

February 9, 2020 - Deut. 17:14-18:13 - Asking for a King
Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 17:14 – 18:13 - Asking for a King
Psalm 120, Psalm 121, Psalm 122 and Psalm 123
Haftarah: Isaiah 32:1-20, Isaiah 33:2-6, 15-17

Asking for a King

This is really a continuation of the discussion on legal authority, the setting up judges and establishing justice in the land.

Deuteronomy 17:14-15 - "When thou art come unto the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the LORD thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee: thou mayest not set a stranger over thee, which is not thy brother."

This passage was puzzling to the Sages. Was this a command, or an option?

In **1 Samuel 8**, the people ask Samuel "now make us a king to judge us like all the nations." And God responds that "they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them."

This wasn't the first time Israel asked for a king:

- **Judges 8:22–23** - "Then the men of Israel said unto Gideon, Rule thou over us, both thou, and thy son, and thy son's son also: for thou hast delivered us from the hand of Midian. And Gideon said unto them, I will not rule over you, neither shall my son rule over you: the LORD shall rule over you."

But Gideon's son Abimelech, later accepted the title of king after killing 70 of his male relatives (**Judges 9:5-6**) but actually reigned only 3 years.

The answer the rabbis came up with was that God had foreseen that Israel would need a king, but that the people would ask for a king for the wrong reason - they wanted to get rid of Prophet Samuel so they could more easily integrate into the surrounding pagan culture (i.e. be "like as all the nations that are about me").

"This chapter was only recorded in anticipation of their future murmurings," said Rabbi Nehorai. "[As in many cases] The Torah only states this in consideration of the evil inclination."

The commentary of Isaac ben Judah Abravanel (1437–1508): "During the period of the conquest and settling down, when it could be argued that a king was necessary, they would not make such a request. After they had settled down into an ordered existence, and a king was obviously no necessity, they would ask for one, for one reason only: '[to be] like all the nations round about me.'"

A similar contingency is stated in **Deuteronomy 4:25-30** - "When thou shalt ...corrupt yourselves, and make a graven image..." Obviously this doesn't constitute a command, it merely takes into consideration human frailty.

Another parallel passage is **Deuteronomy 21:10-14** - "When thou goest forth to war...And seest among the captives a beautiful woman, and hast a desire unto her..."

This is not a command to take a captive as a wife, God merely says if you do, here are a set of restrictions on that practice to preserve her human dignity and assign her rights.

But another interpretation regards **Deuteronomy 17:14** as a prophecy, and not undesirable (after all, Messiah was meant to be Israel's King - King Messiah!)

Rules for the Monarch

Now God sets out parameters for a king, if or when Israel asks to have one.

The first requirement would be that the king is chosen by God.

Targum: "ye shall seek instruction from the Lord, and afterward set him as king"

Also, the king would be "one from among thy brethren," not an Edomite, though called sometimes their brother. (Herod was an Edomite, but was imposed on them by the Romans).

Messiah would also be a king from among themselves:

- **Jeremiah 30:21** - "Their leader [Messiah] will be one of their own, and their ruler will arise from their midst. And I will bring him near, and he will approach Me, for who would dare on his own to approach Me? declares the LORD."

What's God Got Against Horses?

Deuteronomy 17:16 - "But he shall not multiply horses to himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt, to the end that he should multiply horses: forasmuch as the LORD hath said unto you, Ye shall henceforth return no more that way."

The king was to have no more horses than for his own chariot, according to Rashi, and so the Mishnah (Sanhedrin, c. 2. sect. 4.) and Maimonides (Hilchot Melachim, c. 3. sect. 3.); and the Targum of Jonathan restrains it to two horses only.

Egypt was the closest source of horses, but God did not want them to go back there at all, since the people had expressed a willingness to return during the years in the Wilderness.

Echoed by the Prophets:

- **Isaiah 31:1** - "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the LORD!"

In practice, these prohibitions were loosely applied: David kept 100 of the war-horses taken from the Syrians for himself, but had the others put to death (**2 Samuel 8:4**).

