

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Shoftim 5769

You shall surely place over yourself a king, whom Hashem your G-d will choose (17:15).

Not only is the king chosen by Hashem – he is considered to be Hashem’s representative on earth to preserve law and order. This is the meaning of the verse that states, “And Shlomo sat on the throne of Hashem” (Divrei Hayamim I 29:23).

The Chasam Sofer (Likutei Shailos Utshuvos 86) takes this a step further and asserts that even a gentile king is Hashem’s representative on earth. His proof is that when we see a gentile king, we bless Hashem “who gave of His honor to flesh and blood” (Berachos 58a). We do not merely say that Hashem gave honor to the king; He gave of His own honor to the king.

According to this, the Chasam Sofer explains the verse, “Fear Hashem, my son, and the king; and do not join changers” (Mishlei 24:21). He points out that both here and in Koheles 8:2, “I keep the word of the king and on the matter of the oath of G-d,” Shlomo Hamelech mentions Hashem and the king in the same verse. This is because our fear of the king is not merely due to his power to punish, but also because we believe in Hashem and we know that He has appointed the king as His representative on earth. We believe that Hashem has commanded us under oath to fear the king.

The difference between a non-religious person who fears the king only for practical reasons (out of fear of punishment) and a believer in Hashem who fears the king as Hashem’s representative is that the non-religious person’s fear is only for show; in private he mocks the king and thinks he is smarter. He is a “changer” – he changes his attitude toward the king when in private. Shlomo therefore says, “Fear Hashem, my son, and fear the king, even in private, because of your fear of Hashem. Do not be like those changers who take a different attitude to the king in public and private.”

And the verse in Koheles 8:2 is to be rendered: “I keep the command of the king, not just because I swore allegiance to him (an oath that might be considered taken under duress and therefore not binding), but because I swore to G-d at Sinai that I would keep the Torah, which commands us to obey the king.”

Where does the Torah command us to respect the king? The Chasam Sofer cites three examples from Tanach in which Hashem obligated someone to show honor to a king: 1) He commanded Moshe to honor Pharaoh (Rashi on Shemos 6:13); 2) Eliyahu ran before Achav’s chariot (Melachim I 18:46 with Rashi); 3) Hashem’s Presence left Esther because she called Achashverosh a dog in her prayers (Megillah 15b). And in general, Jews in exile are forbidden to rebel against their host nations. The prophet Yirmiyahu (29:7) says, “Seek the welfare of the city where I have exiled you and pray on its behalf to Hashem, for through its peace you will have peace.”

Based on this, the Chasam Sofer explains a comment of the Magen Avraham in Orach Chaim 284:7. In the prayer we traditionally say every Shabbos morning for the king of our country, we ask Hashem to “conquer his enemies before him.” The Magen Avraham says: “This means his enemies in his own kingdom, for in the whole world there are Jews.” What problem forced the Magen Avraham to conclude that the prayer refers to internal enemies?

The Chasam Sofer explains that the word for “his enemies” used in the prayer is “sonay,” which literally means “his haters.” Every Jew is obligated to love his king and hate his king’s enemies. Thus if Jews in Country A were to pray for the downfall of the haters of their king, they would be praying for the downfall of their fellow Jews in the enemy country, Country B, who hate the king of Country A. This is why the Magen Avraham had to say that we are praying only for the downfall of the haters of the king within the country itself, who cannot possibly be Jews - for the Jews were commanded at Mt. Sinai not to hate their king.

Regarding our king’s external enemies, we have a different prayer in which we simply ask that there should be peace. This prayer appears in the Talmud, Berachos 16b-17a: “May it be Your will, Hashem our G-d, to make peace among the heavenly angels...” Rashi explains that this means the guardian angels of each of the seventy nations. When there is peace among them, there is peace among the nations.

But regarding internal enemies, we do not pray for peace, because those who rebel against a king are wicked, and “there is no peace for the wicked, said my G-d” (Yishaya 57:21).

At first, one might think that this does not apply in democratic countries like the United States, in which the president is an elected official and is supposed to govern in accordance with the will of the people. If we are against something he is doing, we have every right to speak out against him and support his opponents within the government.

This is true, but only in regard to changes that we think would be better for our country. For example, we want our country to be a more moral place. If the president advocates something immoral, we speak out against him, saying that he is not doing what it is best for our country.

But what if the president does what he feels is best for the United States, and Jews speak out against him, not on the grounds that his policies are not good for the United States, but on the grounds that they are not good for the Zionist state? Such Jews are showing that they are more loyal to the Zionist state than they are to the United States, and are violating the principle of loyalty and honor to a king. A president may not be a king as far as the different opinions on how the United States should be run are concerned. But all Americans agree that there should be a president, and that he should run the country in the country’s own best interest. One who acts in the interest of other countries is guilty of treason and is punished severely, even in democratic America. In that aspect the government is still like a king, and one who does not have the country’s best interest at heart is like a rebel against the king.

We live in a climate of rising anti-Semitism. According to a recent survey, over 30% of the non-Jews in America believe that Jews are more loyal to the Zionist state than they are to America. The last thing we want is to contribute more to that image. We need to follow the Torah’s directives for exile, and then Hashem promises us safety: “And even so, when they were in their enemies' lands, I did not reject them nor revile them to destroy them, to annul My covenant with them, for I am Hashem their G-d” (Vayikra 26:44).

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