquire great numbers of horses,” or “take many wives” or “accumulate large amounts of silver and gold” (17: 16-17). These are the temptations of power, and as we know from the rest of Tanakh, even the greatest – King Solomon himself – was vulnerable to them.

Third, consistent with the fundamental Judaic idea that leadership is service, not dominion or power or status or superiority, the king is commanded to be humble: he must constantly read the Torah “so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God ... and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites” (17: 19-20). It is not easy to be humble when everyone is bowing down before you and when you have the power of life and death over your subjects.

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Hence the extreme variation among the commentators as to whether monarchy is a good institution or a dangerous one. Maimonides holds that the appointment of a king is an obligation, Ibn Ezra that it is a permission, Abarbanel that it is a concession, and Rabbenu Bachya that it is a punishment – an interpretation known, as it happens, to John Milton at one of the most volatile (and anti-monarchical) periods of English history.<sup>3</sup>

There is, though, one positive and exceptionally important dimension of royalty. The king is commanded to study constantly:

When he takes the throne of his kingdom, he is to write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law, taken from that of the Levitical priests. It is to be with him, and *he is to read it all the days of his life* so that he may learn to revere the Lord his God and follow carefully all the words of this law and these decrees and not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites and turn from the law to the right or to the left. Then he and his descendants will reign a long time over his kingdom in Israel. (Deut. 17: 18-20)

Later, in the book that bears his name, Moses’ successor Joshua is commanded in very similar terms:

Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. (Josh. 1: 8)

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<sup>3</sup> See Eric Nelson, *The Hebrew Republic*, Harvard University Press, 2010, 41-42.

*Leaders learn.* That is the principle at stake here. Yes, they have advisors, elders, counsellors, an inner court of sages and literati. And yes, biblical kings had prophets – Samuel to Saul, Nathan to David, Isaiah to Hezekiah and so on – to bring them the word of the Lord. But those on whom the destiny of the nation turns may not delegate away the task of thinking, reading, studying and remembering. They are not entitled to say: I have affairs of state to worry about. I have no time for books. Leaders must be scholars, *bnei Torah*, “children of the Book,” if they are to direct and lead the people of the Book.

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The great statesmen of modern times understood this, at least in secular terms. Gladstone, four times Prime Minister of Britain, had a library of 32,000 books. We know – because he made a note in his diary every time he finished reading a book – that he read 22,000 of them. Assuming he did so over the course of eighty years (he lived to be 88), this meant that he read on average 275 books a year, or more than five each week for a lifetime. He also wrote many books on a wide variety of topics from politics to religion to Greek literature, and his scholarship was often impressive. For example he was, according to Guy Deutscher in *Through the Language Glass*, the first person to realise that the ancient Greeks did not have a sense of colour and that Homer’s famous phrase, “the wine-dark sea” referred to texture rather than colour.

Visit David Ben Gurion’s house in Tel Aviv and you will see that, while the ground floor is spartan to the point of austerity, the first floor is a single vast library of papers, periodicals and 20,000 books. He had another 4,000 or so in Sde Boker. Like Gladstone, Ben Gurion was a voracious reader as well as a prolific author. Disraeli was a best-selling novelist before he entered politics. Winston Churchill wrote almost fifty books and won the Nobel Prize for Literature. Reading and writing are what separate the statesman from the mere politician.

The two greatest kings of early Israel, David and Solomon, were both authors, David of Psalms, Solomon (according to tradition) of The Song of Songs, Proverbs and Kohelet/ Ecclesiastes. The key biblical word associated with kings is *chokmah*, “wisdom.” Solomon in particular was known for his wisdom:

When all Israel heard the verdict the king had given, they held the king in awe, because they saw that he had wisdom from God to administer justice. (1 Kings 3: 12)

Solomon’s wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the people of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt ... From all nations people came to listen to Solomon’s wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom. (1 Kings 5: 10-14)

When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon... she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, “The report I heard in my own country about your achievements

and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard” ... The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. (1 Kings 10: 4-24)

We should note that *chokhmah*, wisdom, means something slightly different from Torah, which is more commonly associated with priests and prophets than kings. *Chokhmah* includes worldly wisdom, which is a human universal rather a special heritage of Jews and Judaism. A midrash states “If someone says to you, ‘There is wisdom among the nations of the world,’ believe it. If they say, ‘There is Torah among the nations of the world,’ do not believe it.”<sup>4</sup> Broadly speaking, in contemporary terms *chokhmah* refers to the sciences and humanities – to whatever allows us to see the universe as the work of God and the human person as the image of God. Torah is the specific moral and spiritual heritage of Israel.

The case of Solomon is particularly poignant because, for all his wisdom, he was not able to avoid the three temptations set out in our parsha: he did acquire great numbers of horses, he did take many wives and he did accumulate great wealth. Wisdom without Torah is not enough to save a leader from the corruptions of power.

Though few of us are destined to be kings, presidents or prime ministers, there is a general principle at stake. Leaders learn. They read. They study. They take time to familiarise themselves with the world of ideas. Only thus do they gain the perspective to be able to see further and clearer than others. To be a Jewish leader means spending time to study both Torah and *chokhmah*: *chokhmah* to understand the world as it is, Torah to understand the world as it ought to be.

**“To be a Jewish leader means spending time to study both Torah and *chokhmah*: *chokhmah* to understand the world as it is, Torah to understand the world as it ought to be.”**

Leaders should never stop learning. That is how they grow and teach others to grow with them.



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<sup>4</sup> Eichah Rabbati 2: 13.