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In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag
Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag

HAFTARA - PARSHAT KORACH

I Shmuel 11:14->12:22

Is it good to have a king, or should the leader of Am Yisrael be someone more 'spiritual', like a prophet or a wise-man?

Anyone who has learned Sefer Shmuel would probably assume that a king is bad, for Shmuel himself reacts very negatively to Bnei Yisrael's request for a king.

[See I Shmuel 8:1-7.]

Furthermore, if having a king is so important, we would have expected Yehoshua set up a monarchy as soon as Bnei Yisrael crossed into the land of Israel?

On the other hand, if a king is bad, why does Sefer Devarim permit (or possibly encourage) such an institution?

[See Devarim 17:14-18, and Sanhedrin 20b, in regard to the dispute whether appointing a King is "reshut" or "chova".]

This week's Haftara - which describes the coronation of Shaul ha'melech - can provide us with some insight on this multifaceted topic as it describes how Shmuel may have the perfect opportunity to abolish the kingdom (see 12:19), yet when all is said and done, he actually encourages Bnei Yisrael to keep their king!

In the following shiur, as we study this week's Haftara, we will show how the answer to these questions lies in its concluding pasuk.

INTRODUCTION

This week's Haftara (I Shmuel 11:14->12:22) opens as Shmuel gathers the nation at Gilgal to establish Shaul as the accepted King of Israel (see 11:14-15). Even though Shaul had already been appointed King at an earlier gathering in Mitzpah (see 10:18-27), this additional ceremony became necessary as the first ceremony lacked the necessary enthusiasm and consensus of the people.

[See 10:27, recall as well that Shaul was rather unknown at that time.]

After Shaul's stunning victory in his battle to save the Gilad area from Amonite aggression, Shmuel decides to gather the nation once again to re-establish Shaul's monarchy - this time with complete public approval.

Shmuel utilizes this gathering to address the nation concerning the spiritual dangers created by the appointment of a King. In his address, Shmuel begins on a 'personal note', and then continues by rebuking the nation in regard to the negative aspects of their request for a king.

As we review this address, we will note how it may contain several positive aspects concerning the monarchy as well.

'SHOWING OFF'?

In the first five psukim of his address (see 12:1-5), Shmuel appears to be 'showing off' about how good (or least 'how straight') a leader he has been:

"...Here is your King... As for me, I have become old...I have been your leader from my youth to this day. Now answer me in the presence of God and in the presence of his anointed one - Whose ox have I taken... whom have I defrauded or whom have I robbed or from whom have I taken a bribe?" (12:2-3)

Is Shmuel simply taking this opportunity to 'show off' how great a leader he was? Certainly one would not expect a "navi" to be so vain!

The answer is quite simple. If we read 12:3 a little more carefully, we see that not only is Shmuel making this statement in

front of the nation, but also in front of God (i.e. the ARON) AND in front of his 'anointed one' - which obviously refers to SHAUL, whose monarchy is now being established. The purpose of Shmuel's statement is simply to teach Shaul a lesson and to prepare him for 'public office'. Shmuel wants to make sure that Shaul is publicly forewarned that it is indeed possible (even though it is not easy) to remain a public leader without becoming involved in corruption.

Here, Shmuel is touching on one of the inherent problems of appointing a king. Once so much power is invested into the hands of one individual, it is almost inevitable that he will use this power for his own personal gain. Shmuel's claim is that the king of Israel must be different. Surely, he must be invested with supreme power to enable him to run his kingdom, yet at the same time the leader must be a fine example of honesty and integrity. Therefore, Shmuel brings an example from himself. Even though he had been a national leader since the time of his youth, he had never misused the powers entrusted in him. Shmuel now publicly charges Shaul that he should follow this same path in leadership.

[Note that here we find both positive and negative aspects of a monarchy. By establishing a monarchy, an institution is created which can easily lead to corruption. On the other hand, an opportunity is created where leadership can set a shining example for the entire nation.]

THE 'GREAT GRANDSON OF KORACH'

After this short prelude, Shmuel enters the main section of his address where he rebukes the people for requesting a King for the wrong reason. However, note how refers to God in his opening statement: "God who made Aharon & Moshe..." (see 12:6).

Why would Shmuel use this unique (and rather strange) description of God, instead of the usual 'God of our forefathers', or 'God who took us out of Egypt' etc.?

The answer may lie in the parallel between Shmuel's own life and Parshat ha'Shavuah - Parshat Korach. Recall from this week's Parsha shiur how Korach challenged both (1) the political leadership of MOSHE and (2) the (exclusive) priesthood of AHARON and his children. From a certain perspective, Shmuel (a great great grandson of Korach/ see I Divrei Ha'yamim 6:3-13) follows in Korach's footsteps, for he too challenges (& reforms) the corrupt priesthood of Eli's sons, and he reforms as well the political institutions of leadership! [Note that he is also a Levi who acts as a Kohen (offering korbanot).]

