Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Shoftim

Every Good King Needs Some Skeletons in His Closet

This week's portion, Shoftim [Judges], takes its name from its opening section, which describes how Jewish judges should conduct themselves. Later, it turns to another form of leadership: the king of Israel. The Torah pays close attention to the kind of leader he should become:

דברים יז:יד-כ	**Deuteronomy 17:14-20**
(יד) כִּי־תָבֹא אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ וְיָרַשְׁתָּהּ וְיָשַׁבְתָּה בָּהּ וְאָמַרְתָּ אָשִׂימָה עָלַי מֶלֶךְ כְּכָל־הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר סְבִיבֹתָי: (טו) שׂוֹם תָּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בּוֹ מִקֶּרֶב אַחֶיךָ תָּשִׂים עָלֶיךָ מֶלֶךְ לֹא תוּכַל לָתֵת עָלֶיךָ אִישׁ נָכְרִי אֲשֶׁר לֹא־אָחִיךָ הוּא: (טז) רַק לֹא־יַרְבֶּה־לּוֹ סוּסִים וְלֹא־יָשִׁיב אֶת־הָעָם מִצְרַיְמָה לְמַעַן הַרְבּוֹת סוּס וַיהוָה אָמַר לָכֶם לֹא תֹסִפוּן לָשׁוּב בַּדֶּרֶךְ הַזֶּה עוֹד: (יז) וְלֹא יַרְבֶּה־לּוֹ נָשִׁים וְלֹא יָסוּר לִבָּבוֹ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב לֹא יַרְבֶּה־לּוֹ מְאֹד: ... (כ) לְבִלְתִּי רוּם־לְבָבוֹ מֵאֶחָיו וּלְבִלְתִּי סוּר מִן־הַמִּצְוָה יָמִין וּשְׂמֹאול לְמַעַן יַאֲרִיךְ יָמִים עַל־מַמְלַכְתּוֹ הוּא וּבָנָיו בְּקֶרֶב יִשְׂרָאֵל:	(14) If, after you have entered the land that the Lord your God has assigned to you, and taken possession of it and settled in it, you decide, "I will set a king over me, as do all the nations about me," (15) you shall be free to set a king over yourself, one chosen by the Lord your God. Be sure to set as king over yourself one of your own people; you must not set a foreigner over you, one who is not your fellow Israelite. (16) Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since God has warned you, "You must not go back that way again." (17) And he shall not have many wives, lest his heart go astray; nor shall he amass silver and gold to excess... (20) Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows or deviate from the Instruction to the right or to the left, to the end that he and his descendants may reign long in the midst of Israel.

- **In verse 14, the people are motivated in their desire to have a king because they want to be like the other nations. Do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?**
- **Can you think of a time when being influenced by those around you dramatically impacted a decision you made, or a desire you had?**

Rabbi Nissim ben Reuven (the Ran), a fourteenth-century Spanish rabbi, Talmudic commentator, and philosopher, focuses on the Torah's instruction that the king must not become haughty. He explains that this warning is directed specifically at the king because of the unique circumstances of his position:

דרשות הר"ן יא:לא ולפי דעתי שיש במלח צד ייחדהו שממנו ראו יותר שלא ירום לבבו מצד המלכות יותר ממה שראוי שלא ירום לב שער בני אדם מצד המעלות הנמצאות בהם והוא שידוע שהמלכות אינו דבר דבק למלך אבל הוא דבר ניתן אליו מאת העם או מאת השם יתברך לצורך תיקון העם.	**Derashot HaRan 11:31** I would say, however, that there is a respect in which pride is even less appropriate for a king in point of his kingship than it is for the rest of the populace in point of any superior qualities that they might possess. For it is well known that kingship is not an intrinsic quality of the king's, but is rather something accorded him by the Blessed One or by the people for the common good.

- **The Ran identifies two possible sources of a king's authority: divine appointment or selection by the people. How do you think each model might affect the king's sense of pride or humility?**
- **Can you think of a time you were praised for something you didn't feel that you had earned? How did you respond?**

Rabbi Moses ben Nachman (the Ramban), a leading medieval Torah and Talmud scholar, also focuses on the command that the king must not become haughty. Unlike the Ran, however, he does not understand this warning as applying only to the king. Instead, he reads it as a broader prohibition against haughtiness that applies to everyone:

רמב"ן על דברים יז:כ **לְבִלְתִּי רוּם לְבָבוֹ מֵאֶחָיו**: נִרְמַז בָּכָאן בַּתּוֹרָה אִסּוּר הַגֵּאוּת, כִּי הַכָּתוּב יִמְנַע אֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ מִגֵּאוּת וְרוֹמְמוּת הַלֵּב, וְכָל שֶׁכֵּן הָאֲחֵרִים שֶׁאֵינָן רְאוּיִים לְכָךְ, כִּי בָּרְאוּי לְהִתְרוֹמֵם וּלְהִתְגַּדֵּל יְזֻהֲירֵנוּ לִהְיוֹת לְבָבוֹ שָׁפֵל כְּכָל אֶחָיו הַקְּטַנִּים מִמֶּנּוּ, כִּי הַגַּאֲוָה מִדָּה מְגֻנָּה וְנִמְאֶסֶת אֵצֶל הָאֱלֹהִים אֲפִלּוּ בַּמֶּלֶךְ.	**Ramban on Deuteronomy 17:20** **Thus he will not act haughtily toward his fellows***:* Here in the Torah a prohibition against conceit is alluded to, for Scripture prohibited even the king from indulging in conceit and haughtiness of heart, surely other people who are not of such commendable excellence [or merit, are forbidden to be haughty]. Scripture has thus admonished him for

	whom it is proper to be haughty and majestic that his heart must be as humble as that of his brethren of lower status, because conceit is a reprehensible character trait, and it is loathsome to G-d even in a king.