King Zedekiah was criticized for breaking this rule:

- **Ezekiel 17:15** - "But he rebelled against him in sending his ambassadors into Egypt, that they might give him horses and much people. Shall he prosper? shall he escape that doeth such things? or shall he break the covenant, and be delivered?"

Horses were mainly used to pull war chariots.

Israel's conquest of Canaan was entirely accomplished by infantry. Although Thutmose III had previously fought a large battle in the valley of Megiddo with 1,000 chariots, there are not many battlefields in Canaan suited for chariots and cavalry. An army of infantry can choose its own ground.

The only reason a king would need horses would be to attack other nations, to expand beyond the boundaries of the Promised Land, which apparently was not what God had in mind.

The King Should Not Have Many Wives, nor Much Treasure

Deuteronomy 17:17 - "Neither shall he multiply wives to himself, that his heart turn not away: neither shall he greatly multiply to himself silver and gold."

How Many Wives are Too Many?

Rashi - "And he shall not take many wives for himself": Only eighteen, for we find that David had six wives, and it was told to him [by Nathan the prophet] (2 Sam. 12:8): "and if this is too little, I would add for you like them and like them" [totaling eighteen]. — [San. 21a and Sifrei]

See **2 Samuel 12:8** (Jewish Translation) - "And I gave you the house of your master and your master's wives in your midst, and I gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that were too little, then would I add unto you like them and like them."

Solomon, who started out as a wise king, seemed to disregard this rule, since he had many wives and concubines. But some rabbis note that he had only one son, who was born before he became king. And a minority opinion insists that "Whoever says that Solomon sinned is simply mistaken" (Shabbat 56b).

- **1 Kings 11:3** - "But king Solomon loved many strange women, together with the

daughter of Pharaoh, women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Zidonians, and Hittites; Of the nations concerning which the LORD said unto the children of Israel, Ye shall not go in to them, neither shall they come in unto you: for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods: Solomon clave unto these in love.. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines: and his wives turned away his heart. For it came to pass, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart was not perfect with the LORD his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites. And Solomon did evil in the sight of the LORD, and went not fully after the LORD, as did David his father."

Rav Aha said: Solomon said, three things I violated for which I was punished: "He shall not have many wives," for it says, "King Solomon loved many foreign women" (I Kings 11:1), ... "He shall not keep many horses," for it says, "King Solomon had four thousand stalls for horses and chariots, and twelve thousand horsemen" (II Chron. 9:25), ... and "nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess," for it is written, "the king made silver as plentiful in Jerusalem as stones" (I Kings 10:27). - (Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 2.6)

The danger of idolatry seems to be especially potent when proposed by those close to us. Remember how the Moabite women seduced Israel in the wilderness.

- **Deuteronomy 13:6-11** - "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers ... thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die..."

Jesus put this into the context of the cross and discipleship:

- **Luke 14:16** - "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

How much Treasure is Too Much?

Rashi - "and he shall not acquire much silver and gold for himself": However, he may have what is required to provide for his troops. — [San. 21b]

...Or to pay the stipends or wages to his servants, and only for the treasury of the house of the Lord, and for the necessity of the congregation (or commonwealth), and for their wars; but not for himself or his own treasury.

- **1 Timothy 6:9** - "But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition."

The King Should be Steeped in the Law

Deuteronomy 17:18-19 - "And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his

kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book out of that which is before the priests the Levites: And it shall be with him, and he shall read therein all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them:"

The Jewish translation say "he shall write for himself two copies of this Torah." Possibly just a copy of Deuteronomy is meant.

"copy" = *mishneh* - double, second

"*Mishnah*" is also the name afterwards given to the "text" of the Talmud, the Oral Law, of which the idea is a repeat the law.