The main difference however is that Shmuel makes these reforms for the PROPER reason. He does not become involved for personal gain (like Korach), but rather Shmuel is sincere in all of his endeavors. Therefore, his reform is not only accepted, but also praiseworthy.

[Note Rashi on Bamidbar 16:7 where he explains how Korach's foresight of the greatness of his future grandson may have led him to rebel 'prematurely'.]

After serving as both their spiritual and political leader for so many years, Shmuel now hands over the mantle of national leadership to Shaul, and opens his 'farewell address' by referring to Hashem as "the God who made MOSHE & AHARON" - for they represent the ideal of both spiritual and political leadership.

[Note also Tehilim 99:6 [from Kaballat Shabbat]: "Moshe v'Aharon b'kohonav, u'SHMUEL b'korei shmo..." where again we see the parallel between Shmuel and Moshe & Aharon. For a deeper insight, see the conclusion of Seforno's introduction to Chumash (found at the beginning of Sefer Breishit in the Torat Chayim edition) where he quotes this pasuk in Shmuel (i.e. 12:6) to prove a very important point concerning the nature of "nevuat Moshe"!]

Let's return now to the Haftara itself.

A 'MINI' SEFER SHOFTIM

Psukim 12:7-15 contain the thrust of Shmuel's rebuke of the people. Read them carefully and note how they form a quick summary of the main theme of Sefer Shoftim:

"And now stand upright - v'iy'SHAFTA - and I will JUDGE you in front of God... Whenever you were left God, and he sold you to [your enemies e.g.] Sisrah & Plishtim & Moav... And when you CRIED OUT to God and confessed that you had sinned... then Hashem sent [saviours e.g.] Yerubaal [=Gideon] & B'dan [=Shimshon?] & Yiftach... and SAVED YOU from your enemies..." (see 12:7-11)

[Note how we have selectively quoted in order to highlight the main thematic and textual parallels to Sefer Shoftim. Be sure to compare w/Shoftim 2:11-20! Note also a possible deeper meaning of the word SHOFET both here and there!]

Recall, that it was Shmuel who wrote Sefer Shoftim, and most likely for this very reason - to explain to the people that a king alone will not solve all of their problems. If the underlying cause of their problems - i.e. leaving God - was not eradicated; then they would continue to suffer from their enemies, with a king or without.

Now that the nation has chosen to be ruled by a king (instead of a shofet), Shmuel fears that the people will not realize that they must still remain dedicated to God for their salvation:

"And NOW, when you saw that Nachash king of Amon was attacking, you said to me NO [i.e. we DO NOT want to repent to deserve God's salvation, INSTEAD:] we want a KING who will rule us [i.e. and he will protect us & save us from our enemies], but [you are forgetting that] HASHEM is your true king." (see 12:12)

Shmuel is worried that once Bnei Yisrael appoint a king, they will no longer cry for God's help (as they had done since the time of Yetziat Mitzraim). From Shmuel's point of view, this is most dangerous aspect of a monarchy, for the people will REPLACE their reliance on God to a reliance on their King instead. Therefore Shmuel warns the people:

"Now, here is the king that you have chosen, God has agreed to give you a king - BUT - only if you FEAR God and follow Him... but should you NOT LISTEN to God and rebel against Him, then the Hand of God will be against you..." (12:13-15)

A DIVINE SIGN

Finally, Shmuel provides the people a 'divine' sign that God is indeed quite angered by their request for a king:

"Behold see this great miracle that I will bring today - Is it not the wheat harvest today?! [i.e. early summer (June)/ recall that from May to September it does not rain in Israel], but God will bring thunder and rain [today] - a sign that you should realize how VERY BAD it is what you have done in the eyes of God to ask for a king." (12:16-17)

As the rain and thunder begin, the people are taken aback and immediately ask Shmuel for forgiveness, recognizing their guilt in asking for a king:

"And people said to Shmuel: 'Pray on behalf of your servants so that we not die, for we have added to our sins by asking for a king.'" (see 12:19).

NO KING! NO KING! ...

Considering this expressed 'regret', Shmuel should have taken this opportunity to simply abolish the kingdom altogether. After all, was this not what Shmuel wanted to hear? Was not he (and God) simply 'giving in' to the people because they were so insistent on having a king?

However, instead of this expected reaction, Shmuel does

quite the opposite. He tells the people NOT to worry and to continue with the coronation of their king! [See 12:20-25.]

Apparently, even though the people's original request for a king was made for the wrong reasons, there remains hope nonetheless that a king may actually improve the 'state of the nation'. This may also explain why God Himself had originally agreed to give them a king (back in chapter 8) even though He was disappointed with that original request (see 8:7).

Note how Shmuel emphasizes this point in his response to the people's fear. After explaining that they may keep their king on the condition that they (i.e. the king AND the people) OBEY God (see 12:20-21), Shmuel concludes with an explanation of WHY God has agreed:

"KI - BECAUSE God will not abandon His people FOR THE SAKE OF HIS GREAT NAME - for it is God's desire to make you HIS Nation" (12:22 carefully!)

