

Ah, the Life of a King . . .
Gary Pokras

Focal Point

And it shall be, when he sits on his throne of kingship, that he shall write for himself a copy of this teaching in a book before the levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he may learn to fear the Lord [sic] his God, to keep all the words of this teaching and these statutes. (Deuteronomy 17:18-19; translation by Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses* [New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004], pp. 966-967)

D'var Torah

If you want to live like a king, this week's portion, Shof'tim, tells you how: write a copy of the Torah for yourself, keep it with you all the time, and read in it all the days of your life. On the surface, the meaning of these verses is clear: a king of Israel must be guided by Torah in everything he does, and the scroll must be constantly with him, both as a reminder and for easy reference in the course of his duties.

The idea that a Jewish king should follow Torah may not seem like such a big deal, but it is. Any requirement placed upon a king to follow certain rules and guidelines by definition places restrictions on his power. And if a king has to play by the rules, then it goes without saying that so do the rest of us.

Yet a king is, after all, a king. Why can't he have someone else write the scroll out for him as long as he promises to read it diligently? In truth, it takes a professional scribe as long as two years to write a Torah scroll, and a king has other things to worry about. Sensible as this rationale may seem on the surface, the duties of ruling a kingdom can wait. Here's why: when we write something ourselves instead of having someone else do it for us, it becomes ours-and we become more personally invested in it.

This is serious business: Torah is the closest thing we have to God's blueprint for how to live our lives. And let's face it, nobody can live our lives for us-we have to do that ourselves. Therefore, the king must write out his own scroll. It may not be as pretty as those written by professional scribes, but it will be his; he will read from the labor of his own hands and remember who he is and who he serves. Without this investment in Torah, our tradition asserts that royal birth alone does not sufficiently qualify one to rule.

Taking this a step farther, Rashi noted that the Hebrew word *mishneh*, "copy" (as in "he shall write for himself a copy"), can also mean "second." From this Rashi taught that the king must have already written a first scroll. Furthermore, since the second scroll was specifically for when the king sat on his throne, Rashi concluded that the first one must have been for personal use. Before he could rule from the throne, the king first had to write a Torah and apply it to his personal life. Only then could he write a second copy to define his public office. In other words, we must put our own house in order before we can go on to help others.

In a time when we are taught to compartmentalize our lives, we could learn much from this teaching. Sometimes we act one way with one group of people, another way with a different group, and a third way when we are alone. Sometimes we observe our high-protein low-carb diets punctiliously in public and then gorge ourselves on pretzels and pasta when no one is looking. But what if we lived by the same set of rules everywhere and all the time? Perhaps this is a Jewish definition of integrity-to live not in broken disconnected compartments, but as one whole person all of the time. Perhaps Jewish integrity means consistently applying Jewish values that we learn from Torah in every aspect of our lives.

How exciting it is to think that we can be just as holy as the greatest people described in our sacred texts, just as "majestic" as a Moses, a David, or a Solomon. But how do we get there? Simply put, we just have to choose to live with Jewish integrity-and make no mistake, the choice is ours. We already write a page of "Torah" each and every day through our choices and actions. The question is: what will we choose to write next?

[Please note: The new JPS translation, which appears in the Reform Chumash, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, edited by W. Gunther Plaut, offers an alternative reading that locates the work of writing out the scroll with the levitical priests instead of the king. However, my reading of the text and the basis of this d'rash is based on a more literal reading of the text, which locates the work with the king himself.]

By the Way

[The author chose commentaries to other verses in the parashah that reinforce the same teaching.]

"Appoint for yourselves judges and officers . . ." [Deut. 16:18]. This is [not only a commandment, but] also a promise to the Jew, saying: "You will be able to make yourself into your own judge and officer." Thus it says that "a person is led in whatever direction he seeks to go." Some want to seek the truth. Others find their minds not whole enough and long to be forced along the way. In this, too, a person can find help; these are the [inner] "judges and officers" [Sefat Emet 5:72]. (Arthur Green, trans., *The Language of Truth: The Torah Commentary of the Sefat Emet*, Rabbi Yehudah Leib Alter of Ger [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1998], p. 311)

"Justice, justice shall you pursue . . ." (Deut. 16:20). With justice one must pursue justice. That is, one who pursues after justice

must do so justly, not with falsehood. (R. Bunim of Pshyska, quoted in Aharon Ya'akov Greenberg, ed., *Itturei Torah*, vol. 6 [Tel Aviv: Yavneh Publishing House, 1995], p. 110d; translation from the Hebrew by Gary Pokras)

"You must be wholehearted with the Eternal your God . . ." (Deut. 18:13). From the Torah and all of the Prophets there are only two commandments that must be performed "with the Eternal your God." In terms of "wholeheartedness" the text only says, "You must be wholehearted with the Eternal your God." Similarly, regarding the value of humility, the prophet says, "Walk humbly with your God." The reason is that in both of these commandments one can easily fool others; one can pretend to be pure while his heart is filled with cunning and wicked schemes. Similarly it is taught that humility can be faked . . . [therefore] wholeheartedness and humility must be performed with God, who examines our hearts for health or pride [and cannot be fooled]. (R. Pinchas of Koretz, quoted in *Itturei Torah*, *ibid.*, p. 122c; translation from the Hebrew by Gary Pokras)

Your Guide

1. The Sefat Emet teaches that we are led by our choices. Why do you think we so often choose to do things we know we will probably regret later?
2. R. Bunim turns the saying "The end justifies the means" on its head by suggesting that the means may in fact determine the end. Do you think that is true? Why or why not? Can you imagine any exceptions?
3. R. Pinchas asserts that, like the kings of Israel, we should live with the same rules internally as externally. Why do you think that humility and wholeheartedness in particular are necessary if we are to live to our fullest (Jewish) potential? What would happen if we were arrogant or self-serving on the inside but kept it hidden from everyone?

