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E-LIGHTS

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In loving memory of Rabbi Meyer ben Yehoshua Falk Greenberg ז"ל

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Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe MH"M

Candle Lighting Time:
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THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF JEWISH KINGSHIP

BY RABBI HESCHEL GREENBERG

The Commandment to Appoint a King

One of the Biblical commandments mentioned in this week's parsha is the appointment of a king.

The Talmud states that one of the commandments the Jewish nation was given upon entering the Land of Israel was to appoint a king.

The Mishnah rules that a king cannot serve as a judge and cannot be judged. However, the Babylonian Talmud qualifies and limits this law. It does not apply to the kings of the Davidic dynasty. Rather, it applies only to the kings of the breakaway kingdom of the Ten Tribes, upon whom the prophet Achiyah conferred the right to establish their own monarchy.

The Talmud explains that the reason for this exemption was that those kings would not allow themselves to be governed by the courts. The Talmud relates a tragic incident that occurred during the reign of the Hasmonean king Yannai, which precipitated this exemption.

King Yannai, who had joined the ranks of the heretical Sadducees, rebuffed the judges who were attempting to judge him. The Sages then declared that kings would no longer be judged or serve as judges.

The Jerusalem Talmud, however, does not make any distinction between the two forms of monarchy. Both were exempted from judgment by the courts.

Likewise, the Midrash Rabbah, composed by the Sages in the Land of Israel, also does not distinguish between the two monarchies. The Midrash asserts that it is the honor due to the kings of the Davidic dynasty that demands that they be judged by G-d alone. The Midrash cites the verse written regarding King David: "May my judgment issue from before You" (Psalms 17:2), and concludes: "From Me your judgment will come"—that is, no creature may judge the king; only the Holy One, blessed be He.

What Is the Crux of the Dispute?

We must try to understand the crux of the dispute between the Babylonian Talmud on the one hand, and the Jerusalem Talmud and Midrash on the other.

The difference may be based on two conceptions—and two objectives—of the Davidic monarchy.

On the one hand, the selection of a king was a concession to the people's demand for a monarch. As the Midrash elaborates, G-d was displeased that the people wanted an intermediary between themselves and G-d.

However, after G-d acceded to their demand for a king, the monarch's role was divided into two distinct functions.

The First Role: Establishing Justice and Righteousness

The first role of a monarch was to ensure that justice and righteousness prevail by eliminating corruption and immorality.

This was, in fact, one of the reasons G-d was displeased with their request for a monarch. Weren't the spiritual leaders and prophets sufficiently capable of inspiring the people to live lives of justice and righteousness? Why was a king necessary?

The king's responsibility was therefore, at least in part, to preserve the moral integrity of society and prevent corruption and injustice from taking hold.

The Second Role: Elevating the Spiritual Consciousness of the Nation

The second role of the monarch was far more sublime: to raise the spiritual level of the people to greater heights.

As the Tzemach Tzedek explains in his landmark discourse *Mitzvas Minui Melech*, in his work *Derech Mitzvosecha*, the king was empowered to instill the state of bittul, self-nullification, in the people. Through the king, the nation could surrender its individual egos and become subsumed within the Divine.

In simple terms, the king was meant to teach people to define themselves not primarily in terms of their own individual selfhood, but in terms of their Jewish identity and their degree of submission to G-d.

This higher role was especially prevalent with respect to the Davidic dynasty. The kings of the House of David were endowed with a powerful spiritual identity that enabled them to channel their acute awareness of G-d's sovereignty to the people.

The King's Own Bittul

The king himself, ideally, was to exist in a state of total surrender to G-d.

This is reflected in the Talmudic teaching that when a king prayed the Amidah, he had to remain prostrate throughout the entire prayer, unlike everyone else, who would kneel and prostrate only at the appropriate points of the Amidah. This was a manifestation of the king's own bittul, his complete self-abnegation before G-d.

And by virtue of the nation's submission to the king, the king could channel his own state of self-nullification to the people.

Two Functions Within One Monarchy

When the Jewish nation lived on its land with varying degrees of independence and Divine revelation through the Beis Hamikdash, the monarchs of the Davidic dynasty wore both hats, as it were.

The degree to which the king functioned in each role depended on the spiritual condition of the people and on which aspect of the monarchy was more urgently needed.

In times of moral decline, the king's role was to ensure justice and morality, keeping society from deteriorating.

But in a more spiritually sophisticated period, the king would have to focus on elevating the people to a heightened and sublime G-dly consciousness.

Thus, Jewish kingship contained two dimensions: the external function of maintaining justice and morality, and the internal function of elevating the nation to a higher awareness of G-d.

The Babylonian Talmud: Kingship Through the Prism of Exile

We can now understand the different attitudes of the Babylonian Talmud and the Jerusalem Talmud concerning the law that kings cannot be judged.

The Babylonian Talmud was composed in the Diaspora, in a world characterized by spiritual darkness. Indeed, the Talmud itself applies the verse from the Book of Lamentations, "You have settled me in darkness", to the Babylonian Talmud.

The Babylonian Talmud therefore focuses on and relates to the exile dimension of the world—a dimension that existed sporadically even during periods of heightened spirituality in the era of the First Beis Hamikdash.