Hidden in this short pasuk is the most important positive aspect of having a king - for it is only through the establishment of a monarchy that Am Yisrael can mature into a NATION! Surely, there are dangers in appointing a king. But there are even greater dangers in not appointing one; for without a monarchy, the result will be anarchy.

BACK TO SEFER BREISHIT

Recall from Sefer Breishit how God had hoped for the Nation of Avraham to become His own special nation, living in Eretz Canaan, serving as God's MODEL nation among the seventy nations of the world. Unfortunately, up until this time period, this goal had not been realized. Since the time of Yehoshua, Am Yisrael's history exhibited many 'highs' and 'lows', but even at the best times - never did we find Am Yisrael serving as God's model nation. During most of the time period of the Shoftim, Am Yisrael was basically 'fighting for survival'.

Both politically and economically, they never matured into a full-fledged nation, nor had they enjoyed any type of positive relationships with any of their neighboring countries.

[Note that not even once in Sefer Shoftim do we find a foreign power entering into any sort of treaty with Am Yisrael. In contrast, once David's monarchy is established he immediately enters into a treaty with Chiram king of Tzor, while Shlomo widened his foreign diplomacy to its fullest international potential.]

One could suggest that this may be the underlying reason why God agreed at this time to appoint a king. He realized that without a monarchy, i.e. a strong central government (with the right to conscript soldiers and levy taxes/ see I Shmuel 8:11-17 = "mishpat ha'melech"), Bnei Yisrael would never become the nation that He had hoped for.

But since God's ultimate interest is for Am Yisrael to become His model nation, sooner or later they must mature into a developed political entity - 'like any other nation' ["k'chol ha'goyim"/see Devarim 17:14 & Netziv in Emek Davar] - but with special laws that will make them God's nation.

Even though they presently ask for a king for the 'wrong reason', God hopes to take advantage of the situation, in order to catalyze a more ideal manner of national growth.

As we shall see, it will be specifically the job of the NAVI to make sure that the king truly leads the people in this direction. [See 12:23, see also I Shmuel 2:35!]

Therefore, Shmuel agrees to a king, even though the people have asked for the wrong reason, for their request has created an unprecedented opportunity to finally steer Bnei Yisrael back in the proper direction. It is not an easy job, but slowly and surely this dream finally comes true (at least partially) during the time period of David & Shlomo.

TODAY

One cannot help but notice the parallel to the events in our own generation (in connection to the establishment of the state of Israel).

Certainly, the intentions of many of those who desired the establishment of a sovereign Jewish state was not 'out of the fear of God'. And certainly, the debate at that time concerning whether or not it should be established was legitimate. However, now that Divine Providence has allowed that state to come into existence, it may now be our responsibility to do our best to help it develop properly - "ki ho'il Hashem l'asot etchem lo l'Am" - "...for it is God's desire that we become His nation, for the sake of His great Name" (12:22).

shabbat shalom,
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

A. Based on the above shiur, why do you think that the Haftara ends with pasuk 22 instead of finishing three psukim later at the end of the perek (and the end of the 'parshia')?

B. Even though the main section of Sefer Shoftim seems to make the same point as Shmuel in chapters 8 & 12 that a kingdom would not be good, clearly the conclusion of the Sefer and its closing four chapters indicate quite the opposite - "ba'yamim ha'hem ein melech b'Yisrael...". In fact, these chapters seem to blame Bnei Yisrael's political and spiritual downfall on the fact that there is no king. Iy"h, we will show in our series on Nviiim rishonim that Sefer Shoftim presents a 'double message' regarding how to relate to the institution of a "melech".

C. When we speak of "melech", there are two aspects:
1) a dynasty, the succession of power from father to son.
2) a strong central gov't. with the right to levy taxes etc.

Which of these two aspects would relate to modern day democracies? Could this suggest the possibly that certain laws of a "melech" may apply to a 'president' or 'prime-minister' of a democracy as well?!

See Rambam Hilchot Melachim I and Hilchot Terumot I:1-3.

D. A FITTING SIGN

In conclusion, let's note how the Shmuel's sign of 'RAIN on a summer harvest day' ["geshem b'yom katzir"] may reflect this very concept. [based on a shiur by Rav Yoel bin Nun]

Ask any farmer if rain is 'good' or 'bad', he'll immediately tell you that most of the time rain is 'good', for without it, nothing will grow. However, rain at the wrong time of the year, e.g. rain during the wheat harvest - can be disastrous.

In a similar manner, the concept of a "malchut Yisrael" - a king of Israel - in principle is a positive one, for through it Am Yisrael can better develop into God's model nation. However, just as rain can be damaging if it falls at the wrong time, so too a monarchy which is established for the wrong reason.

In Shmuel's sign, he may be hinting to a similar concept. Bnei Yisrael have asked for a king, which carried great potential, but for the wrong reason, and hence at certain times it can be spiritually damaging as well.