

# BLUEPRINT FOR UTOPIA

*by Rabbi Naftali Reich*

In this weeks Torah portion, the Torah commands us to appoint a king over the Jewish nation. Living as we do in a society that values the freedoms of our democratic tradition, we tend to take a dim view of the concept of monarchy. The idea of a ruler invested with unlimited power is anathema to those of us raised in a social order in which egalitarianism is one of the supreme values. Indeed, the very mention of absolute monarchy conjures up dark images of citizens living at the mercy of selfish, totalitarian rulers. The Torah introduces us to a vastly different type of monarch, one who is forbidden to engage in self-aggrandizement or excessive acquisitiveness. The Jewish king "shall not multiply his possession of horses, nor shall he take too many wives, lest his heart turn astray. Nor shall he hoard silver or gold, the Torah commands.

The Jewish king is to be a model of humility and moderation, elevating his people to higher levels of Divine service by his own lofty example, and by the enforcement power invested in him by the Torah. The sages saw in the Torah's laws governing Jewish kingship the only workable blueprint for a utopian society. These laws serve as a primary example of the Torah's infinite understanding of human psychology. Throughout mankind's history, various isms regarding the formation of an ideal society have held sway. None have succeeded in striking a perfect balance between government authority and personal freedom. Although we may not appreciate the wisdom behind the Almighty's laws, we are ultimately best served by surrendering ourselves to His infinite wisdom.

King Shlomo, the wisest of all men, overstepped the limitations the Torah placed upon a monarch. He rationalized his actions by noting that the Torah emphasizes that these restrictions are precautionary measures, intended to protect the king from losing sight of his mission. Having plumbed the depths of the Torah's wisdom and realized the fruitlessness of materialism and worldly pursuits, King Shlomo was confident that he had no need for the safeguards imposed by the Torah. He was certain that the foreign wives he had converted to Judaism would not lead him astray. He was confident that the Torah's prohibitions did not apply to him. But no mortal is immune to error, and as we read in Melachim, "His wives persuaded him to follow alien gods." The sages tell us that the verse is not to be taken literally. Shlomo himself never worshipped idols, but he was lax in demanding that his foreign born wives totally abandon the practices of their childhood. Before long, his kingdom became contaminated by their alien influences. The message of this story is that as wise and insightful as we may fancy ourselves to be, no human being is infallible. No one is smarter than the Almighty. If the Torah prohibits or discourages a particular behavior or activity, one violates that prohibition only at his own grave peril. A monarch once sent his most trusted minister to serve

as an ambassador to a foreign nation. Before the minister left, the king issued a strange command. He cautioned him never to roll up his shirtsleeves in the presence of the foreign king. Although the minister was perplexed by this odd request, he pledged to remain faithful to the king's orders.

At the end of the minister's term, the foreign king threw a farewell party in his honor. At the party, in the presence of many foreign dignitaries, the king suddenly announced that all of the subjects of the ambassador's country are disfigured! They are born with a birthmark, a black stripe down their arm, he insisted.

The humiliated ambassador vehemently denied the king's absurd allegation. The king challenged him to lift up his shirt sleeve and prove his claim before all the assembled. The ambassador recalled his monarch's words and refused to comply. "Ah ha!" exclaimed the foreign king! "This proves that I am right; you are afraid to lift up your sleeve and expose your blemish!"

All the denials of the ambassador were to no avail. Finally the king promised that he would pay one million gold coins to the ambassador's ruler if he would only lift up his shirtsleeve for a moment, and settle the issue once and for all. At this point, the humiliated ambassador succumbed. How could he lose? Surely he had to protect the honor of his native country. He hastily rolled up his shirtsleeves. The king, appearing to be shocked, acknowledged that there was no birthmark. He presented the unblemished ambassador with a million coins to take home to his monarch.

Upon returning home, his king furiously accosted him. "Why did you lift up your shirtsleeve?" he shouted. "Didn't I order you never to do that?" "But I earned a million gold coins for your majesty!" protested the minister.

"You fool," shouted the king, "I had bet that king ten million gold coins that you would be an obedient minister and would never lift your shirt sleeve!" We may be tempted to question the Divine wisdom when it does not seem to conform to our own enlightened and progressive minds. Yet, the Torah's truths are eternal and serve as our guiding light under every circumstance. Let us learn from King Shlomo's tragic mistake that ultimately precipitated the decline of his kingdom. We each have a kingdom at our fingertips and it is our responsibility to maintain it with devotion and care, surrendering ourselves to the will of the King of Kings. Only then can we ensure a blissful connection to Him in this world and in the World to Come.

Wishing you a blissful Shabbos! Rabbi Naftali Reich

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