"At the time a king sits on the throne of his kingdom, he writes for himself a book of the law, besides what his fathers left him; and he copies it out of the book of the court by the order of the Sanhedrim of seventy one; if his fathers have left him none, or it is lost, he writes two books of the law, one he leaves in the house of his treasures, which he is commanded, as everyone of Israel is, and the second never departs from him" - Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedran, fol. 21. 2.

The King Must Remain Humble

Deuteronomy 17:20 - "That his heart be not lifted up above his brethren, and that he turn not aside from the commandment, to the right hand, or to the left: to the end that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he, and his children, in the midst of Israel."

Humility is a vital requirement for a virtuous king. Reading the scriptures would direct him toward being humble in his office.

No One is Above the Law

It's interesting that this would not be an absolute monarchy like the surrounding pagan nations at the time, but the king would be in submission to God, subject to the rule of law (The Great Sanhedrin could actually put him on trial) and though chosen by God and anointed by the prophet (see David - **1 Samuel 16:13**), he was even subject in some sense to the approval and agreement of the tribal elders and people of Judah and Israel:

- **2 Samuel 2:4** - "Then the men of Judah came to Hebron, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah."

- **2 Samuel 5:3** - "So all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, where King David made with them a covenant before the LORD. And they anointed him king over Israel."

Rashi, on this same incident in **1 Chronicles 11** - "and David made with them a

covenant": Like the covenant that Jehoiada made, as it is written (**2 Kings 11:17**): "And Jehoiada enacted the covenant between the Lord and between the king and between the people, to be the people of the Lord." The meaning is [that they agreed] to be servants of the Lord, and also "between the king and between the people," to be his servants according to the king's judgment, and also that the king should do according to the law for his servants; to wage their wars.

"before the Lord": But is it not so that the Tabernacle was not in Hebron? What then is the meaning of "before the Lord"? Wherever people make a stipulation or enact a covenant, the Omnipresent is there.

The coronation of Jehoash (or Joash) gives some interesting attitudes toward kingship later in Israel's history.

Following the death of his father, Ahaziah, Jehoash was spared from the rampages of Ahaziah's mother, Athaliah, by Jehoash's paternal aunt, Jehosheba, who was married to the high priest, Jehoiada. After hiding him in the "attic of the Holy of Holies" in the Temple for seven years, Jehoiada had Jehoash crowned and anointed king in a coup d'état against Athaliah, who had usurped the Throne of David. Athaliah was then killed.

- **2 Kings 11:12** - "And he brought out the king's son, and placed the crown and the testimony, and they made him king and anointed him: and they clapped their hands and said, "Long live the king!"

The crown was never solely passed on to a son by inheritance, but required the "acclamation" of the congregation.

Rashi - [The 'testimony'] was the copy of the law commanded in Deut.17:18. And our Rabbis said that the crown itself was the testimony, for anyone who is fit for the throne it would fit, whereas anyone unfit for the throne it would not fit.(Ab. Zarah 44a)

Perhaps this was the origin for the similar Sword in the Stone myth?

- **2 Kings 11:17** - "And Jehoiada made a covenant between the LORD and the king and the people, that they should be the LORD'S people; between the king also and the people."

Treatment of the Priests and Levites

Deuteronomy 18:1 - "The priests the Levites, and all the tribe of Levi, shall have no part nor inheritance with Israel: they shall eat the offerings of the LORD made by fire, and his inheritance."

Deuteronomy 18:3 - "And this shall be the priest's due from the people, from them that offer a sacrifice, whether it be ox or sheep; and they shall give unto the priest the shoulder, and the two cheeks, and the maw." (or "foreleg, the jaws, and the stomach")

The rabbis said the priests gained these portions because of the actions of Phinehas:

Rashi - Those who interpret the symbolism of Biblical verses say, the זרוע [which is, in effect, the “hand” of the animal, became the due of the kohanim , as a reward] for the “hand” [which Phinehas, the kohen , raised against the sinners], as it is said, “and he took a spear in his hand” (Num. 25:7); the jaws [as a reward] for the prayer [he offered], as it is said, “Then Phinehas stood and prayed” (Ps. 106:30); and the maw (הקבה), as a reward [for his action against the sinning woman], as it said, “[And he stabbed both of them, the man of Israel] and the woman in her stomach (קבתה)” (Num. 25:8). - [Chul. 134b].