- **What do you think the Ramban means when he says that it is "proper" for a king to be haughty? How would you reconcile that with the fact that he calls it a "reprehensible character trait"?**

A passage from the Talmud—the record of generations of rabbinic debate about law, philosophy, and biblical interpretation, compiled between the third and eighth centuries—offers a different perspective from both the Ran and the Ramban. Explaining why King Saul's dynasty ended while King David's endured, Rabbi Yochanan suggests that Saul had nothing to keep him humble. His teaching echoes the verse in Shoftim by emphasizing that even a king must remember that he is no better than anyone else:

יומא כ"ב ב אָמַר רַב יְהוּדָה אָמַר שְׁמוּאֵל: מִפְּנֵי מָה לֹא נִמְשְׁכָה מַלְכוּת בֵּית שָׁאוּל — מִפְּנֵי שֶׁלֹּא הָיָה בּוֹ שׁוּם דּוֹפִי, דְּאָמַר רַבִּי יוֹחָנָן מִשּׁוּם רַבִּי שִׁמְעוֹן בֶּן יְהוֹצָדָק: אֵין מַעֲמִידִין פַּרְנָס עַל הַצִּיבּוּר אֶלָּא אִם כֵּן קוּפָּה שֶׁל שְׁרָצִים תְּלוּיָה לוֹ מֵאֲחוֹרָיו. שֶׁאִם תָּזוּחַ דַּעְתּוֹ עָלָיו אוֹמְרִין לוֹ: חֲזוֹר לַאֲחוֹרֶיךָ.	**Yoma 22b** Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: Why did the kingship of the house of Saul not continue on to succeeding generations? It is because there was no flaw in his ancestry; he was of impeccable lineage. As Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Shimon son of Yehotzadak: One appoints a leader over the community only if he has "a box full of creeping animals hanging behind him," i.e., he has something inappropriate in his ancestry that preceded him. Why is that? It is so that if he exhibits a haughty attitude toward the community, one can say to him: Turn and look behind you and be reminded of your humble roots.

- **According to the Talmud, how can a complicated family history help keep a king humble? How does this relate to the Torah's warning that a king must not consider himself better than others?**
- **Rabbi Yochanan's teaching suggests that our family history can shape who we**

become. When have you felt your own family history influencing your actions or your sense of self?

Dr. Christine Hayes, a scholar of Jewish studies who taught at Yale University until her retirement in 2023, offers a distinctive reading of the verse from Shoftim. Rather than viewing it only as a warning against arrogance, she explains how its message can free us from perfectionism and help us embrace our own capabilities:

Pride and Shame, TEXTing Podcast Episode 7
The idea that there's some virtue that attaches to being, what one might think of as the chosen one, either a leader, or a people, that's definitely not the biblical message. The biblical message is that there's no place for arrogance here…It reminds people to remain humble… But at the same time, it also sends the message that God doesn't expect an impossible virtue before we can be the hero of the moment or the leader of the day, or do what needs to be done. We don't have to be so judgmental of ourselves… We can't say, well, who am I? I'm not worthy. You can be an instrument of doing something positive…We don't expect an impossible virtue.

- **Do you agree that the idea that God does not demand perfection can be learned from the sources we've seen?**
- **Dr. Hayes suggests that humility does not require us to deny our strengths. How can we acknowledge our abilities and accomplishments without feeling superior to others?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Whose interpretation of the warning against a king's haughtiness resonates more with you—the Ran's or the Ramban's? Why?
2. According to the Ran, the warning against pride relates specifically to the king's position. How might he view a king who takes pride in a skill or achievement unrelated to his kingship?
3. This sheet focused on one rule governing the king, but the opening verses contain several others. What values or concerns might lie behind those laws?
4. What is one idea from today's learning that will stay with you?

Suggestions for Further Study
If you are interested in seeing further sources on Shoftim, visit the Simchat Torah

Challenge Shoftim page, which includes additional resources for continued learning. You can also find materials on Sefaria's Shoftim topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Kings, Leadership, and Humility.

The passage from the Talmud, in the fourth source, spoke about King David's unique family tree. If you would like to know more about the two women mentioned, you can read their stories on Sefaria, in Hebrew or English. Tamar's story can be found in Genesis 38, and Ruth's story is told in the book of Ruth. If you are interested in a source which speaks more explicitly about the connection between David, Ruth, and Tamar, you can read "A Tale of Two Women" from this essay by former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom Rabbi Jonathan Sacks.

Enjoyed this sheet? Receive a new one in your inbox every week by subscribing at simchattorahchallenge.org.