BIBLE 365

Daily podcast with
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Deuteronomy Weekly

The King and Us

Parashat Shoftim, Deuteronomy, Chapters 16-21

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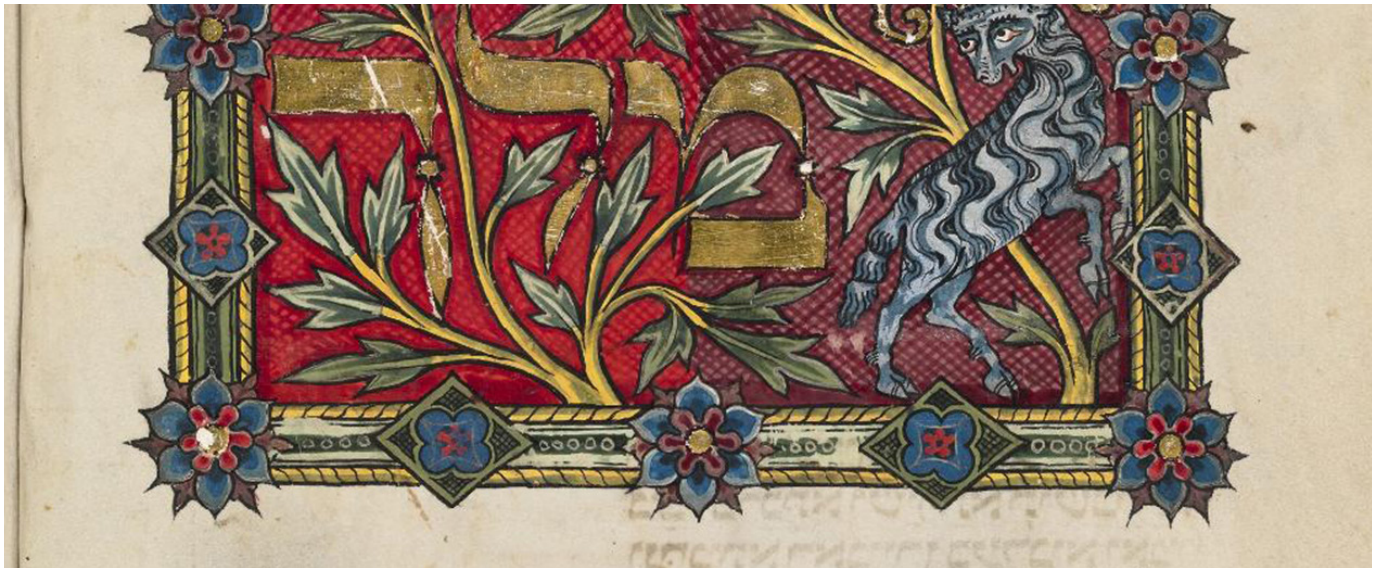


> Rabbi Yochanan said, "One should always strive to run toward kings of Israel. And not only should he run toward kings of Israel, but also toward kings of the nations of the world, so that if he will be privileged, he will distinguish between the kings of Israel and the kings of the nations of the world."

The Talmud tells us that it is a virtue, a learning experience, to study royalty. I have followed this rabbinic dictum—reading books about the Houses of Tudor, Stuart, Hanover, and Windsor, and reading and watching some of the greatest plays and films about kings. If this kind of study is always important, it is especially so as we approach Rosh Hashanah, a holiday whose theme, among others, is the kingship of God.

In Eastern Europe, the first night of Rosh Hashanah was known to some as "coronation night." Again and again, we call the Almighty "*Melech al Kol Ha'aretz*," "King of all the earth." It therefore behooves us to seek to understand what Jews mean by the concept of kingship and how this approach differs from the general conception of royalty. What do we mean when we call God a king? Why is it so important to coronate the Almighty year after year? What might my own delving into royal history teach us about the meaning of monarchy?

The chapters of the Torah that we read this week describe the various leaders of Israelite society: prophets, priests, and judges. We are also introduced therein to the biblical laws pertaining to monarchs:

> *When thou art come unto the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, and shalt possess it, and shalt dwell therein, and you shall say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me;*
>
> *Thou shalt set a king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: one from among thy brethren shalt thou set king over thee...* (Deuteronomy 17:14-15)

The Torah goes on to stress that an Israelite king differs from most monarchs. He is to refrain from many of the trappings of the rulers of the rest of the world, and he is also obligated to keep a Torah with him always:

> *And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this Torah on a scroll 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.* (Deuteronomy 17:18-19)

"God became King because he made room in existence for others."

