

MELECH: THE KING AND I

by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene

The Mitzvah:

Once the Jewish people entered the Holy Land there was the mitzvah of appointing a Melech, king. Chosen from among his brethren, the Jewish monarch was to be accorded the utmost respect by his subjects and any rebellion against him was punishable by death. He himself was subject to several specific laws such as writing an additional Torah scroll, and prohibited from amassing an excessive amount of wives, of gold and horses (Deuteronomy 17:14-20)

What lies behind the figurehead of a king? And what is to be the relationship between a Jewish sovereign and that of his subjects the Jewish people?

A king summons up the concept of "fear". The personification of authority, his word is the law of the land: Dina d'malchusa dina, the law of the kingdom is the law [to be upheld] (Gittin 10b). The king is unyielding. His honor - accorded by the position not his personality - cannot be waived or compromised. "If a king renounced his honor, his honor is not renounced" (Kesuvos 17a). Insubordination towards the monarch, of any kind, is not tolerated.

His importance can be understood based on the principle that there is always a parallel between the spiritual and physical worlds. Here, the concept of human kingship is a metaphor to the Kingship of G-d. "The royalty on earth reflects the royalty of Heaven" (Berachos 58a).

In general, the underlying relationship between G-d and this world is as its All-Powerful Ruler; he is melech malchei hamelachim, "the King of all kings". But to the chosen nation, He is also a Father who typically displays "love and compassion" onto his children. Therefore, in their prayers, the Jewish people incorporate both aspects of their divine worship. They view G-d as Ovinu Malkeinu, "Our Father and Our King".

In the Jewish nation's divine worship, the first step is obedience "out of fear". He does not want to flaunt any one of the King's 613 commandments dreading the possible consequences. This corresponds to yiras Hashem, divine reverence. Fear of punishment and retribution from the mighty king, albeit the category of sheloy lishma, "not for the sake of His Name" is nevertheless the springboard through which to progress onto the higher dimension - namely that of serving G-d lishma, "for the sake of His Name". This elevated category bespeaks ahavas Hashem, serving G-d "out of love".

The respect, awe and authority of a human king were the means to instill fear into his subjects. All his grandeur, affluence and influence cannot be for his self-glorification. Rather, it was as a means to come onto fear of G-d, the King of all kings.

A Jewish king had to constantly focus on his mission. His destiny requires that he impose his stamp and mark upon his people. The anointed leader of his people, he was divinely entrusted to supervise his subjects and to faithfully live by the dictates of the Torah. That a Torah scroll always accompanies the king, acts as a constant and powerful reminder how both he and his subjects are inextricably bound to the laws of G-d. The king was similarly instructed not to pursue wealth, women and military strength because this would distract him from his role.

It would have been ideal had the Jewish people risen to the higher level of ahavas Hashem, serving G-d out of love without ever requiring the presence of a human king to impose and implement the concept of yiras Hashem, "divine service out of fear". This explains why this mitzvah is seemingly phrased as "optional" rather than obligatory. Only if the people ask for a monarch, something which they historically requested in the time of the prophet Shmuel, should the necessary steps be taken.

The king is there because he is the one who is entrusted to redirect all the fear he garners from his subjects onto the King of kings. The Jewish sovereign is the Torah leader of his people constantly concerned for their physical and spiritual welfare. In this respect, Jewish rabbinic leaders are similarly described as royalty (Gittin 62a).

The Jewish nation anxiously waits for the day when G-d will be universally heralded as Master of the Universe and crowned King by the entire world. Text Copyright © 2006 by Rabbi Osher Chaim Levene and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).