

## **Fill Your Own Cup 5786 – Summer Series**

### *Power and Powerlessness in Jewish Texts Session Two – From Nation to Kingdom*

#### **1) Rabbi Aharon Frazer, Privilege and Power in the Torah**

<https://thelehrhaus.com/scholarship/privilege-and-power-in-the-torah/>

The Torah is ambivalent about power, especially the power that settled civilizations can accumulate. While Jews are permitted to seek power, and indeed we are promised power as a form of reward for holy living, the Torah consistently raises concerns that power can be a source of great evil and of our undoing. From the cities portrayed in Genesis through the curses at the end of Deuteronomy, the Torah illustrates time and again how agriculture, kings, and military power can be sinister and incur God’s wrath.

In this discussion, I’d like to trace this theme through the *Humash*—mostly from the book of Genesis but citing examples from the other books as well. While the Torah does not oppose us constructing a strong and prosperous civilization, it implores us time and time again to remember that power is a gift from God, not an entitlement, and to be mindful of how we treat the weak. All human power is conditional on heeding these warnings. I believe that this ambivalence toward power is a core theme that underlies many of the Torah’s stories and laws and is a foundational teaching of Judaism.

#### **2) Deuteronomy 17:14 – 20**

- 14) If, after you have entered the land that the LORD your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, “I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me,”
- 15) you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the LORD your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your kinsman.
- 16) Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the LORD has warned you, “You must not go back that way again.”
- 17) And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess.
- 18) When he is seated on his royal throne, he shall have a copy of this Teaching written for him on a scroll by the levitical priests.
- 19) Let it remain with him and let him read in it all his life, so that he may learn to revere the LORD his God, to observe faithfully every word of this Teaching as well as these laws.
- 20) Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel.

#### **דברים יז:יד-כ**

כִּי־תָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נָתַן  
 לָךְ וַיִּרְשָׁתָהּ וַיִּשְׁבְּתָהּ בָּהּ וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲשֶׁיִּמְכָה  
 עָלַי מֶלֶךְ כַּכְּלִהָדוֹת אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתַי:  
 טו שׁוֹם תַּשִּׁים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר  
 יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקִּרְבֵּי אֲחֵיךָ תַשִּׁים עָלֶיךָ  
 מֶלֶךְ לֹא תוֹכֵל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נָכְרִי אֲשֶׁר  
 לֹא־אֲחִיךָ הוּא:  
 טז רַק לֹא־יִרְבֶּה־לוֹ סוּסִים וְלֹא־יֵשֵׁב אֶת־  
 הָעָם מִצְרַיִם לְמַעַן הִרְבֹּת־סוּס וַיִּהְיֶה  
 אָמַר לָכֶם לֹא תִסְפְּוּ לָשׁוּב בְּדֶרֶךְ הַזֶּה  
 עוֹד:  
 יז וְלֹא יִרְבֶּה־לוֹ נָשִׁים וְלֹא יִסְוֹר לְבָבוֹ  
 וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא יִרְבֶּה־לוֹ מְאֹד:  
 יח וְהָיָה כְּשִׁבְתּוֹ עַל כִּסֵּא מַמְלַכְתּוֹ וְכָתַב  
 לוֹ אֶת־מִשְׁנֵה הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת עַל־סֵפֶר  
 מִלְפָּנֵי הַכֹּהֲנִים הַלְוִיִּם:  
 יט וְהִיְתָה עִמּוֹ וְקָרָא בּוֹ כָּל־יְמֵי חַיָּו  
 לְמַעַן יִלְמַד לְיִרְאָה אֶת־יְהוָה אֱלֹהָיו  
 לְשׂוֹמֵר אֶת־כְּלֵי־דְבָרֵי הַתּוֹרָה הַזֹּאת וְאֶת־  
 הַחֻקִּים הָאֵלֶּה לַעֲשׂוֹתָם:  
 כ לְבַלְתִּי רוּם לְקַבּוֹ מֵאֲחָיו וּלְבַלְתִּי סוֹר  
 מִרְהַמְצֵנָה יָמִינוֹ וּשְׂמֹאלוֹ לְמַעַן יֵאָרֵיךְ  
 יָמָיִם עַל־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ הוּא וּבְנָיו בְּקִרְבֵּי  
 יִשְׂרָאֵל: (ס)

**3) The Beginning of Politics: Power in the Biblical Book of Samuel**

*Moshe Halbertal and Stephen Holmes*

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In the political theology typical of the great land powers surrounding ancient Israel, the king was either a God, an incarnation of a God, or a semi mythic human king who was elected by the Gods to serve as a necessary mediator between the divine order and the human world. Though there was certainly a spectrum of monarchic ideologies in the ancient near east, kingship was not generally perceived as a historical institution that was consciously chosen at a certain critical moment in time out of the imperatives of communal life and in full recognition of the onerous burdens of taxation and conscription that would inevitably be imposed by a human sovereign as the price of organizing collective defense...