The Torah then gives the reason for its concern and the root of these obligations:

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

This, then, is the Torah's ultimate concern: that the king's heart include his brethren and that he not grow haughty above his brethren. Royalty, it would seem, is at least in part a matter of the heart.

Maimonides furthers elaborates on this by stating that if the Torah is particularly concerned about the heart of the king, it is because "*Libo hu lev kol kahal yisrael*," "The king's heart is the heart of all the people of Israel." The king's heart, in other words, must contain the hearts of all his subjects. It is expanding beyond oneself that for Judaism is the essence of Israelite royalty.

The wonderful film, *The King's Speech*, depicts the king of England's relationship with a speech therapist, Lionel Logue. In order that they be equals during therapy, Logue insists that he call the king "Bertie," but of course, they are not equals, and the king treats his therapist as a servant. He never calls him "Lionel," only "Logue."

At the end of the film, when the king—thanks to Logue's help—successfully gives his wartime speech, the king first says, "Thank you, Logue." Then the king walks over, shakes Logue's hand, and says, "Thank you, my friend."

Only then does Logue sincerely respond, "Your majesty." Logue understood, in other words, that it was precisely the king expanding his circle of friends that made him majestic.

If it is expanding one's heart beyond oneself that defines the *melech* (Hebrew for king), then it is at least in part because this reflects the Almighty's royalty. Thus, one of the most famous stanzas of Jewish liturgy: "*Adon Olam asher malach beterem kol yitzir nivrah*," "Master of the Universe who reigned before creation," "*l'eit nasa vehevtso kol, azai Melech shemo nikra*, "when all at his will came into being, **then** was God called a King." God became King because he made room in existence for others. In contrast to the customary coronation of kings, in which a people first exist and only then crown a monarch, God became King by allowing humanity to come into existence.

What made the Almighty a monarch is that though utterly self-sufficient, he was not satisfied to live in existence all alone, and that he therefore brought the world into being. In Jewish mysticism, this is described as a great mystery: God, though infinite and everywhere, somehow lovingly made room for the universe, and thereby became a king. This, in turn, defines our understanding of human kingship.

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik noted that in Jewish mysticism, the experience of God dwelling amongst us on earth is described by the term "*Malchut*," "Kingship." This, he argues, seems initially counterintuitive. A king, at least in the ancient world, was set apart from his subjects. But we see from this, as Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik explains, that:

> An open existence is a royal existence. The king resides in the midst of the people. He is always close to his subjects and accessible to them...Everybody and everyone may approach the king...Each may ask for help.

"This, then, is the Jewish notion of kingship. In expanding one's heart to include others, royalty is made manifest."

Rabbi Soloveitchik further noted that some of the most famous monarchs in Israelite history made themselves accessible to the people. Solomon, who ruled over Israel as a superpower, maintained a throne room that was open to every member of Israelite society. As Rabbi Soloveitchik put it:

> Kingship in general historical terms precipitates the separation of the king from his people, his existential exclusiveness. However, in Judaism, *malchut*, kingship, means integration of the individual in the community and existential all-inclusiveness and openness. The king opens himself up to everyone and embraces the entire nation without excluding anybody.

Rabbi Soloveitchik concludes that kingship:

> requires of man not only to be aware of the existence of others, but also to feel, to experience their existence as if it were his own.

This, then, is the Jewish notion of kingship. In expanding one's heart to include others, royalty is made manifest.

We now turn to the difference between kings and other Israelite leaders. As our passage in Deuteronomy describes, the supreme court of the Jews, ultimately known as the Sanhedrin, issues forth its rulings from the midst of the Holy, from the sacred site that the Lord will select:

> *And thou shalt do according to the tenor of the ruling, which they shall declare unto thee from that place which the Lord shall choose; and thou shalt observe to do according to all that they shall teach thee.* (Deuteronomy 17:10)