Deuteronomy 18:6-7 - "And if a Levite come from any of thy gates out of all Israel, where he sojourned, and come with all the desire of his mind unto the place which the LORD shall choose; Then he shall minister in the name of the LORD his God, as all his brethren the Levites do, which stand there before the LORD."

Rashi says that "Levite" means a priest, since it is said he would minister. "And since Levites are not fit to serve in the whole service, we see that this verse is not referring to them [but rather to kohanim]. — [Sifrei]"

“with all the desire of his mind “ - of his own free will. This is how any of us should look at our service to God - completely given over to it, with our freewill being “Not my will, but Thine!”

Usually priests served in different shifts or "courses." By the time of David there were 24 courses of priests. This verse affirms they could go up to Jerusalem and serve on their own as well, even if it was not their time. (There probably was a need for extra help during feasts and festivals).

Deuteronomy 18:8 - “They shall have like portions to eat, beside that which cometh of the sale of his patrimony.”

Jewish translation: “They shall eat equal portions, *except* what was sold by the forefathers.”

Rashi - “They shall eat equal portions”: This teaches that they [the kohanim present as pilgrims on the Festivals] receive a portion of the hides [of the Festival burnt-offerings] and the flesh of the he-goats of sin-offerings [of the Festival]. Now one might think that [these kohanim may participate] also in sacrifices which are brought unrelated to the Festival, such as the תמיד, the daily burnt-offerings, מוספי שבת, additional offerings of the Sabbath [on which a Festival may coincide] and sacrificial vows and donations. Therefore, it says:

“except what was sold by the forefathers”: Except what his ancestors sold [to one another] in the days of David and Samuel when the system of shifts was established, trading with each other thus, “You take your week, and I will take my week.” - [Sifrei ;

Sukk. 56a]

i.e. If they came at a festival time, they could partake of the additional offerings, but not what was allotted to the assigned course of priests already serving.

Idolatry and Sorcery are Prohibited

Idolatry, magic and seeking after mediums or omens is an attempt to know the future and control it. Israel should trust in God alone.

Deuteronomy 18:9-12 - "When thou art come into the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee, thou shalt not learn to do after the abominations of those nations. There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or his daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, Or a charmer, or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the LORD: and because of these abominations the LORD thy God doth drive them out from before thee."

Rashi - "who passes his son or daughter through fire": This was the Molech worship. They made two bonfires on either side and passed the child between them both. — [San. 64b]

[For] whoever does these [things] [is an abomination to the Lord]: It does not say, "one who does all these things," but, "whoever does these things," even one of them. — [Sifrei , Mak. 24a]

Be Ye Perfect!

Deuteronomy 18:13 - "Thou shalt be perfect with the LORD thy God."

Rashi - Be wholehearted with the Lord, your God: Conduct yourself with Him with simplicity and depend on Him, and do not inquire of the future; rather, accept whatever happens to you with [unadulterated] simplicity and then, you will be with Him and to His portion. — [Sifrei]

"perfect" = *tamiym* - pure, without blemish, whole, upright.

This is the word used to describe an acceptable sacrifice - like Christ, without spot or blemish.

- **Exodus 12:5** - "Your lamb shall be without blemish, (*tamiym*) a male of the first year: ye shall take it out from the sheep, or from the goats"

The rabbis said this exhortation in Deuteronomy follows the prohibition against idol worship, divination and sorcery because it was also said to Abraham, who first left all these pagan practices behind:

- **Genesis 17:1** - "And when Abram was ninety years old and nine, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect (*tamiym*)."

Jesus also commanded this:

- **Matthew 5:48** - "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect."

- **Philippians 3:12** - "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus."

Christ's perfection has already apprehended us, but we strive to align our own apprehension to what that means within us, and live and walk accordingly.