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The biblical political theology that preceded the dramatic events recounted in the Book of Samuel upended this ancient near eastern formula. rather than declaring that "the king is a God," the new theology postulated instead that "God is the king." The sole or exclusive kingship of God was fundamentally irreconcilable with a consolidated political monarchy. The kingship of God entailed, as we see in the biblical Book of Judges, a divine monopoly on sovereign authority that essentially precluded the creation of self sustaining political institutions...

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The conditions for the emergence of genuine political thought, as a result, were established only when a third alternative emerged between these two radically opposed outlooks, between "the king is a God" and "God is the king." The first part of the Book of Samuel narrates, among other events, a dramatic break from God's direct sovereignty over political events. This is the essence of the shift from "God is the king" to "the king is not a God." That theological change allowed for the establishment and recognition of purely human sovereignty which, in turn, gave birth to a vividly insightful way of thinking and speaking about the newly emergent and self sustaining political reality.

In the Samuel narrative, both the shift away from the political theology of the Book of Judges and the initial appearance of monarchy in Israel are presented as events occurring in human history. They do not belong to the mythic past. The biblical king, enthroned before our eyes, is a thoroughly human being, not a God. He is not a pillar of the cosmic order. he plays a negligible and wholly dispensable role in religious ritual, does not convey divine commands to his people, does not maintain the order of nature, and is not the prime lawgiver.

**4) Samuel I 8:11 – 17**

(1) And it came to pass, when Samuel was old, that he made his sons judges over Israel (2) Now the name of his first-born was Joel; and the name of his second, Abijah; they were judges in Beer-sheba (3) And his sons walked not in his ways, but turned aside after wealth, and took bribes, and perverted justice. (4) Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel to Ramah (5) And they said unto him: 'Behold, You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.

6 But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said: 'Give us a king to judge us.' And Samuel prayed unto the LORD. 7 And the LORD said unto Samuel: 'Listen to the voice of the people in all that they

**שמואל א' פרק ח:יא-יז**

א וַיְהִי, כַּאֲשֶׁר זָקַן שְׁמוּאֵל; וַיִּשֶׂם אֶת-בָּנָיו שְׁפֹטִים, לְיִשְׂרָאֵל. ב וַיְהִי שָׁם-בְּנוֹ הַבְּכוֹר יוֹאֵל, וְשֵׁם מִשְׁנֵהוּ אַבְיָה--שְׁפֹטִים, בְּבֵאֵר שֶׁבַע. ג וְלֹא-הָלְכוּ בָנָיו בְּדַרְכּוֹ, וַיִּטּוּ אַחֲרֵי הַבָּצָע; וַיִּקְחוּ-שֹׁחַד--וַיִּטּוּ, מִשְׁפָּט.

ד וַיִּתְקַבְּצוּ, כָּל זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל; וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל-שְׁמוּאֵל, הַרְמָתָה. ה וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָיו, הֲנֵה אַתָּה זֹקֵן, וּבָנֶיךָ, לֹא הָלְכוּ בְּדַרְכֶיךָ; עֲתָה, שִׂימָה-לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ לְשֹׁפְטֵנוּ--כְּכָל-הַגּוֹיִם. ו וַיִּרַע הַדָּבָר, בְּעֵינֵי שְׁמוּאֵל, כַּאֲשֶׁר אָמְרוּ, תְּנֵה-לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ לְשֹׁפְטֵנוּ; וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל שְׁמוּאֵל, אֶל-יְהוָה. {פ}



over you” (Deuteronomy 17:15), meaning, it is necessary that his fear should be upon you.