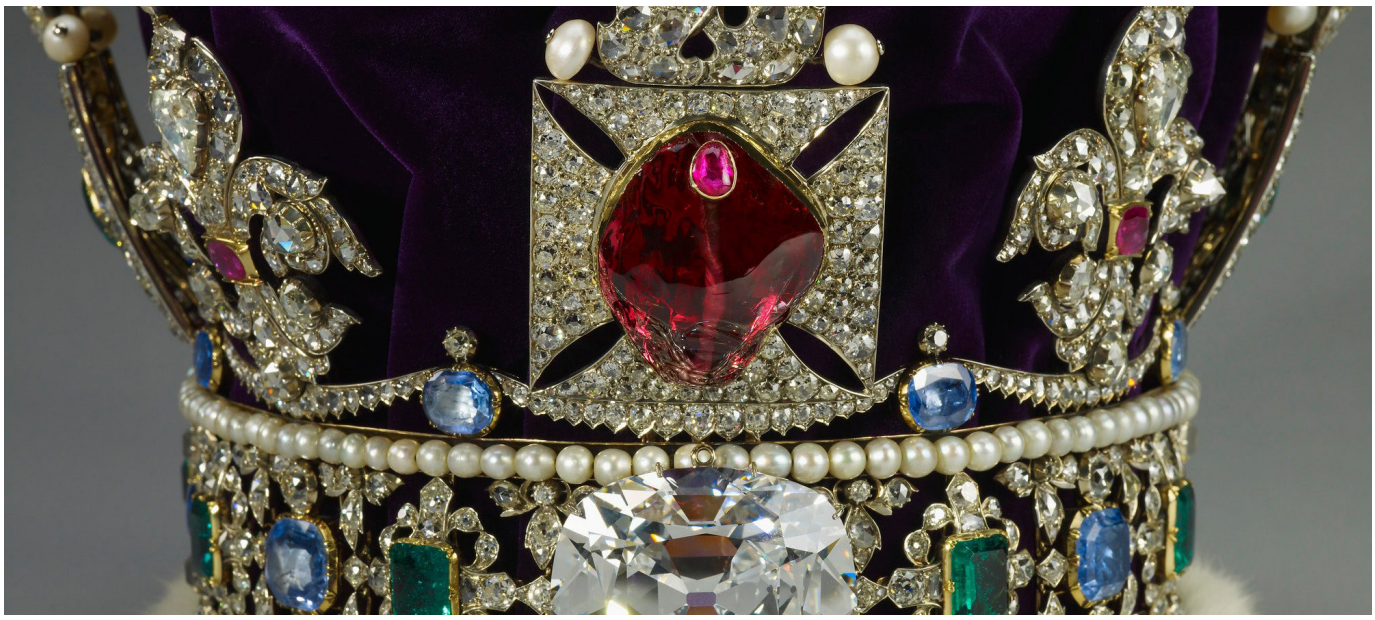
In accordance with this verse, the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem met within the Temple precincts. Similarly, the priests, the *kohanim*, are themselves dedicated to God, marked to minister in the Holy.

But the king, as we have just read, is different. He is obligated to write the Torah that he carries with him in the presence of the priests, meaning within the Temple, but then he bears it with him in the presence of all Israel. This way, we are told, the king's heart will not arrogantly rise above that of his brethren. The king thus bears the law of God throughout the land, even as his heart expands to include all of Israel. This is royalty.

We are now, perhaps, able to understand why year after year we coronate God on Rosh Hashanah. Not because God needs it, but because we need it. For in pondering the essence of Jewish royalty, we better comprehend how we too can become members of a royal court worthy of crowning the King of Kings.

In this vein, it struck me, as a student of royalty, that an interesting contrast presents itself. Britain's Imperial State Crown contains jewels from throughout its history. It has, according to what I've read, a sapphire of Edward the Confessor, pearls that happened to be worn by Elizabeth I, a ruby that was worn by Henry V as he fought at Agincourt. Meanwhile, the *Midrash* describes the crown of the Almighty as containing jewels of a very different sort.

> Rabbi Pinchas says…when Jewish communities pray…first, one synagogue prays, then somewhere else another. When all of them are finished, the angel appointed over



> the prayers takes all of them and weaves them into a crown, and places it upon God's head.

It is Jews joining other Jews in prayer to God, living their lives beyond themselves, that is the Almighty's adornment, for He as King revels in his relationship with us. It is we who take part in His coronation.

Rabbi Soloveitchik would recall as a young boy sitting in school and listening to his rabbi, his teacher, say right before Rosh Hashanah, in a tremulous voice, something like:

> Tonight, my children, we coronate God. Do you know who gets to place the crown on God's head? Yankel the tailor and Berel the shoemaker. Zalman the water carrier and Yossel the painter.

The point, perhaps, is that we coronate God to remind us what kingship truly is, to remind us what truly matters, to remind us when we truly matter.

It is advised to ponder royalty, the rabbis write: for if we do so, we may come to understand the difference between the Jewish conception of royalty and that of others.

As we approach Rosh Hashanah in less than a month, I wish all of you a *Shana Tovah* and a joyous coronation night, when we will coronate God as King and ponder for our own lives the nature of royalty that matters most.

Discussion Questions:

1. In later Jewish history, the Israelite monarchy will fall to the family of David. What about David may have made him well-suited to the unique role of a Jewish king as Rabbi Soloveichik describes it?

2. How might biblical teachings about the monarch be applied to other potential leaders today?

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