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The Peace-ful Warrior

Shira Stern

My most poignant image of the Six Day War is the photograph of a young Israeli soldier praying at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, enveloped in a *talit*, with an Uzi submachine gun hanging from his shoulder. He had just participated in the most daring and important mission of his life, and yet there he stood, not rejoicing with his unit but quietly immersed in prayer. The connection between the warrior and God is both modern and ancient, for even as we learn in this week's Torah portion, *Shoftim*, about how to wage war, we are also reminded that Israel did not go to war alone. Before the battle began, the priest gathered the troops together and proclaimed: "Hear, O Israel! You are about to join battle with your enemy. Let not your courage falter. Do not be in fear, or in panic, or in dread of them. For it is *Adonai* your God

who marches with you to do battle for you against your enemy, to bring you victory." (Deuteronomy 20:3-4) *Sh'ma Yisrael*, "Hear, O Israel," the very same words that defined the relationship between the Israelites and God, were then used to gather the troops around the flagpole, lest anyone imagined that he could wage and win the battle alone.

And yet this image of God as warrior, so striking in Exodus 15 when Moses celebrated the miracle of the parting of the sea, is also disturbing. The strong militaristic language that proclaims victory in the *haggadah* is balanced by the talmudic passage cited in *Megillah* 10b in which God weeps for the drowning Egyptians. God may have engineered our liberation from Egypt, but death and destruction are not the point. War and all its consequences must be carefully considered.

We go to war fully cognizant of what might happen; namely, we might not return. That is why we read about those exempt from fighting: those who have built a new house, or planted a vineyard, or just become engaged to marry. (Deuteronomy 20:5-7) These individuals, who have more peaceful pursuits on their mind, would not make the best fighters. But these men also represent a future for the community that is as important as that promised by those protecting the nation's military interests. Our ultimate mission as Jews is to survive and flourish, to build and plant and grow as a people, which are all peaceful pursuits. Sometimes war is necessary in order to pursue peace, but can we be peaceful warriors? Can we take the message and apply it to today's Middle East peace process, which is a verbal battle if not a physical one? If we always have had God with us, on our side, can we find God in the minutia of the deliberations? In the Jerusalem Talmud, *Sotah* 8:3, we learn that when the Israelites went to war, they carried the broken tablets of the Ten Commandments with them, while the intact ones remained behind. Perhaps those shattered shards are the broken dreams of peace, and perhaps it is our job to find a way to embrace the fragments even as we yearn to make them whole once more.

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TZEDEK, TZEDEK TIRDOF
YOU SHALL SURELY PURSUE JUSTICE
Faith Joy Dantowitz

Recently I lent a CD to a friend who wanted to see if he liked it before purchasing it. When he returned it to me, he said, "Thanks, I made a copy of it." I was not happy with this response and encouraged him to buy his own CD. After all, didn't he want to support the musician?

The point is: Does it really matter if a friend copies your CD? Does it matter if you download shareware software that says, "If you like this program, please send a check to?" and *never* send a check? Even before the Internet, it was easy to get music for "free" and to "borrow" things permanently.

As I ponder these seemingly trivial matters, I am drawn to this week's *parashah*, *Shofim*, in which we read the famous phrase, *Tzedek, tzedek tirdof*, "Justice, justice shall you pursue." (Deuteronomy 16:20) The word *justice* is connected to the word *tzedakah*, which means righteousness. We should each pursue what is right.

As a parent, I've faced this issue with regard to child care. Should you pay on or off the books? If you withhold taxes, you pay more and the IRS requires you to perform a lot of work to do so. If you pay off the books, the baby-sitter will take home more cash and you will have less hassle. But what is right? What is just?

The Torah portion begins by requiring us to appoint magistrates and officials. But what standards should we require of our leaders? What do we expect of ourselves? If we are to judge others, then we must also judge ourselves. I believe this portion makes us confront our personal morality. Judaism urges us to choose the path of righteousness. We are required to do what is right and just, whether the path be smooth or bumpy.

And why should we choose *tzedek*? It is because of our *b'rit*, our covenant, with God. As we learn from Rabbi Eliezer: "In a place where there is judging, there will be no further judging. In a place where there is not judging, there will be further judging. Therefore, if justice is carried out on earth, no judging will take place in heaven. But if there is no justice below, then there will be judging above." (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 5:5)

Tzedek, tzedek, tirdof: Let us undertake to pursue justice in all the aspects of our lives.

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