From this perspective, the Babylonian Talmud sees the role of the king through the compromised prism of exile. The king's primary focus would not be on fostering a direct spiritual relationship between the people and G-d, but rather on ensuring justice and morality.

Therefore, he too had to be subject to judgment.

Although the kings reigned during the First Temple era, when the Jewish nation enjoyed varying degrees of independence and spiritual sophistication, there was always the potential for exile conditions to assert themselves upon the populace of which the king was a part—as they eventually did.

The Babylonian Talmud's perspective is therefore that kings can be judged because of the encroaching exile dimension of monarchy, notwithstanding the holiness of the Beis Hamikdash.

The Hasmonean Decline and the Intensification of Exile

Things changed in a way that ultimately resulted in the inability—or unwillingness—to hold kings responsible for injustice when exile conditions deteriorated.

The Hasmonean dynasty, which reigned in Israel during the Second Temple era, introduced more pronounced exile influences as it degenerated into the heresy of the Sadducees, reversed the spiritual victory over Hellenism, and eventually invited the Roman Empire into Israel. This ultimately led to the destruction of the Second Beis Hamikdash.

The episode involving King Yannai therefore becomes emblematic of the danger of a monarchy that no longer functions primarily as a spiritual conduit between the people and G-d.

The Jerusalem Talmud: Kingship Through the Prism of Light

The Jerusalem Talmud, by contrast, known as the Talmud of light, sees things through the heightened perspective of the holiness of the Land of Israel and the Beis Hamikdash.

The Davidic monarchs reflected the higher role of the king: to connect the people to G-d.

From that perspective, the exile dynamic was not as pronounced. As such, the king could not be judged by anyone other than G-d Himself, because his role was predominantly one that cemented the connection between the people and G-d through his own connection to G-d.

The king was not merely an administrator of justice. He was meant to embody the Divine sovereignty that permeated the Jewish nation.

Two Talmuds, Two Perspectives on Kingship

In short, the crux of the dispute between the Babylonian and Jerusalem Talmuds concerning the judgment of a king revolves around the question of which of the two roles of the king was more dominant.

The Babylonian Talmud, emerging from the darkness of exile, emphasizes the king's role in maintaining justice and morality. Since the king himself exists within the world of potential moral corruption, he must remain accountable to judgment.

The Jerusalem Talmud, reflecting the holiness and spiritual light of the Land of Israel, emphasizes the king's higher function: to elevate the people and connect them to G-d. From this perspective, the king is not subject to human judgment, because his ultimate accountability is to G-d alone.

"Zion Will Be Redeemed with Judgment"

There is a Chassidic insight—and a popular gematria—in the words of the prophet Isaiah: “Zion will be redeemed with judgment, and its captives with righteousness” (Isaiah 1:27).

First, however, let us examine the Chassidic explanation of the two parts of this verse.

“Zion” refers to the innermost core of the soul, which can never truly fall into captivity. At worst, this dimension of the soul can become concealed. It therefore needs to be exposed through Torah, the power of Divine light that illuminates that which has become hidden.

The external dimensions of the soul, by contrast, can actually fall into captivity. They therefore need to be liberated through tzedakah, which has the power to redeem and release the soul from its entanglement with the material world.

The Gematria of the Two Talmuds

The popular gematria points out that the first three words of the verse, “Zion will be redeemed” (*Tziyon b'mishpat tipadeh*), which relate to the innermost essence of the soul, have the same numerical value as Talmud Yerushalmi.

The second part of the verse, “and its captives with righteousness” (*v'shaveha b'tzedakah*), which relates to the aspect of the soul that can become captive, has the same numerical value as Talmud Bavli.

This can be explained in light of the distinction we have drawn between the approaches of the two Talmuds.

The Jerusalem Talmud's focus is on the innermost aspect of the soul, which is totally surrendered to G-d and exists in a state of bittul, absorbed in its Divine source.

By contrast, the Babylonian Talmud focuses on the aspect of the soul that engages the dark material world, with all of its blandishments and distractions, and therefore needs the power of tzedakah to liberate it when it becomes enmeshed in that darkness.

The Ultimate Redemption: Beyond Judgment

When Moshiach ushers in the Final Redemption and rebuilds the Beis Hamikdash, the level of G-dly revelation will increase exponentially.

The distinction between these two dimensions of kingship will then reach its ultimate resolution.

The Jewish people will no longer exist in a world dominated by the darkness of exile. The external forces that presently obscure our Divine consciousness will disappear, while the innermost dimension of the soul will be openly revealed.

In that era, when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea,” the entire population will no longer need to judge and be judged in the same manner as in the present world.

At that time, the higher function of the king—to elevate the people into a state of bittul and profound awareness of G-d—will become fully manifest. Moreover, there will no longer be a need for judgment because the entire world will be elevated even beyond the higher level that existed in the days of the Bais Hamikdash as explained in the discourse of the Tzemach Tzedek cited above.

The king will no longer merely be the guardian of justice in a morally compromised world. He will become the ultimate conduit through which the sovereignty of G-d is revealed to the entire nation.