

What Makes a Leader? Shoftim 2021

Many years ago, when I was a schoolgirl in Social Studies class, we learned about the 3 branches of the US government: the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. (I *hope* kids are still taught these basics of civics – I'm not sure.) The 3-part structure was designed by our founders to *balance* power, to *limit* the power of any one branch or any one leader.

In recent years, we have witnessed the potential damage when the balance of power is threatened. And as *we*, along with the rest of the world, have had to navigate a global pandemic, we have experienced the absolute importance of solid leadership.

Today's parsha, Shoftim, has the Torah's most explicit laying out of a leadership and governing structure, as it describes those who wear what the Sages call the "three crowns": the priest, the monarch, and the prophet. Not identical, certainly, but something like our 3 branches of govt.

In the Torah, the ultimate power is God. In the human realm, the next level down, so to speak, power is to be divided, not concentrated in a single person or office. In Biblical Israel, the **monarchs**, {mostly kings,} had secular government power. They were the executive branch.

Priests were the leaders in the religious and ritual domains, which also included healing functions and some judicial matters as well.

Prophets were appointed by God to "speak truth to power" and to remind the people of their moral and religious commitments when they strayed from those. Prophets played a unique role: delivering divinely sanctioned moral messages. We might wonder who assumes the task of the prophet in our time. Journalists, academics, clergy? In discussing this question, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks comments, "today there is a shortage of Prophets. Perhaps there always was."

Today's parsha deals with all three roles, with the most specific attention given to kings. It is intriguing that the Torah assumes that people may or may not decide to even appoint a king- God does not command one way or another, rather saying, "**if** you should decide to set a king over you..." This ambiguity led to much debate among the sages as to whether God approved or wanted there to be kings in ancient Israel, or whether this was a concession of sorts to human needs.

(We seem to have followed our tradition's ambivalence, as modern societies moved on from the absolute power of monarchy in favor of democratic government.) In our parsha, we see too that the guidance for the king is framed in a strikingly negative way: the Torah does not relate what a king *should* do, but rather what he must not do. He should **not** "acquire great numbers of horses," or "take many wives" or "accumulate large amounts of silver and gold." These are the temptations of power that seem of most concern to the Torah.

Also striking is that the king is commanded to always be learning, and to be humble. Says our parsha: "...and he is to read Torah all the days of his life so that he may learn to revere Adonai and follow carefully all the words of this law **and** ...not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites..." This is a very powerful statement to make to a person with so much power. It says: you always have more to learn, *and* remember, you are not superior to your subjects.

The Torah sees leadership as not about status or superiority; rather, leadership is service. It is about service to God and to one's fellow citizens, who are one's **equals**, equal even to a king!

These Torah ideas reflect very ancient seeds of democracy. They are ideas that many, or most of us were raised on in our mother's milk, so to speak, but they bear remembering.

In our nations and on a more micro-level, in our communities and organizations, absolute power does not rest in any one leader or group. Leaders, even kings, are "only human." Leaders must always be answerable to a higher moral authority and to their peers.

As we navigate many great challenges in our world: a deadly pandemic, a major climate crisis, ongoing wars, and masses of refugees continuing to seek safe homes, we pray for the emergence of leaders who are wise and humble, who are always learning, and whose goal is to follow the famous words of our Torah portion: tzedek tzedek tirdof – run after tzedek, run to do what is just and what is right!

Shabbat Shalom