And so would **Rabbi Yehuda say**: Three mitzvot were commanded to the Jewish people upon their entrance into Eretz Yisrael, which apply only in Eretz Yisrael: They were commanded to establish a king for themselves (see Deuteronomy 17:14–15), and to cut off the seed of Amalek in war (see Deuteronomy 25:17–19), and to build the Chosen House, i.e., the Temple, in Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 12:10–12).

**Rabbi Nehorai says**: This biblical passage about appointing a king was stated only in response to the Jewish people’s complaint, as it is stated: “When you come unto the land that the Lord your God gives you, and shall possess it, and shall dwell therein, and shall say: I will set a king over me, like all the nations that are around me” (Deuteronomy 17:14).

It is taught in a baraita: Rabbi Eliezer says: The elders of Samuel’s generation asked appropriately, as it is stated: “Give us a king to judge us” (I Samuel 8:6).

But the ignoramuses among them ruined it, as it is stated: “But the people refused to heed the voice of Samuel; and they said: No, but there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us, and emerge before us, and fight our battles” (I Samuel 8:19–20).

וְכֵן הָיָה רַבִּי יְהוּדָה אוֹמֵר: שְׁלֹשׁ מִצְוֹת נִצְטְווּ יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכַנְיָסְתָן לְאֶרֶץ – לְהַעֲמִיד לָהֶם מֶלֶךְ, וְלְהַכְרִית זֶרְעוֹ שֶׁל עַמְלֵק, וּלְבַנּוֹת לָהֶם בַּיִת הַבְּחִירָה.

רַבִּי נְהוֹרַי אוֹמֵר: לֹא נִאֶמְרָה פְּרָשָׁה זוֹ אֲלֵא כְּנֶגֶד תַּרְעוּמָתוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וְנִאֶמְרָת אֲשִׁימָה עָלַי מֶלֶךְ וְגו'".

תַּנְיָא, רַבִּי אֱלִיעֶזֶר אוֹמֵר: זְקֵנִים שֶׁבְּדוֹר כְּהוֹגֵן שְׂאֵלוֹ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "תִּתֵּן לָנוּ מֶלֶךְ לְשִׁפְטֵנוּ". אָבֵל עָמִי הָאֶרֶץ שֶׁבָּהּוּ קִלְקְלוּ, שֶׁנֶּאֱמַר: "וְהִיָּינוּ גַם אֲנַחְנוּ כְּכָל הַגּוֹיִם וְשִׁפְטָנוּ מִלְּכָנוּ וְנִצָּא לְפָנֵינוּ".

**6) Abarbanel, Deuteronomy 17:14**  
*R' Yitzchak Abarbanel (1437-1508) Portugal*

And after these two introductions, we come to explain the section in the Torah relating to the king and the subject of the mitzvah in truth. In fact, when it says "When you arrive in the land that Hashem, your God, is giving you and inherit it and live in it, and you say, "Let me appoint over me a king like all the nations around me", there is no mitzvah whatsoever in this, for God did not command that we say this and ask for a king. Rather, here is (just) foretelling of the future...[so when it says] 'Set a king over yourself...one of your own people', it is not commanding them to ask for [a king], [rather it is saying] that if they ask for one of their own volition, they should choose as God instructed from among their brethren, and so this matter of a king is a positive commandment that depends on a discretionary matter. [That is] as if to say when you want to do this, [although] it is inappropriate, do not except in this particular way.

**אברבנאל על תורה, דברים י"ז: י"ד**

ואחרי ב' ההקדמות האלה שהקדמתי, שמע פי' פרשת המלך וענין המצוה כפי אמתתה, הנה באמרו כי תבאו אל הארץ אשר יהוה אלהיך נותן לך וירשתה וישבת בה ואמרת אשימה עלי מלך ככל הגוים אשר סביבותי אין בזה מצוה כלל כי לא צוה הש"י שיאמרו זה וישאלו מלך, אבל הנה הוא הגדת העתיד...רוצה לומר שום תשים עליך מלך מקרב אחיך לא שיצוה אותם שישאלוהו, כי אם שכאשר ישאלו אותם מרצונם לא יבחרוהו מעצמם כי אם אשר יבחר יהוה מקרב אחיהם ולפי זה יהיה ענין המלך מצות עשה תלויה בדבר הרשות, כאומר כאשר תרצה לעשות כן עם היותו בלתי ראוי, אל תעשה אותו כי אם בזה האופן