

Dear Chavraya,

In the intersection of Torah and time we come to an inspiring confluence of themes and communal events this Shabbos and this weekend. The Torah portion is *Parashat Shoftim*, the portion of judges, concerned with a wide range of law pertaining to the organization of a social framework rooted in justice. The essence of all that is contained in this portion is expressed in the exhortation at the very beginning, *tzedek, tzedek tirdof / justice, justice shall you pursue*. Among the laws of *Shoftim* are laws pertaining to kings of Israel. Seeming on the surface to have little to do with us, of course it has everything to do with us. Even more so is the connection with us as *Nehar Shalom* on this Shabbos of clothing our Torah with new garb prior to its dedication on Sunday.

The Torah speaks of Israel as a “sovereignty of priests and a holy nation.” As such, the laws pertaining to the king are addressed to each one of us, their underlying values to be adapted and applied to the context of our own lives. The king is not to *get himself many horses*. The horse was a primary vehicle of war, thus the king is not to amass weaponry or engage in an arms race. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch in nineteenth century Germany comments: “A Jewish king who glories in building up a mighty military force... commits a direct transgression, because his true calling lies elsewhere.” The Torah continues with several laws that govern the behavior of the king: *He also must not take upon himself many wives, so that his heart may not go astray, and he must not amass silver and gold for himself in excess. Rather, when he sits upon the throne of his sovereignty, he shall write for himself a copy of this Torah...; he shall read from it as long as he shall live, so that he may learn to be in awe of God...; so that his heart may not lift itself up above his people....*

The king is to write a Torah and to study it throughout his life as a source of inspiration and guidance. Inculcating humility, the Torah is to be for the king a corrective and a reminder, helping him to be aware of his true calling and challenging him when he strays from it. It is an astounding standard of leadership. Rooted in an ancient context, these laws of the king offer an ideal of national leadership and self-awareness that the world thirsts for today. It is ultimately about the values that define the character and soul of the nation itself.

Like the king, each one of us is commanded to write a *Sefer Torah*, inculcating within ourselves the same values that were to govern the behavior of the king. Through Torah, each of us is directed to pursue the ways of peace, eschewing the ways of power that lead so easily to corruption, shunning the arrogance of nationalism. Living humbly as citizens of one nation, we are then able to recognize the equal value of other people and nations.

As we dedicate our Torah this Sunday, it is really ourselves whom we dedicate to the Torah. By writing one letter in the Torah, we symbolically fulfill the mitzvah to write an entire Torah. As the writing of a Torah was meant to guide a Jewish king in the ways of peace and humility, so may our writing guide each of us, as individuals and as a community.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor